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Secretary of Natural Resources
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Testimony on H.R. 6893 "*Chesapeake Bay Watershed Advancement for Training, Education, Restoration, and Science (WATERS) Act*"

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries

March 26, 2026

On behalf of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, or MD DNR, it is my pleasure to testify before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries in support of H.R. 6893, the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Advancement for Training, Education, Restoration, and Science (WATERS) Act. This bipartisan bill will help restore the health of the Chesapeake Bay watershed, strengthen fisheries management, and expand environmental education programs for residents across the Bay watershed.

MD DNR's vision[1] is inspired by nature and rooted in science to improve and grow stewardship for Maryland's natural resources. We manage fishing and boating for the state, as well as our lands, waters, parks, forests, and wildlife. One of our top priorities, with which many of you may be familiar, you spend so much of your time in Washington, is the efforts to restore, conserve, and protect the Chesapeake Bay and its watershed. Maryland is proud to be a leader in this effort, which is so central to environmental management across the mid-Atlantic

The Chesapeake Bay is the Nation's largest estuary, with a watershed that spans 64,000 square miles and is home to more than 18 million people. For several hundred years, the Chesapeake Bay has been the epicenter of regional agriculture, aquaculture, recreation, history, trade, and culture. Specifically, the Bay produces around 500 million pounds of seafood annually which makes it an economic engine of the region and supports the commercial and recreational fishing industries of the Bay states, especially for iconic species such as the blue crab, oysters, and striped bass,[2] which MD DNR works to sustainably manage in our waters.

By the 1970s, however, significant degradation was being observed in our fisheries, marked by sharply declining oyster and blue crab populations, muddied waters, and one of the planet's first

[1] https://dnr.maryland.gov/pages/about_dnr.aspx
[2] https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/chesapeake-bay

identified marine dead zones. The primary cause was identified as nutrient and sediment pollution, originating mostly from wastewater or runoff, which then make the habitats inhospitable for aquatic life. Over the last half century, concerted efforts and significant progress has been made to address not only poor water quality but also its impacts on living resources in the Bay, but other watershed challenges include debris pollution, ongoing development across the watershed, invasive species, and changing environmental conditions like temperature, pH, extreme weather events, and ocean currents.

Maryland has long recognized the importance of restoring and preserving our shoreline and Bay habitats and to benefit fish and wildlife and connect our communities to the outdoors through coastal recreation and industries. But the restoration effort is far bigger than Maryland alone, and to be successful, jurisdictions across the watershed and the federal government itself have formed a partnership to work together toward common goals.

From 2024 to 2025, Governor Wes Moore served as the Chair of the Chesapeake Bay Executive Council, which leads the Chesapeake Bay Program,[3] a regional partnership between the seven Chesapeake watershed Jurisdictions (Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvanie, Virginia, and West Virginia), the Chesapeake Bay Commission, and the Environmental Protection Agency on behalf of numerous agencies, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA), in the Federal Government.

NOAA's main representative in matters related to the Chesapeake Bay, including in the Chesapeake Bay Program, is the NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office (NCBO), which is part of NOAA Fisheries' Office of Habitat Conservation, and uses science, service, and stewardship to improve the health of the Chesapeake Bay and ensure its sustainable use for generations to come.[4] NCBO's engagement and leadership in the Chesapeake Bay Program, particularly through the last several years of revisions to the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*,[5] demonstrate the organizational and scientific capacity the Office provides that translates into real-world impact.

Maryland and the NCBO have worked together not only in recent years but for decades – both inside the Chesapeake Bay Program and outside of it – to restore and protect the health of tidal resources along the state's extensive coastline and waters while bringing up the next generation of environmentally-literate stewards across the state to take on that work in the future. Some collaborations that have been particularly successful include:

- **Large scale oyster restoration:** NOAA partners with the State of Maryland to implement large scale oyster restoration.[6] This partnership has resulted in successful restoration of five tributaries in the state in accordance with the *2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*[7] with additional areas and activities being planned now. As part of

[3] https://www.chesapeakebay.net/
[4] https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/contact-directory/noaa-chesapeake-bay-office
[5] https://www.chesapeakebay.net/files/documents/CBWA-2025-IV-Final-Facing.pdf
[6] https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/chesapeake-bay/oyster-restoration
[7] https://www.chesapeakebay.net/files/Chesapeake-Bay-Watershed-Agreement-Amended.pdf

this work, NOAA has provided funding to MD DNR to support in-water restoration and oyster hatchery production at the Horn Point Laboratory. NOAA also supports the Oyster Recovery Partnership[8] to conduct oyster monitoring in Maryland.

