

*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

*Charlotte Davis, Executive Director*

Testimony in Support with Amendment of  
Senate Bill 526 – Natural Resources – Forest Preservation and Retention  
Education, Energy, and Environment Committee  
March 2, 2023

**The Rural Maryland Council supports with amendment Senate Bill 526 – Natural Resources – Forest Preservation and Retention.** This bill will strengthen protection for forests, decreasing forest fragmentation while maintaining and increasing the total acreage of forest state wide by, altering the definition of "qualified conservation" for purposes of provisions of law related to forest mitigation banks; establishing and authorizing certain alternative methods of calculating forest afforestation, reforestation, and preservation requirements; adding certain tree plantings and practices as methods that certain municipal corporations may use to meet afforestation or reforestation requirements; and generally relating to forest preservation and retention.

A recent study published by the Harry R. Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology of the University of Maryland found that Maryland experienced a net statewide forest loss of more than 19,000 acres from 2013 through 2018. Losses to development and forest fragmentation - particularly in Montgomery, Prince George's, Anne Arundel, Charles, Calvert and Baltimore County - remain significant.

Senate Bill 526 will strengthen current law to address this forest loss and fragmentation by:

- Updating forest goals and definitions to provide clarity and reflect new data.
- Change state policy regarding the “retention and sustainable management of forest lands” from encouraging achieving no-net-forest-loss, to increasing forest land acreage and tree canopy across MD.
- Provide afforestation\* requirements for developed areas, while establishing priority afforestation and reforestation areas. \*Afforestation – the act of establishing a forest, especially on land not previously forested.
- Establish forest conservation thresholds for agricultural and resource areas, medium, high-density, mixed-use and planned unit development areas, commercial and industrial use areas, and institutional development areas. The forest conservation threshold means the percentage of the net tract area at which the reforestation requirement changes from a ratio of 1/4 acre planted for every 1 acre removed, to a ratio of 2 acres planted for every 1 acre removed. Likewise, it establishes a formula for payment into the Forest Conservation Fund.
- Establishes parameters for afforestation and reforestation efforts, both on-site and off-site. Likewise, standards for meeting afforestation and reforestation requirements are established to guide State and local programs.

The Council works closely with the Maryland Forest Association (MFA) – an association that represents forest landowners and forest product companies. MFA staff have informed the

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Council that some counties occasionally confuse commercial logging where the land is not to be converted to a non-forest use with forest land clearing where the intent is to convert the use, usually to development. To avoid this confusion, MFA suggests a simple amendment noting that the provisions of the act do not apply to commercial logging or forest management activities (amendment text attached).

The Rural Maryland Council supports forest preservation and retention and respectfully requests your favorable support of House Bill 289.

The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) is an independent state agency governed by a nonpartisan, 40-member board that consists of inclusive representation from the federal, state, regional, county and municipal governments, as well as the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. We bring together federal, state, county and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to identify challenges unique to rural communities and to craft public policy, programmatic or regulatory solutions.