



**Committee:** Education, Energy, and the Environment  
**Testimony:** HB1267, Patuxent Research Refuge and Beltsville Agricultural Research Center - Zoning Classification (Protecting Patuxent Research Refuge Act)  
**Position:** Favorable  
**Hearing Date:** March 31, 2026

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports House Bill 1267 because it takes important steps to protect two ecologically important natural areas from future development should the federal government decide to vacate them: the Patuxent Research Refuge (PRR) and the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC). The bill helps to ensure that these properties retain their extensive, undeveloped natural areas, which together form the largest contiguous forest between Baltimore and Washington, DC.<sup>1</sup>

For the last 100 years, the 6,500-acre facility at BARC has contributed to significantly advancing agricultural knowledge and technologies that provide the country with healthy crops and animals, natural resources, sustainable agricultural systems, and safe products. Currently, one of the ongoing projects is devoted to breeding and growing hybrid American chestnut trees resistant to the blight that killed 99 percent of this keystone species in the early twentieth century, before which time it had significant economic value as a food crop and wood product for the eastern half of the country.

While much of the landscape at BARC is utilized for research, significant portions are wild, spared from development thanks to their location within a federal reservation. These natural areas contain forests, grasslands, streams, and wetlands, including unusual and irreplaceable habitats such as vernal pools, magnolia bogs, and pine barrens. They support over 230 species of birds, rare freshwater mussels, three globally rare plant communities, and 25 state rare, threatened, or endangered plant species.<sup>2</sup> BARC ranks second among the top 100 birding “hotspots” in Prince George’s County, second only to the Patuxent Refuge’s Central Tract.<sup>3</sup>

Despite BARC’s tremendous value, the USDA Secretary laid out a plan in July 2025 that it will be “vacated” as part of the large-scale reorganization of USDA.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, the Department’s subsequent report on the comment period showed overwhelming opposition to

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<sup>1</sup> “Patuxent Research Refuge” [web page], U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (no date).  
<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/patuxent-research/species>

<sup>2</sup> R. H. Simmons, et al., “Conservation Priorities and Selected Natural Communities of the Upper Anacostia Watershed,” *Marilandica* (Maryland Native Plant Society), vol. 12, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1-23.

<sup>3</sup> “Prince George’s, MD,” hotspots, eBird (Cornell Lab of Ornithology), <https://ebird.org/region/US-MD-033/hotspots>

<sup>4</sup> “Department of Agriculture Reorganization Plan,” Secretary Memorandum: SM 1078-015, 7/24/2025  
<https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sm-1078-015.pdf> (“Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC): this facility will be vacated over multiple years to avoid disruption of critical USDA research activities.”)

closure from different types of constituents.<sup>5</sup> Of more than 14,000 comments received on USDA’s overall reorganization, 82% opposed the plan. For BARC specifically, “the dataset comprises 2,185 comments submitted to the USDA and Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC), with a 92% negative sentiment . . . citing risks to ongoing research, environmental impacts, and regional economic reliance.”<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, in November 2025, Maryland Senators Van Hollen and Alsobrooks secured full funding of BARC for fiscal year 2026, postponing any closure for the time being, but leaving the site vulnerable in subsequent years.<sup>6</sup>

Adjoining BARC to the east, the Patuxent Research Reserve encompasses more than 12,500 acres of natural areas that offer the public 23 miles of trails and the National Wildlife Visitor Center. Together, the North and South Tracts attract more than 200,000 visitors annually to hike, fish, and enjoy nature.<sup>7</sup> Two hunting seasons in fall and spring provide opportunities for hunting deer and wild turkey, with more than 5,000 people taking part annually.<sup>7</sup> The Visitor Center draws between 40,000 and 60,000 visitors each year.<sup>7</sup>

The facility also serves as the Department of Interior’s largest center for environmental science and education, including the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory, the North American Breeding Bird Survey, the USGS Bee Lab, the Northeast Amphibian Research and Monitoring Initiative, and the Fish Passage Design and Analysis Laboratory. While the federal government has not explicitly targeted the PRR for closure, attempts to drastically cut staff there are cause for concern about the property itself. To date, the Department of Interior’s attempts at mass layoffs have faced legal challenges, and court proceedings are ongoing.<sup>8</sup>

HB1267 will help protect these valuable natural areas lands as habitats and public amenities in case the federal government sells or otherwise transfers ownership or management. For these reasons, the Maryland Sierra Club respectfully requests a favorable report on HB 1267.

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<sup>5</sup> “USDA Reorganization Summary and Analysis of Feedback,” U.S. Department of Agriculture, 12/8/2025 <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-reorg-comments-analysis-12082025.pdf>;

O. Kelley, “USDA Reveals Public Comment Support for BARC as Funding Showdown Looms,” *Greenbelt News and Review*, 1/1/2026 <https://www.greenbeltnewsreview.com/news-stories/usda-reveals-public-comment-support-for-barc-as-funding-showdown-looms/>

<sup>6</sup> U. S. Senator Chris Van Hollen [website], “Van Hollen, Alsobrooks Announce Protections for BARC & Over \$25 Million in Direct Funding for Local Projects Supporting Economic Development, Emergency Response, Veterans, Infrastructure, & More,” Nov. 25, 2025 [https://www.vanhollen.senate.gov/news/press-releases/van-hollen-alsobrooks-announce-protections-for-barc-and-over-25-million-in-direct-funding-for-local-projects-supporting-economic-development-emergency-response-veterans-infrastructure\\_more](https://www.vanhollen.senate.gov/news/press-releases/van-hollen-alsobrooks-announce-protections-for-barc-and-over-25-million-in-direct-funding-for-local-projects-supporting-economic-development-emergency-response-veterans-infrastructure_more;);

J. Thompson, “Advocates and Lawmakers Are Fighting to Save the USDA’s Flagship Campus,” *Sierra Magazine*, 1/29/2026. <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/advocates-and-lawmakers-are-fighting-save-usda-s-flagship-campus>

<sup>7</sup> B. Knudsen, *Patuxent Research Refuge: Comprehensive Conservation Plan*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2013), pp. 3-44 to 3-55. [https://www.fws.gov/sites/default/files/documents/PWR\\_2022\\_RevisedCCP.pdf](https://www.fws.gov/sites/default/files/documents/PWR_2022_RevisedCCP.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Federal Workers Legal Defense Network, “Federal Court Litigation Relating to Federal Workers,” 2/25/26 <https://workerslegaldefense.org/litigation-tracker>