- **Striped bass assessment:** Working through the Chesapeake Bay Program, NCBO and MD DNR co-lead a Striped Bass State of the Science workshop in February 2025. The two-day workshop aimed to investigate the environmental and ecological factors contributing to the low recruitment of Striped bass. The workshop generated a report[9] that provided recommendations on existing survey effectiveness, identified priority science needs, and fostered greater collaboration among participants to support effective management strategies for the valuable species.

- **Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System (CBIBS):** CBIBS[10] monitors and maps conditions in the Chesapeake Bay. MD DNR supports its maintenance by performing on-water water quality sensor swaps and buoy tending services. The MD DNR fleet of vessels also responds to emergency needs and fills gaps when NOAA vessels are unavailable. The data CBIBS collects is integrated into MD DNR's Eyes on the Bay[11] web portal that provides up-to-date Maryland tidal water quality data and information

- **Environmental Education:** NOAA Bay Watershed Education & Training Program (B-WET)[12] promotes student learning in their local communities and encourages capacity building for environmental education. Grantees in the state of Maryland have received $17.8M in funding from the B-WET since 2002, reaching approximately 325,000 students and 9,000 teachers. NOAA is also a named partner in the Maryland Outdoor Learning Partnership,[13] which is co-chaired by MD DNR. (Note: MD DNR has received $478,500).

NCBO provides world-class technical capacity, subject matter expertise, cutting-edge research, trusted monitoring, staffing, and coordination..[14] Without NCBO, such extensive, cross-jurisdictional projects – ranging from live monitoring of Bay water quality and conditions, to enabling sustainable fisheries and habitat science, to educating the next generation of Bay stewards – could not be successful.

H.R. 6893, the "*Chesapeake Bay Watershed Advancement for Training, Education, Restoration, and Science (WATERS) Act*" would provide certainly for NCBO by:

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[8] https://www.oysterrecovery.org/
[9] https://www.chesapeake.org/stac/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/FINAL_Report_Striped-Bass-Survey_25_006.pdf
[10] https://buoybay.noaa.gov/
[11] https://eyesonthebay.dnr.maryland.gov/
[12] https://www.noaa.gov/office-education/bwet#:~:text=B%2DWET%20is%20a%20competitive,capacity%20building%20for%20environmental%20education.
[13] https://dnr.maryland.gov/pgc/pages/default.aspx
[14] https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/s3/2023-03/0086369_Chesapeake_Bay_Office_Biennial_Report_2021-22_FINAL.pdf

- **Reauthorizing NCBO,** strengthening its ability to fulfil its role as a key partner of the Bay states and the Chesapeake Bay Program, where it is a leader of the Program's fisheries, environmental literacy, climate resiliency, and habitat work. Scientific data from this office is critical for the management and restoration of oysters, blue crab, striped bass, and other ecologically and commercially important species and for planning, management and assessment of Bay Program priorities.

- **Authorizing NCBO to formally establish the Chesapeake B-WET program,** which awards educational grants related to Bay restoration, the facilitation of environmental education for K-12 students and related professional development for teachers. Up to this point, the program has been considered an education activity supported by NOAA's Operations, Research, and Facilities account, but providing a stronger connection between the practitioners of Bay science and educators and students of the Bay watershed will provide a more local focus and allow for more meaningful watershed educational experiences.

- **Directing NOAA to support coordinated management, protection, characterization, and restoration of Bay habitats and living resources**, as well as the CBIBS along the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. This will encourage NCBO to collaborate with universities, nonprofits, and other stakeholders to promote integrated coastal observations, including monitoring and observing restoration activities in the Bay; collect and analyzing data related to marine resources; and organize information for use by policymakers, resource managers, educators, and the public.

The text of the WATERS Act, then titled as the Chesapeake Bay Science, Education, and Ecosystem Enhancement Act, passed out of the Committee on Natural Resources by Unanimous Consent in the 118th Congress. I sincerely hope it will find the same robust and bipartisan support in the 119th Congress to better enable NOAA's critical role of providing important insights into the Bay's ecosystems, improving our understanding, management, and stewardship of the Chesapeake Bay.