



Saving the Chesapeake's Great Rivers and Special Places

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Date: February 16, 2026

Bill Number: **SB 523 - Department of the Environment - Water Resources - Protection of Vernal Pools (Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2026)**

Committee: Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Position: Support

Chairman Feldman and Committee Members:

Chesapeake Conservancy supports SB 523 - Department of the Environment - Water Resources - Protection of Vernal Pools (Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2026), for the purpose of mapping and protecting Maryland's vital vernal pool wetlands.

Vernal Pools are currently *excluded* wetlands that provide infinite ecological benefit, especially in a time when we are losing species at an alarming rate. A vernal pool is a freshwater wetland that is typically water-filled from early winter through mid-summer. They do not host fish populations but provide habitat for native and critical species that cannot reproduce elsewhere. Fairy shrimp, wood frogs, spring peepers, toads, spotted salamanders and other woodland salamanders all count on Maryland's vernal pools for their survival.

East of the Mississippi, close to a dozen other states have already enacted protections for vernal pools, and Maryland, with one of the most sensitive ecological landscapes in North America, needs to lead on protecting these vital spaces. This bill simply extends current wetland protections for these small but mighty nontidal wetlands and requires that any "regulated activities" that affect vernal pools simply provide compensation or mitigation for any unavoidable damage done.

Chesapeake Conservancy's Conservation Innovation Center (CIC) has pioneered the use of high-resolution land use and land cover data products to deepen our understanding of both precision-based and landscape-scale conservation. We leverage cutting-edge geospatial data science, artificial intelligence and advanced analytics to tackle pressing environmental and conservation challenges in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. By creating, using and sharing some of the most comprehensive land use, land cover and hydrography mapping tools in the world, we stand ready to support the State of Maryland in clearly understanding and identifying vernal pools.

For further information, please contact Jody Couser, senior vice president of policy & communications, at jcouser@chesapeakeconservancy.org or (443) 321-3610.

We greatly appreciate your consideration and respectfully request a favorable report.