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Testimony in SUPPORT of HB701 - Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2026

Environment and Transportation Committee
February 18, 2026

Dear Chair Korman and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in **SUPPORT OF HB701**, on behalf of Arundel Rivers Federation. Deeply rooted in the South, West, and Rhode Rivers, Arundel Rivers Federation heals and protects our waterways and champions clean water across Maryland. Our vision is healthy waterways for all, and we achieve our mission through restoration, education and outreach, and Riverkeeper programs.

House Bill 701 will create regulations to protect currently unprotected vernal pool wetlands and their buffers. Vernal pools provide unique habitat for amphibians and other aquatic species that simply cannot be provided in other, perpetually wet environments. Typically, fish and other aquatic predators are able to move throughout wet landscapes to find food sources and smaller aquatic species - especially larval stages of amphibians - are placed at risk in such landscapes. However, vernal pools are uniquely disconnected from the broader rivers and streams for most of the year, offering a haven for these creatures that otherwise would not exist.¹ Additionally, seasonally wet areas, such as vernal pools, provide critical water storage during wet times of the year, allowing seasonal snowmelt and rainwater to be stored in small pockets across the landscape without exacerbating downstream flooding or pollution problems.

MDE developed a consensus definition of vernal pools in December of 2024 and has worked with Vernal Pool Partners closely for the past two years— making this the perfect time to solidify vernal pool protection at the state level. The bill language has been updated significantly over the past two years in an effort to address MDE concerns. The bill now specifies a list of "qualified" vernal pools that would be developed at a reasonable and cost-effective pace for the Department. Nearby states including Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Maine have already enacted protection or certification programs of vernal pools.

The Vernal Pools Wetlands Protection Act of 2026 would better protect vernal pools, a vital and unique habitat that is often overlooked and poorly managed in Maryland.

Arundel Rivers Federation respectfully requests a **FAVORABLE REPORT on HB701**.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elle Bassett".

Elle Bassett
South, West, and Rhode Riverkeeper
Arundel Rivers Federation

¹ Tarr, M. and Babbitt, K. The Importance of Hydroperiod in Wetland Assessment: A guide for community officials, planners, and natural resource professionals. University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. Available at: https://extension.unh.edu/sites/default/files/migrated_unmanaged_files/Resource000812_Rep847.pdf.