

February 20, 2023

**Written testimony for HB631 - Natural Resources - Land Conservation - Establishment of Goals and Programs - (Maryland the Beautiful Act)<sup>1</sup>**

**Position: Favorable**

Submitted by: Denisse Guitarra, MD Conservation Advocate, Nature Forward



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Dear Members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee,

Nature Forward (formerly Audubon Naturalist Society) is the oldest independent environmental organization in the DC metropolitan region. For 126 years, Nature Forward has inspired residents of the greater Washington, DC, area to appreciate, understand, and protect their natural environment through environmental education, advocacy, and outdoor experiences. We strongly support passage of HB631 - Natural Resources - Land Conservation - Establishment of Goals and Programs - (Maryland the Beautiful Act) and we appreciate the opportunity to testify on this bill.

If enacted, HB631 will have a threefold impact by 1) setting a new state conservation of protecting 30% of Maryland's lands by 2030 and 40% by 2040; 2) Create a \$10M Rapid response revolving loan fund to help small and medium land trusts to preserve lands quickly; 3) Allocate more than \$250K in grant funding towards land trusts and community non-profits. HB631 is a strong well-rounded legislation that will facilitate more land conservation and stewardship, provide funding to land trusts for such activities, and increase nature access, protect biodiversity and habitat, and help combat the climate crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> HB631. Available at: <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgaweb/Legislation/Details/hb0631>



## **New 30 x 30 and 40 x 40 State Land Conservation Goals**

HB631 states “the intent of the General Assembly” that “by 2030, 30% of lands in the state be conserved, and by 2040, 40% of lands in the state be conserved.” This bill’s “30 x 30” land conservation goals mirrors those in President Biden’s 2021 Executive Order 14008.<sup>2</sup> Notably, HB631 goes further by including an additional goal of protecting 40% of Maryland lands by 2040. To help meet these challenging conservation goals, the bill provides for a Smart Growth Subcabinet to work with state and local partners to track progress and implementation. Also impressive is the broad array of activities that will be undertaken to accomplish these land conservation goals. Additionally, the Maryland Environmental Trust will administer a “40 x 40 land conservation implementation grant program;” the program grant will be competitively awarded each year to a statewide nonprofit organization focusing on supporting “permanent conservation of the lands of the state.” For FY 2025 and thereafter, the bill also mandates an annual budget appropriation of \$250,000 for this effort.

## **Local Land Trust Revolving Loan Program and Revolving Loan Fund**

We fully support HB631 is the creation of a revolving loan program to make loans to certain land trusts on a rolling basis, to assist them in purchasing property for purposes of conservation. The loan program is specifically intended to support the efforts of local trusts that have trouble accessing these programs to partner up with a local government entity. A special, non-lapsing revolving loan fund, administered by the Maryland Environmental Trust, is also created to provide revolving loans to land trusts on a rolling basis to assist the trusts purchase property. A land trust that receives a program loan to purchase property must repay the loan only after the property is placed under an easement or transferred to a state or local

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<sup>2</sup> Executive Order 14008, “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad” (Jan. 27, 2021), Sec. 216. 86 Fed. Reg. 7619, 7627 (Feb. 1, 2021). Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad/>



government entity. Notably, the bill directs that in FY 2025, the governor includes in the annual budget bill an appropriation of \$10 M to the Fund, to be used solely for the loan program.

### **Grants to Land Trusts & Community Non-Profits**

Nature Forward also supports the provisions in HB631 for land stewardship grants. In FY 2025 and thereafter, the governor shall include an annual budget appropriation of \$235,000 to the Maryland Environmental Trust for several types of grants. This includes grants to land trusts to support land monitoring and stewardship of agricultural lands, forests lands, and lands facing a threat from invasive species or climate change. Citizen stewardship grants to nonprofits, community organizations, schools, and municipal corporations also are included.

HB631 merits support because it establishes valuable land conservation goals and programs for Maryland as well as the mechanisms and the money to achieve these goals by creating partnerships between government and local communities. The permanent protection of Maryland lands from development is a laudable goal and one which can help combat climate change. On behalf of Nature Forward and our 28,000 members and supporters, we recommend that the Committee passes and approves HR631. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Denisse Guitarra, MD Conservation Advocate, Nature Forward

Anne W. Cottingham, Conservation Volunteer, Nature Forward