

SB 526 (Elfreth) / HB 723 (Love)

Natural Resources - Forest Preservation and Retention

MARYLAND IS LOSING FOREST AND TREE CANOPY

A recent study published by the Harry R. Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology of the University of Maryland found that Maryland experienced a net statewide forest loss of more than 19,000 acres from 2013 through 2018. Losses to development and forest fragmentation - particularly in Montgomery, Prince George's, Anne Arundel, Charles, Calvert and Baltimore County - remain significant.

CURRENT LAW IS INSUFFICIENT

Maryland's Forest Conservation Act, passed in 1991, introduced a minimum floor for mitigation when forests are cleared for development. But these standards are not equipped to address today's challenges to climate and clean water. An unbalanced reforestation ratio of a quarter acre planted for each acre cleared, combined with other credits, means that nearly two-thirds of a forested site can be felled with no replanting required at all. And without clear definitions and protections for the state's most valuable priority forests, too many are left fragmented and vulnerable to degradation.

SB 526 / HB 723 WILL:

- Update forest goals and definitions to provide clarity and reflect new data
- Protect and conserve more forest land and tree canopy
- