

March 2, 2022

Elders Climate Action Maryland urges you to support the Maryland the Beautiful Act (HB 1031 / SB 791) sponsored by Delegate Eric Luedtke and Senator Sarah Elfreth and advance this bill favorably from committee.

Maryland's landscape varies from our mountainous west to the central piedmont to the eastern coastal plain. Maryland is home to significant and diverse habitats for birds, plants, and wildlife in that diverse landscape. Our state's landscape has changed dramatically over the past century. Hundreds of thousands of acres of forestland serving as important habitat for wildlife have been developed.

This trend is playing out across the United States and globally. Today, as many as 1 million species are threatened by extinction in the coming decades due to global climate change, habitat loss, pollution, and other human-caused factors. This nature crisis is happening in our backyards, too. In 2021, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declared that the Maryland darter fish – the only species known to be unique to Maryland – is extinct.

We know that preserving forests and wetlands is essential for meeting the climate crisis that threatens so many of our homes and even our lives here in Maryland and around the world.

As Maryland continues to grow, we must ensure that space for nature and for Marylanders to enjoy and benefit from open space is a part of our future. HB 1031 would achieve this by setting a goal for Maryland to have 30% of its lands conserved by 2030 and 40% by 2040. For two decades, Maryland has preserved hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural lands by following a goal set by the General Assembly in 2002 (Senate Joint Resolution 10 / House Joint Resolution 22).

Thanks to conservation programs funded through the real estate transfer tax, we have made significant progress on the agricultural land preservation goal and land conservation statewide. Today, about 28% of Maryland's lands are protected, but we do not have a goal in statute to guide overall land conservation efforts today and over the next two decades. HB 1031 would resolve this by setting a meaningful and achievable goal and providing the tools to help achieve this goal and do so in an equitable manner.

Importantly, HB 1031 would establish a new program called the "Greenspace Equity Program." This program would provide grants to land trusts, local governments, and non-profits to complete greenspace projects in underserved communities such as new parks, community gardens, trails, and more. Despite considerable investments in land conservation over the past decades, many Maryland communities still lack greenspace, which has significant costs for public health, local economies, and community well-being. The Greenspace Equity Program would target grant investments to support community-led greenspace projects that meet the unique community needs for greenspace. In this way, we can help ensure that as Maryland pursues a 30% and 40% land conservation goal, it can do so in an equitable way and benefits underserved Maryland communities.

HB 1031 would also help advance progress toward its conservation goal by creating a revolving loan fund for private land trusts. Land trusts play an important role in protecting land across Maryland. These organizations – most often non-profits – are based in communities. They acquire and conserve land so that it remains forestland, farmland, or open space in perpetuity. Landowners often contact their local land trust first to explore a conservation option, making these organizations especially important in the effort to protect open space in Maryland.

HB 1031 would establish a revolving loan fund to provide land trusts with another source to secure capital so that they can work with landowners and buy and conserve land. Landowners are pressured to act quickly in today's hyper-competitive real estate market. A revolving loan fund would allow private land trusts to better compete in the real estate market and meet landowners' interests in conserving their property. As a result, land trusts would be able to continue to play an important role in protecting and stewarding land for the benefit of Marylanders across the state.

Lastly, HB 1031 would increase funding for the existing Mel Noland Woodland Incentives Fund. Statewide, the majority of forestland in Maryland is privately owned. Forests provide numerous ecological benefits to Marylanders, like clean air and clean water, wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, and more. Recognizing the vital role private forestland owners play in stewarding forests and the benefits to Maryland, the Mel Noland Woodland Incentives Fund provides grant funding to private landowners to support their efforts to steward and manage forests.

By passing the Maryland the Beautiful Act, we can do a great deal to ensure our children, grandchildren, and future generations can thrive in Maryland and enjoy all the benefits of a healthy natural world. Thank you for considering our testimony, and I urge your support for HB 1031.