



## **HB 1560 – Forest Conservation – Incentives – Pilot Program and Fund**

**Testimony before House Environment & Transportation Committee**

**March 11, 2026**

**Position: Favorable**

Dear Honorable Chair Korman, Vice Chair Guyton, and Members of the Committee, my name is Mary Elizabeth Kaiser, and I represent the 1700+ members of Indivisible Howard County. Indivisible Howard County is an active member of the Maryland Legislative Coalition (with 30,000+ members). We are providing written testimony today in support of **HB 1560 – Forest Conservation – Incentives – Pilot Program and Fund** which advocates for the stewardship of Maryland’s forests by requiring the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to establish and implement a pilot program with (1) “a science-based methodology to quantify the ecological value of forest ecosystem benefits as a foundation for compensating private forest landowners for forest expansion, retention, and preservation and assessing impacts resulting from forest loss;” (2) “Establishing and managing the [non-lapsing] Forest Ecosystem Value Incentives Fund to provide additional financial incentives for long-term expansion, retention, and preservation of forest land and the adoption of ecosystem value-oriented forest management plans through existing and new programs for private forest landowners;” and (3) “Enhancing existing programs and developing new programs to compensate forest landowners for preserving, enhancing, and restoring the high-value ecosystem benefits that forest land provides, including a pilot project to significantly increase the number of forest landowners in state-designated targeted ecological areas agreeing to adopt a new ecosystem value-oriented forest management plan;”

Maryland passed a landmark Forest Conservation Act (FCA) in 1991 and revisited the need for land and forest conservation in the years since at the urging of environmental and community groups who cited “unsustainable deforestation” from development. In 2023, the Maryland the Beautiful Act and the Forest Preservation and Retention Act were passed. A study of the FCA’s impact found that while the FCA has been successful in preserving forest cover, a stronger emphasis on connectivity and conservation of large forest patches, particularly for parcels with extensive forest cover, will be helpful in reducing fragmentation and disturbance with development (Mockrin et al., 2023, Jnl of Environmental Planning & Management). In recent years the percentage of forested land in Maryland has hovered at 40%. The majority (~76%) of forested land in Maryland is privately owned and only ~10% of total forest area is designated as permanently protected from harvesting (MD DNR, Forest Service). Crucial to protecting a larger fraction of these privately owned forests, is the incentivization of conservation and forest stewardship for the land owners. HB1560 aims to offer incentives based on quantifying the value provided by maintaining Maryland’s forest coverage and conservation easements while balancing these incentives against budget considerations.

The benefits of forest conservation are well known. Younger trees absorb carbon quickly, while mature forests store more carbon overall and provide critical wildlife habitat. Maryland’s forests offset a significant portion of the state’s greenhouse gas emissions (MD DNR). Maryland’s forests need to remain protected and healthy to mitigate increased CO2 emissions associated with climate change and

to protect against invasive pests and diseases associated with warmer temperatures less stable climactic conditions. Forests also play a vital role in protecting the Chesapeake Bay by filtering sediment, nitrogen, and phosphorus from runoff. Riparian buffers—trees along streams—trap pollutants before they reach waterways, reducing erosion and improving water quality (MD DNR). In addition, the maintenance of a healthy, stable forest supports a viable forest products industry which is important to the economies of rural Maryland. Emerging sectors such as woody biomass for thermal and electrical energy, poultry litter bedding, and carbon credit programs offer new opportunities to revitalize the rural Maryland’s forest economy (MD DNR).

This bill provides for the development of a plan, the funding of the plan and the establishment of benchmark metrics and timelines to monitor the forest land use and conservation easements to gauge and determine the efficacy of the program in expanding Maryland’s forested lands under conservation stewardship.

The members of Indivisible Howard County’s Environmental Action Coalition **support HB1560** and its goal of expanding the percentage of Maryland’s forested land that is part of a managed conservation program through incentives to the private land owners. We thank Del. Behler and his colleagues for their leadership in sponsoring this important legislation.

**We respectfully urge the committee to issue a favorable report on HB 1560.**

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important legislation.

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