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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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SPONSOR TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB1006
(STATE HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION - VEGETATION MANAGEMENT - POLLINATOR HABITAT PLAN)

Delegate Sheila Ruth
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Pollinators such as bees and butterflies play an incredibly important role in our ecosystem and agricultural industry. Three-fourths of all crops require pollination, yet pollinator populations are under threat from habitat loss, pesticides, and climate change. This pollinator population decline has caused a 3-5% reduction in food production, a serious threat to human health. [A new study](#) found that loss of pollinators is causing close to 500,000 early human deaths annually worldwide from nutritional deficiencies, and that **1% of all human deaths can be attributed to pollinator loss!** (Source: [The Guardian](#))

We must take urgent action to protect pollinators. The Maryland General Assembly has already taken steps in past years, restricting the sale of neonicotinoid pesticides and requiring the Department of Natural Resources, the Maryland Environmental Service, and the State Highway Administration to develop Pollinator Habitat Plans. But further action is necessary.

The State Highway Administration has done a great job developing pollinator-friendly sites at welcome centers, rest areas, and offices under their Pollinator Habitat Plan, but the total area of

these sites are not sufficient to protect habitats and prevent mass extinction of these crucial insects. The areas along highways have the potential to provide much larger pollinator meadows.

In 2019, the University of Maryland Department of Entomology released the results of a [three-year study of the impact of roadside vegetation management practices on pollinators](#). The study, sponsored by the Maryland State Highway Administration, looked at three different scenarios for roadside vegetation management: a) selective herbicide use, b) a single mowing in the fall, and c) more frequent mowing. The study found that both selective herbicide use and annual fall mowing significantly increased floral diversity and bee abundance compared to more frequent mowing.

In addition to providing crucial pollinator habitats, native plant meadows do more to filter runoff, thus preventing flooding and improving water quality in the Chesapeake Bay, compared to turf grass.

HB1006 is modeled off of a bill that recently passed the New York State Legislature and was signed into law, [New York Assembly Bill A8275A](#). HB1006 requires SHA to develop policies and procedures to encourage the use of native pollinator-friendly plants along state highways, to reduce mowing to the extent feasible without impacting motorist safety, and to incorporate those policies and procedures into the existing Pollinator Habitat Plan. The bill also requires SHA to develop public outreach plans in order to educate the general public about the nature of these pollinator-friendly areas.

Formalizing these aspects of pollinator protection along highways and educating the public about them are crucial steps in protecting pollinator areas, including the pollinator meadows.

I worked closely with SHA in developing this bill and took great care to provide necessary protections while still leaving SHA the flexibility to manage highway rights-of-way according to their system and safety needs. The bill requires SHA to develop policies but allows them the flexibility to determine what those policies are.

As legislators we often hear from constituents demanding that SHA mow more frequently in our communities. The flexibility in this bill allows SHA to set policies that determine which areas should be mowed more frequently and which should be managed as meadows. For example, SHA could provide an opportunity for community input when making these decisions. Some communities may prefer a more manicured appearance, but with the education and outreach efforts required in the bill, other communities may embrace the opportunity for native pollinator meadows. In addition, reducing mowing in more remote areas would free up resources to enable SHA to mow more frequently in communities that prefer a turf grass appearance.

Loss of pollinators is already impacting our food systems and our health, and further loss could have a devastating impact on humanity's ability to survive. We must do everything we can to protect these creatures that we depend on. I ask for a favorable report for HB1006.