



SB 526 - Natural Resources - Forest Preservation and Retention

Position: SUPPORT

Date: March 2, 2023

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Our organizations request a **FAVORABLE** report on SB 526 from the Education, Energy and Environment Committee.

Maryland's Forest Conservation Act, passed in 1991, introduced a minimum floor for mitigation when forests are cleared for development. But these standards are not equipped to address today's challenges to climate and clean water. An unbalanced reforestation ratio of a quarter acre planted for each acre cleared, combined with other credits, means that nearly two-thirds of a forested site can be felled with no replanting required at all. Without clear definitions and protections for the state's most valuable priority forests, too many are left fragmented and vulnerable to degradation.

This legislation will update and strengthen forest goals and definitions to provide clarity and reflect new data, protect and conserve more forest land and tree canopy, and give local governments significantly greater flexibility to pursue solutions that meet local development priorities and advance equity.

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 growing suburban counties - remain significant.

Under current law, jurisdictions must usually consider forest impacts from development in a formulaic, project-specific way. This legislation will encourage local innovation by empowering counties and municipalities to design a program customized to meet their local priorities while meeting a stronger forest conservation standard. The bill also recognizes the important role some smaller forested areas play in urban and suburban areas by providing options to receive preservation credit for activity that enhances the health of these areas. In summary, the bill raises the standard for forest conservation but gives local governments and developers the tools they need to succeed in meeting it.

We respectfully request a **FAVORABLE** report from this Committee on SB 526.

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