



Hearing before the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
Maryland General Assembly
March 3, 2026

**Statement of Support (FAVORABLE)
of Maryland Catholics for Our Common Home for
SB 781, Environmental Permits - Requirements for Burden Analysis, Issuance and Renewal, and
Public Participation (Cumulative Harms for Environmental Restoration for Improving Shared Health
- CHERISH Our Communities Act)**

Maryland Catholics for Our Common Home (MCCH) is a lay-led organization of Catholics from parishes in the three Catholic dioceses in Maryland: the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Archdiocese of Washington, and the Diocese of Wilmington. It engages in education about, and advocacy based upon, the teachings of the Catholic Church relating to care for creation and respect for all life. MCCH is a grassroots voice for the understanding of Catholic social teaching held by a wide array of Maryland Catholics. In the 2025 Legislative Session, over 700 Maryland Catholics from 45 different Catholic parishes and religious communities across the State joined together through MCCH to support several key environmental bills under consideration by the General Assembly. MCCH is independent, though, and should be distinguished as an organization from the Maryland Catholic Conference, which represents the public policy positions of the bishops who lead these three dioceses.

Because we are attuned both to the cry of a distressed Earth and the cry of the poor who suffer first and foremost from environmental pollution, including a warming planet, **MCCH would like to express our strong support for Senate Bill 781, Environmental Permits - Requirements for Burden Analysis, Issuance and Renewal, and Public Participation (Cumulative Harms for Environmental Restoration for Improving Shared Health - CHERISH Our Communities Act).**

From our faith perspective this is an important bill (as is its companion, SB 780, also being heard at this hearing).

In his 2015 encyclical, entitled *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*,¹ Pope Francis called for a comprehensive response to protecting God's creation—one that addresses, simultaneously, two related crises: (1) the widespread despoliation of our environment (our air, water, and soils that sustain all life) by human activities; and (2) the disproportionate impact on the poor of environmental and climate collapse.

¹ The English text of the encyclical, to which the paragraph numbers in the parentheses on the next page refer, can be found at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

Pope Leo XIV highlighted the duty of Catholics to act on the second of these crises—the lack of environmental justice—in his message last year for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation,² stating:

Environmental justice—implicitly proclaimed by the prophets—can no longer be regarded as an abstract concept or a distant goal. It is an urgent need that involves much more than simply protecting the environment. For it is a matter of justice—social, economic and human. For believers it is also a duty born of faith, since the universe reflects the face of Jesus Christ, in whom all things were created and redeemed. In a world where the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters are the first to suffer the devastating effects of climate change, deforestation and pollution, care for creation becomes an expression of our faith and humanity.

The CHERISH Our Communities Act addresses both environmental protection and environmental justice in an integrated, but targeted, fashion. It centers its attention and action on a specific set of permits, mostly air pollution permits, water pollution permits for a narrow list of types of industries, and waste disposal permits. It focuses on those communities in Maryland that are already burdened by disproportionate pollution. Currently, these communities have no opportunity to provide public comment on several types of permits to pollute that are being issued to neighboring facilities, including more than half of all types of air pollution permits. The CHERISH Our Communities Act will ensure public participation in the process and fix this longstanding environmental injustice.

The CHERISH Our Communities Act will prevent a new polluting facility from being built in an environmental justice community if the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) determines, through a deliberative public process with public input, that allowing the facility to be built would contribute to a disproportionate pollution and health burden on the nearby community. The bill will also require a reduction in pollution from existing facilities when their permits are renewed, if the MDE determines that facility is contributing to a disproportionate pollution and health burden on the nearby community.

The limited and targeted approach in this bill (i.e., it will not affect most businesses and will not affect housing or other construction, unless the construction is of a facility that would pollute) is an effective remedy for a historical pattern of unfairly siting polluting facilities in minority, economically distressed, or rural communities through decision-making processes that have not been transparent or inclusive.

To our mind, both bills carrying the short title of the “CHERISH Our Communities Act” speak to the essence of how we treat and value one another—as human beings and as members of communities—with the respect and dignity that each deserves. Pope Francis wrote in *Laudato Si'* that “everything is connected” and “concern for the environment thus needs to be joined in a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society. A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion, and concern for our fellow human beings” (no. 91).

For these reasons we strongly urge your support for this bill. Thank you for your consideration of our views and our respectful request for a **favorable** report on Senate Bill 781, the CHERISH Our Communities Act.

² The English text of the “Message of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV for the 10th World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation 2025” can be found at: <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/creation/documents/20250630-messaggio-giornata-curacreato.html>.