

Thursday March 4, 2021

TO: Paul Pinsky, Chair of Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee and Committee Members

FROM: Kelly Leo, The Nature Conservancy, Maryland Resilient Coasts Program Director; and Caitlin Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst

POSITION: Support SB 822 Public Safety – Maryland Emergency Management Agency – Office of Resilience

The Nature Conservancy supports SB 822 offered by Senator Hester. SB 822 would establish an Office of Resilience within the Maryland Emergency Management Agency (MEMA). This new Office would be responsible for providing coordinated guidance on state resilience initiatives, leveraging federal, state, and private resources to streamline pre-disaster mitigation and resilience funding streams, and building and integrating partnerships across sectors into emergency planning and management. The Office would allow the State and local governments to capitalize on significant changes at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) through new funding opportunities aimed at pre-disaster mitigation.

In states from Virginia to New Jersey, Louisiana, North Carolina, Oregon, Colorado, Rhode Island, and major cities like Boston and Philadelphia, similar Offices or Chief Resilience Officer positions have already been established. Networks already exist to share information about how to maximize resilience by providing cohesive, strategic, and cross-jurisdictional leadership at the necessary scale. What would make Maryland unique is that the majority of these other Offices of Resilience and Chief Resilience Officer positions have been established by a Governor's executive order on the heels of a major natural disaster to help expedite spending recovery funding. Here in Maryland, we would be strategically creating this Office in order to capitalize on new federal funding programs that will be flush with cash for *pre-disaster* mitigation funding to help *proactively* reduce risk to our communities and increase our resilience.

Creating this new Office allows for improved responses, reduced risk, and a pathway for a more proactive and comprehensive approach to mitigating and limiting natural disaster and climate change impacts. Already, the State has a multitude of programs across many agencies that improve resilience, but increased coordination between each of these programs and local government bodies, including Offices of Emergency Management that are tasked with building community resilience and hazard mitigation, is necessary to best leverage available information, funding, and resources. Creating this office within MEMA will strongly incorporate emergency management perspectives within those projects and programs.

At the federal level, FEMA is improving their funding streams for proactive pre-disaster mitigation, a risk reduction and mitigation strategy that currently goes widely unfunded in Maryland. Alongside this approach comes new funding opportunities through the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) Program. By establishing the Office of Resilience in MEMA, we will improve Maryland's ability to access these funds from its federal counterpart by strengthening pre-disaster mitigation coordination between those agencies.

The Conservancy commends Senator Hester for rising to the increasingly urgent need to establish and fund more proactive approaches for building resilience and mitigating environmental hazards.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on SB 822.