
January 31, 2024

The Honorable Pamela Beidle
Chair, Senate Finance Committee
3 East, Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis MD 21401

RE: Letter of Information – Senate Bill 178 – Agriculture – Pollinator Habitat Plan – Requirements for State Highway Administration

Dear Chair Beidle and Committee members:

The Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) offers the following letter of information for the Committee’s consideration on Senate Bill 178.

Senate Bill 178 requires the State Highway Administration’s (SHA) pollinator habitat plan to include policies and procedures 1) to encourage the use of pollinator-friendly native plants along State highways; 2) to develop and maintain pollinator habitat areas along State highways, to the extent feasible and in accordance with relevant safety standards for all road users; and 3) for educating and communicating with the public about pollinator habitat areas along State highways. In developing the policies and procedures, SHA must consider certain federal policies. SHA must regularly update the pollinator habitat plan by October 1, 2024. Finally, Senate Bill 178 requires the Administration to track and evaluate federal programs that provide funding for pollinator habitats, native plants, and invasive species control, and apply for any funding the Administration determines appropriate and beneficial to pollinator habitats; and requires the Administration to update the plan by October 1 each year; among other requirements.

In 2016, the General Assembly passed Chapter 614, which required SHA, in consultation with the Maryland Department of Agriculture, to develop a pollinator habitat plan. SHA’s current Pollinator Habitat Plan emphasizes three strategies to enhance pollinator habitat, food, shelter, and mobility networks, in an effort to support the various life stages of these important species while balancing mobility and safety needs: 1) construction of demonstration gardens (5 previously constructed gardens totaling approximately 0.3 acres, and 6 new sites – approximately 0.2 acres total - planned for construction this year); 2) establishment and management of roadside pollinator meadows, where appropriate (3 sites to be added this year, totaling approximately 6.7 acres); and 3) efforts to identify appropriate locations for the aforementioned strategies, as well as an inventory of existing sites. SHA publishes information about its current Pollinator Habitat Plan on its website, as well as information about its design best practices in the SHA Landscape Design Guidance document. Further, to foster educational opportunities on the importance of pollinator habitat preservation, SHA includes educational signage in its demonstration gardens that provide information on pollinators and identify the native host and food-source plants that make up pollinator habitat.

Presently, SHA is developing corridor vegetation management guidelines to maintain safety and operability that reflect best management practices outlined in the Federal Highway Administration's Roadside Best Management Practices that Benefit Pollinators, coordinating how this may be balanced with requests for maintenance within these corridors. Additionally, SHA has a team working on a plan to meet federal requirements based on the protection of the monarch butterfly and the need for pollinator areas. In response, SHA has included milkweed, the host plant for monarch butterfly larvae, in the plant schedules and meadow seed mixes for the projects to be constructed this year. Further, SHA notes that milkweed spreads naturally along the roadside when mowing schedules are appropriately managed; as such, late season mowing practices can help promote the natural spread of milkweed in the SHA right-of-way. Despite the focus on monarch butterflies, the Administration is developing this plan with the potential to add other pollinators in the future.

Finally, MDOT has dedicated teams that regularly research federal funding opportunities, including those that would apply to the efforts underlying the Pollinator Habitat Plan. The Administration recognizes the importance of leveraging discretionary funds to support the state's transportation and environmental priorities (e.g., solar panel installation, stormwater water quality management) and seeks to make every dollar count. However, given the limited pool of State matching funds, SHA must balance its many competing transportation and environmental priorities to ensure maximum value for the State and its citizens. As such, SHA suggests that the Committee allow the Administration to consider the reasonableness of pursuing the many policies and funding opportunities available to support a thriving pollinator population in Maryland, when crafting its Pollinator Habitat Plan.

The Maryland Department of Transportation looks forward to further collaboration with the sponsor and respectfully requests the Committee consider this information during its deliberations of Senate Bill 178.

Respectfully submitted,

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