



Testimony in Support of
Senate Bill 558 - Chesapeake Bay - Enhancement Program and Maryland Seafood Industry Financial
Assistance Fund - Established
Environment and Transportation Committee
April 1, 2026

The Rural Maryland Council supports Senate Bill 558 - Chesapeake Bay - Enhancement Program and Maryland Seafood Industry Financial Assistance Fund - Established as amended. SB 558 creates a new statewide initiative within the Maryland Department of Natural Resources focused on rebuilding oyster populations and addressing environmental impacts linked to major development activities. The program is intended to direct resources toward areas of the Chesapeake Bay where oyster habitat has been disrupted, using restoration strategies such as reef rebuilding and the placement of young oysters to strengthen long-term population health. The bill was recently amended to authorize the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) to issue emergency loans to watermen, providing crucial support to the seafood industry while advancing ecological restoration.

Under this approach, restoration efforts would be guided by scientific data and coordinated planning, with funding dedicated to improving habitat conditions and supporting oyster survival. By establishing a formal structure in law, the State can ensure these efforts continue consistently over time rather than relying on temporary or informal arrangements. This creates a clearer connection between environmental impacts and the investments needed to address them.

Maryland's oyster industry has faced increasing pressure in recent years due to environmental variability, market shifts, and extreme weather, all of which have reduced harvest opportunities and created uncertainty for watermen. These conditions underscore the need for proactive measures to strengthen resilience and promote stability within the industry.

Despite these challenges, the seafood sector remains a significant contributor to Maryland's economy. According to the 2025 Report on the Impact of Resource-Based Industries on the Maryland Economy, prepared by the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation and the Business, Economic, and Community Outreach Network at Salisbury University, the industry generates approximately \$317.4 million in economic activity, representing 1.1% of total resource-based industry output. It supports 3,014 jobs (2.8% of employment in these sectors) and produces over \$11.9 million in state and local tax revenue. These figures do not fully reflect the continued growth of aquaculture. The industry also remains central to many coastal communities, with oysters playing a critical role in both ecosystem function and the viability of working waterfronts.

By investing in oyster restoration tied to environmental impacts, SB 558 advances a practical approach that supports both ecological health and economic sustainability. Strengthening oyster populations improves water quality, enhances habitat, and helps maintain a stable foundation for Maryland's seafood industry.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support as of SB 558 as amended.