

Tuesday, March 24, 2026

TO: Senator Brian Feldman, Chair of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee, and Committee Members

FROM: Michelle Dietz, Director of Government Relations, The Nature Conservancy; Amy Jacobs, Chesapeake Bay Program Director, The Nature Conservancy

POSITION: Support HB784 Aquaculture - Placement of Shellfish, Bags, Nets, and Structures on Submerged Aquatic Vegetation - Extension

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 784 offered by Delegate Jones. TNC's mission is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. We work in more than 70 countries and all 50 states in the United States. With the support of more than one million members globally, TNC has been working to conserve, protect, and restore ecosystems and species for nearly 75 years around the world. In Maryland, our work focuses on delivering solutions that secure clean water, air, and healthy, resilient living environments.

HB 784 strengthens the shared goals of restoring submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) and supporting oyster aquaculture—two foundational components of a healthy Chesapeake Bay ecosystem. The bill extends the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) discretion to allow aquaculture gear in areas where SAV has begun to encroach on an existing aquaculture lease, and it prolongs the current sunset provision through June 30, 2030. The continued expansion of SAV is one of the clearest indicators of improving Bay health. Because SAV thrives in clearer, cleaner water, its recovery reflects decades of progress reducing nutrient and sediment pollution under the Chesapeake Bay Blueprint. These underwater grasses provide essential habitat for fish and crabs, stabilize sediments, and generate oxygen, making them a cornerstone of ecological recovery.

Oysters—and oyster aquaculture—play an equally important role. As natural filter feeders, oysters remove excess nutrients from the water, improving clarity and complementing the conditions that allow SAV to flourish. A 2018 study found that oyster aquaculture operations in the Chesapeake Bay can remove between 21–372 pounds of nitrogen and 3–49 pounds of phosphorus per farm each year, contributing directly to better water quality.

By allowing DNR to adaptively manage overlapping areas of SAV and aquaculture, HB 784 recognizes that both resources are vital to restoring the Bay. With thoughtful coordination, expanding SAV beds and sustainable oyster farming can coexist—each strengthening the ecological foundation on which long-term Chesapeake Bay recovery depends.

The provisions within HB 784 allows DNR to permit placement of aquaculture gear in areas of active leases where SAV has encroached after lease issuance. It includes important safeguards that limit the potential impact to SAV, like prohibiting harvest by dredging and limiting placement of gear to not

more than 10% of SAV area. This bill also gives oyster farmers harvesting flexibility while remaining protective of SAV.

TNC has been proud to support and invest in oyster restoration, and the state's oyster industry along with many others over the last two decades. We have a history of working across sectors to leverage private, state and federal funding for its benefit. We also recognize that food production and restoration efforts must be balanced in order to realize the many benefits oysters and SAV provide to the Chesapeake Bay, including improving the Bay's health, strengthening our state and local economies, and enhancing Maryland's culture.

The Nature Conservancy commends Delegate Jones on introducing HB 784, which balances ecological and economic goals for the Chesapeake Bay. **Therefore, we urge a favorable report on HB 784.**