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Committee: Environment and Transportation

Testimony on: SB 434 “Natural Resources – Restorative Aquaculture Pilot Program”

Position: Support

Hearing Date: March 29, 2023

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club supports a favorable committee vote on SB 434 that will require the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to establish and operate the Restorative Aquaculture Pilot Program. SB 434 encourages those currently holding an aquaculture lease to participate in the program by offering a financial incentive for maintaining the operations of that lease in accordance with the criteria and metrics for restorative aquaculture for a minimal of four years as identified by the DNR and determined in collaboration with the MD Aquaculture Coordinating Council and the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Sciences (UMCES). SB 434 further incentivizes participation by permitting participants in the pilot program to sell the oysters they grow to the DNR for use in oyster restoration sanctuary projects.

Efforts to repair the Chesapeake Bay as an ecosystem begins with rebuilding the Bay’s vital oyster substrate. It is the ability of the eastern oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*) to form reef habitat that is essential for other Bay life that makes the pollution filtering oyster a keystone species. A technical memorandum published by the NOAA in 2020 predicted an increase of 45% more biomass in the amount of harvest available fish and crab if the newly restored oyster bars from Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement would be allowed to reach maturity. Oyster planting projects are Maryland's hope for a future Chesapeake Bay put into present day action. Replenishing and maintaining its oyster population serves both our conservation goals towards a Green Maryland and our economic need to sustain Maryland's historic seafood industry. While organizations such as the DNR are already practicing restorative aquaculture with oyster planting projects, SB 434 would open project participation to aquafarmers, widening the number of participants and increasing the area and number of aquaculture plots studied to collect valuable data concerning oyster density, oyster biomass, and habitat complexity. SB 434 creates a platform for the science of sustainable aquafarming to advance collaboratively by including the Aquaculture Coordinating Council and the scientists of UMCES alongside the DNR to receive and manage all data generated by "The Restorative Aquaculture Pilot Program."

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club recognizes the ecological importance of repairing the Chesapeake’s Bay oyster substate and the need for our state to identify and define the best practices for achieving this goal. We encourage a favorable report for SB 434.

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