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

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan and honorable members of the Committee,

The Maryland Native Plant Coalition is in strong support of HB1267, which seeks to protect and preserve the Patuxent Research Refuge and the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center.

Right in the heart of highly populated central Maryland are two incredibly unique wildlife habitats, the Patuxent Research Refuge and the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC). Together they make up the largest contiguous expanse of open space and wildlife habitat in the Baltimore-Washington region.[1] Both are currently owned and managed by the federal government; however, this situation could change. HB1267 puts a plan in place to preserve these vitally important properties in the event of a change in ownership of the land.

The Patuxent Research Refuge, established by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1936, is the only US wildlife refuge, out of over 570, created to support wildlife research.[2] The Refuge lies partially in Anne Arundel County and partially in Prince George's County. With over 13,000 acres of forests, meadows and wetlands, the Refuge provides vital habitat for migratory birds, amphibians, and forest-interior dwelling species (FIDS).

BARC, in Prince George's County, was established in 1910 and expanded in the 1930's during the Great Depression under Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, who believed that "research was the best way to advance agriculture and preserve the environment."[3] At 6,500 acres, BARC is comprised of various research and agricultural facilities but also contains high quality forests, wetlands, streams, and accompanying plant and wildlife communities.

Together these two properties encompass over 18,000 acres of open areas and serve as the "green lungs" in the midst of highly developed central Maryland.[4] Although some of the BARC acreage is agricultural research land, the majority is natural habitats that provide extensive environmental, health and economic benefits to our state. These large natural areas capture rainfall and runoff, and stabilize soils, thereby reducing erosion. The many plants produce oxygen and trap pollutants like nitrogen, keeping it out of our waterways. The forest helps lower temperatures, a critical function in paved urban areas that suffer from heat-island effects. The natural areas promote human health by giving us tranquil spaces to experience nature's beauty. Additionally, the large tract of forest provides critical unfragmented,"interior" versus edge forest areas that many birds and other wildlife species need to reproduce and survive.[5]

Central Maryland is a highly developed and paved area of our state where much of the forested land is fragmented. Forest fragmentation, the "whittling away of forest tracts into increasingly smaller and more isolated patches" occurs as we construct housing, commercial districts, and roads, and engage in logging and agriculture.[6] Small, fragmented forests do not provide the same environmental conditions as large uninterrupted forests, such as higher humidity and complex layering of canopy, midlevel and lower level vegetation. A forest fragment also has a much higher proportion of edges than interior space. Forest edges facilitate the encroachment of non-native invasive plants, allow greater light and wind penetration, and provide easier access for avian and mammalian predators. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources defines edge habitat as the forest area within 300 feet of the forest edge.[7]

FIDS, including certain migratory and non-migratory birds, box turtles, bats, frogs and salamanders, require interior forest spaces for food, shelter and nesting. 90% of Maryland's forested land is privately owned[8], and 70% of family-owned forests are less than 10 acres in size. Achieving the interior forest conditions necessary to support FIDS typically requires a forest of at least 50 acres.[9] The natural areas of the Patuxent Research Refuge and BARC provide this necessary interior forest space, which is increasingly rare in Maryland.

For the many reasons outlined above, the preservation of the natural areas at Patuxent Research Refuge and BARC are of critical importance for the health of our ecosystems and Marylanders. The benefits these natural areas provide to our state's residents and wildlife alike are priceless and should be preserved for our own and future generations.

The Maryland Native Plant Coalition asks for a FAVORABLE report on HB1267.

Respectfully,
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References

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