

## Environmental Matters Committee

### RE: Support for House Bill 296 --Designation of New Wildlands

*“It is the course of wisdom to set aside an ample portion of our natural resources as national parks and reserves, thus ensuring that future generations may know the majesty of the earth as we know it today.”*  
- John F. Kennedy – President of the United States

Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of **House Bill 296** — Designation of New Wildlands. My name is Joel Dunn, Executive Director of the Chesapeake Conservancy, a non-profit organization based in Annapolis, Maryland. Our mission is to connect people with the Chesapeake Bay and protect our natural and cultural resources. I urge the Committee to support the designation of more than 20,000 acres of new Wildlands for three primary reasons:

**First, designation of large contiguous landscapes that are ecologically intact**, like these new Wildlands designations and the expansion of our existing Wildlands, **are in line with current scientific findings**. Landscape ecologists, biologists, water quality specialists, and experts from many disciplines are telling us that larger, landscape scale conservation is needed to maintain critical ecosystem services -- clean water, healthy air, and diverse wildlife populations for all to enjoy. This is particularly relevant in terms of building ecosystem resilience to a rapidly changing climate.

**Second, the proposed Wildlands are landscapes that contain rare, threatened, and endangered plant and wildlife species** or other features that are evocative of the 17<sup>th</sup> century with Captain John Smith explored the Chesapeake. These landscapes are too sensitive to withstand off-road vehicle use and resource extraction activities like mining and logging operations without losing their function. While we strongly support public access to Maryland’s natural areas, we believe that recreation in sensitive areas like these Wildlands should be limited to passive recreation only, including hiking, hunting, fishing, kayaking, canoeing, bird watching, and horseback riding. These are the last great places in Maryland. Once lost, they cannot be replaced.

**Finally, there is strong public support for land conservation and the creation of natural area reserves in particular**. In nine public meetings (one for every county with a proposed site), and in written comments, there was strong support for the proposed designations. Previous studies performed by the former Maryland Greenways Commission showed that over 90% of people surveyed said that some parts of Maryland should be left in their natural state forever. A similar number of people felt that land conservation was a good use of public funds. A majority felt it is important to have natural areas close to where they work and live, and that the presence of natural areas has a positive economic effect on nearby real estate. This also accentuates the importance of Maryland’s Program Open Space, a program that was significantly cut in this year’s budget proposal to the legislature. We urge you to restore this funding.

In summary, for these compelling reasons, I again urge the Committee to approve **House Bill 296** as written. Taking the initiative and resources to protect these lands now will reap long-term ecological benefits for Maryland in the future. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this matter.