

Thursday, March 2, 2023

TO: Brian Feldman, Chair of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee; and Committee Members

FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; and Cait Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst

POSITION: Support SB 526 - Natural Resources – Forest Preservation and Retention

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 526 offered by Senator Elfreth. TNC is a global conservation organization working to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Maryland, our work focuses on delivering science-based, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water and healthy living environments for our communities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing resilience in the face of a changing climate. We are dedicated to a future where people and nature thrive together.

SB 526 seeks to update Maryland's Forest Conservation Act (FCA) in order to provide clear definitions and protections for our state's most valuable priority forests. The current FCA standards have become outdated and insufficient to address today's challenges; this has resulted in many forests in Maryland becoming fragmented and increasingly vulnerable to degradation.

According to a recent study from the Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology, Maryland experienced a net statewide forest loss of more than 19,000 acres between 2013 and 2018. Significant losses were due to development and forest fragmentation, particularly in growing suburban counties. SB 526 reflects this study's data and findings to better protect and conserve forested lands and tree canopy from current threats. It also provides local governments with significantly greater flexibility to pursue solutions that meet local development priorities and advance equity. This legislation will encourage local innovation by enabling counties and municipalities to design programs customized to meet their local needs and priorities, while meeting a stronger overall forest conservation standard. It also recognizes smaller forested areas' importance to improving communities' health and resilience and places value on those benefits.

Each year, the United States loses an area the size of Delaware to development and unsustainable use. This land and biodiversity loss can often be irreversible. Here in Maryland, the lands and waters that surround us are precious resources. They are an invaluable part of our heritage, our economy, and our identity. The Appalachians are one of the most resilient, diverse, and productive ecosystems on Earth. TNC has prioritized conservation across this ancient chain of forested mountains, valleys, wetlands and rivers as a global imperative due to the high biological diversity of species, the carbon stored in the forests and the rich history and culture of this landscape, beginning with the original Indigenous stewards. Through our work to protect this priority landscape, TNC has seen first-hand how critical it is to protect and conserve forested lands and tree canopy. Maryland's forests play a critical role in building climate resilience, enhancing public health, and preserving our state's rich biodiversity. Forest connectivity provides much needed habitat bridges, especially as climate change drives species to move and adapt.

Climate change and a wide range of human activities are impacting forests at an unprecedented and unsustainable rate. Maryland's forests provide significant economic benefits, in the form of ecosystem services such as pollination and water filtration and storage, as well as recreational opportunities. By passing SB 526, we can take marked steps to reverse forest loss in our state in order to create a future where natural places can support vulnerable species and can continue to provide valuable ecosystem services on which state residents depend.

TNC commends Senator Elfreth for advancing legislation aimed at better protecting Maryland's forests and preserving the many values and benefits that they provide.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on SB 526.