



February 17, 2021

On Behalf of the Mid-Atlantic Renewable Energy Coalition
HB860/SB692: Letter of Information

Chairman Barve, Vice Chair Stein, and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

I am Bruce Burcat, the Executive Director of the Mid-Atlantic Renewable Energy Coalition (MAREC). MAREC is an organization representing many of the leading utility-scale wind and solar developers, wind turbine and PV solar panel manufacturers, and public interest organizations that support the responsible development of renewable energy in and around the Mid-Atlantic region.

The goal of this legislation is admirable, but [MAREC/ACP], has a number of questions and related concerns about the bill as currently drafted. Our understanding is that the intent of this legislation is to extend the life of a resolution introduced and passed about 20 years ago, the goal of which was to preserve 1,030,000 acres of productive agricultural land by 2022. However, as written, this bill may codify the requirement that the state preserve an *additional* million plus acres of land by 2030, rather than just authorize the organizations named in the bill to have additional time to complete the existing goal.

Over the past two decades, land use needs, and priorities have shifted, and we ask the committee to ensure that the goal of the bill is balanced with other state priorities, like promotion of in-state renewable energy projects to meet Maryland's ambitious but achievable goal of 50% renewable energy – also by 2030. To help meet that 50% threshold, 14.5% of our renewable energy portfolio must come from solar projects located in Maryland. Industry estimates that about 15,000 to 25,000 acres of land are required to meet that goal by 2030.

In addition to the positives renewable energy brings, there are clear economic benefits to the communities in which they are built. Solar farms are a passive land use – many times for decades and require no costly services like sewer or water. Typically, they provide higher tax revenue back to the local community and many times help families hang on to their land while only dedicating a small part of it to an energy project.

Wind energy projects could also be compromised inadvertently by this bill. To construct a 100 MW wind farm, approximately 6,000 acres are required. This may seem like a large amount of land, but roughly only about 3% of that land is occupied by the wind turbines and other facilities to operate the wind farm, like roads and substations. So, all of the unoccupied land is still available for agricultural use.

As an industry working with landowners in Maryland, we have deep respect for land preservation as an individual, local government, and state priority.

Many of the landowners that host renewable energy projects across the state are farmers who view renewables as a way to diversify their agricultural activities, allowing them to continue an increasingly challenging way of life while keeping their family's land out of residential or commercial development for decades. And because solar fields typically install and nurture native grass ground cover that protects the soil and can provide habitat for pollinators over several decades without repeated surface disturbance or significant use of pesticides and fertilizers, they provide significant benefits in terms of reduction in pollutants and erosion in groundwater and surface water, including the Chesapeake Bay. Unlike residential and commercial development, at the end of the useful life of a solar project, the utilized land can be returned to purely agricultural use.

While our members support the intent of this legislation, we have a number of questions and comments about HB860 as outlined below.

- Does the bill indeed add an additional million acres to the original goal? If so, we respectfully request a study or work group to look at where and how land is being preserved and what the cost of the anticipated land preservation is. The study group can help define what is meant by "productive agricultural land." There are a lot of implications of this, such as the economic and climate implications of this expanded goal and its impact on competing state policy goals, like the need to preserve agricultural land and the need for renewable carbon free generation resources?
- One critically important consideration is once this land is preserved, are there any additional permissible uses – like renewable energy projects?
- Is there a map of productive agricultural land preserved or a specific region of focus? Piecemeal preserved parcels often times make it hard for landowners to use their property for renewable energy projects or get them connected to the grid.

We thank the committee for consideration of the issues raised in our testimony and look forward to working with the sponsor and the committee on this legislation.