



## Testimony in Opposition to Senate Bill 875 - Oysters - Rotational Harvest - Pilot Program

3/6/2026

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice-Chair Kagan, and esteemed members of the Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in **OPPOSITION** to SB875 on behalf of ShoreRivers. ShoreRivers is a Riverkeeper organization focused on protecting water quality on Maryland's Eastern Shore, with more than 2,000 members. Our mission is to protect Maryland's Eastern Shore waterways through science-based advocacy, restoration, education, and engagement.

HB1388 would weaken protections and open specific existing oyster sanctuaries to harvest at a time when the science clearly demonstrates that sanctuaries are working and need additional investment, not rollback.

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources' 2025 stock assessment shows that in areas where restoration has occurred, **adult oyster abundance has increased dramatically—by roughly 300–500 percent in several restored sanctuary systems.** In fact, the highest number of oysters recorded anywhere in the Chesapeake Bay is currently within a sanctuary in the Little Choptank River. These gains are not theoretical. They are measurable, model-based results grounded in fishery-independent surveys and long-term monitoring.

At the same time, commercial harvest has rebounded to levels not seen since the 1980s, with recent dockside values exceeding \$20 million annually. Importantly, this resurgence has occurred while sanctuaries remain in place. **The data do not support the claim that sanctuaries suppress the fishery. Rather, they suggest that a balanced management portfolio—sanctuaries, public fishery areas, and aquaculture—can rebuild biomass while sustaining harvest.**

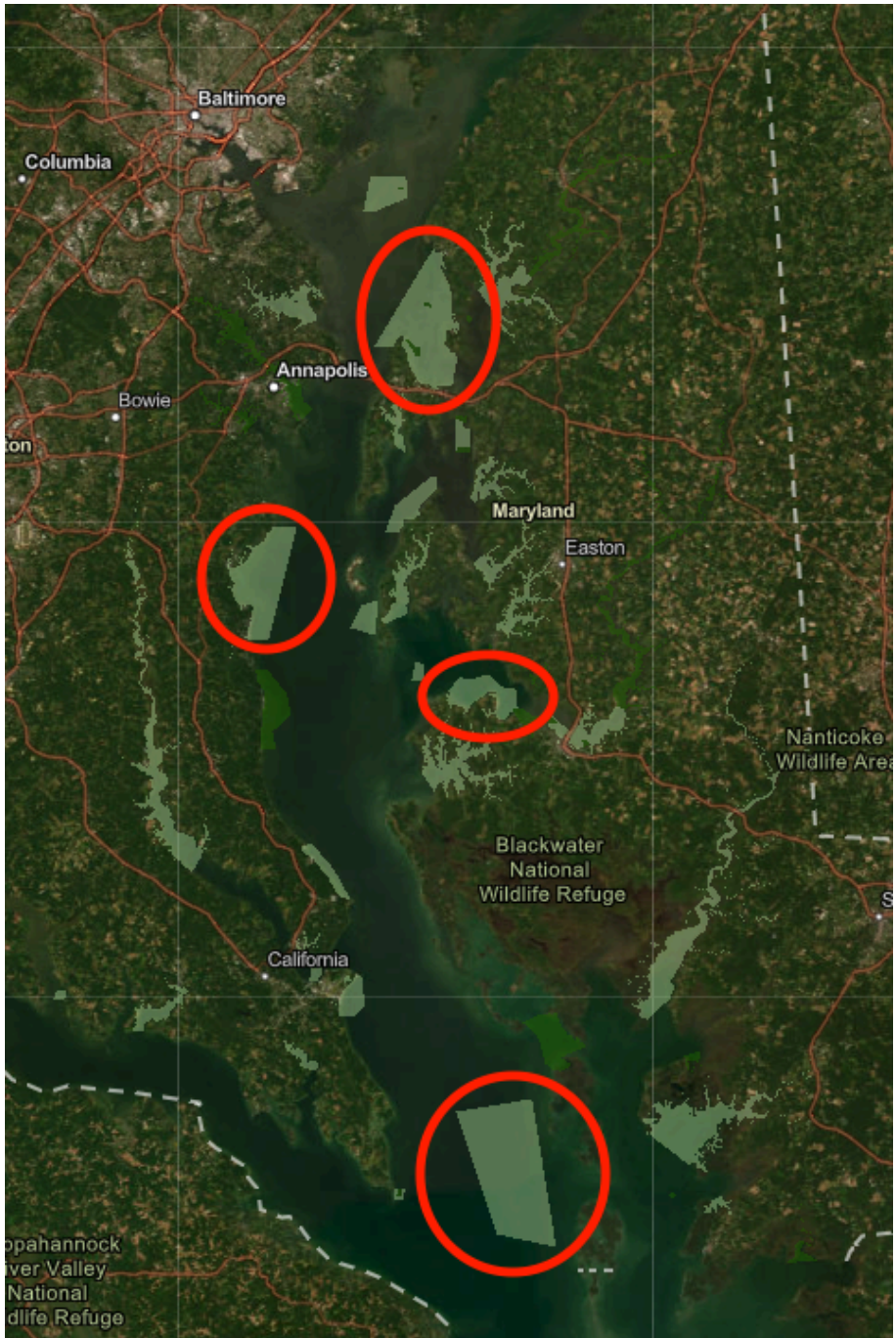
Peer-reviewed research also underscores the ecological risk of expanding harvest into protected areas. **Analyses of Maryland data demonstrate that dredging is associated with measurable loss of shell habitat (cultch), and that habitat losses can exceed removals from harvested oysters alone.** Oyster reefs are self-building habitat; when the structural shell is diminished, recruitment suffers and long-term productivity declines. Sanctuaries protect that three-dimensional reef structure and function as broodstock reserves, supplying larvae to the surrounding waters.

### ShoreRivers

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Removing sanctuary status would reduce the protected oyster bottom from 24% to 15%.

**Most importantly, the Oyster Advisory Commission, on which I serve alongside four members of the Maryland General Assembly, is currently engaged in active discussions about how to address underinvested sanctuaries, particularly those that have not yet received adequate bottom preparation, shell planting, or large-scale seed deployment.** The appropriate response to uneven performance is targeted investment and adaptive restoration, not opening these areas to harvest before their ecological potential is realized. **Because work within the OAC is ongoing, this legislation to address the issue is premature.**

Maryland has made significant progress rebuilding its oyster population through a science-based approach. SB875 would reverse that progress by reducing the integrity of sanctuary protections, just as the stock assessment confirms that restoration works.

Accordingly, ShoreRivers respectfully **urges an unfavorable report on SB875** and encourages the General Assembly to focus instead on sustained investment in sanctuary restoration to achieve similar gains throughout the Bay.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



**Benjamin Ford, Miles-Wye Riverkeeper**, on behalf of ShoreRivers