

Dear Honorable Committee Members,

I am writing to respectfully express my deep concerns regarding House Bill 1388 (HB1388) — Oysters – Rotational Harvest – Pilot Program. This bill proposes a five-year rotational harvest pilot program for oysters in several designated areas of the Chesapeake Bay.

While I appreciate the intent to explore new approaches to oyster harvest, I believe HB1388 as written is detrimental to the long-term health and sustainability of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem and its oyster population.

Scientific research and decades of restoration efforts have shown that oyster sanctuaries and protected reef systems are critical not only for oyster recovery but for overall Bay health. Oysters play a vital ecological role as natural water filters — improving water quality, providing habitat for fish and other aquatic species, and supporting commercial and recreational fishing industries. Disturbing these reefs, even under a rotational harvest pilot, risks undermining the very gains that restoration programs have worked hard to achieve.

Permitting harvest in areas that have historically served as reefs — even cyclically — can disrupt oyster breeding and reef infrastructure, jeopardizing long-term population stability. Moreover, oyster reefs take many years to develop; repeated harvesting cycles could prevent reefs from ever reaching ecological maturity.

On a personal note, my daughter's Girl Scout troop is currently working toward their Bronze Award through oyster gardening in partnership with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. These young girls are learning firsthand about conservation, stewardship, and the importance of rebuilding oyster populations to improve water quality. HB1388 directly undermines the very goals they are working toward. It is disheartening to see students investing time and effort into restoring the Bay while state policy considers actions that could reverse that progress.

Instead of prioritizing short-term harvest opportunities, Maryland should continue focusing on proven restoration strategies that protect and rebuild oyster habitat, bolster water quality, and support sustainable aquaculture practices. These efforts are essential not only for the Bay's ecological integrity but also for the economic stability of watermen, tourism, and coastal communities that depend on a healthy Chesapeake Bay.

I urge you to carefully consider the environmental implications of HB1388 and to support policies that prioritize oyster restoration, habitat protection, and long-term sustainability over expanded harvest that could weaken the Bay's resilience.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and your service to the people and natural resources of Maryland.

Respectfully,

Paul Merena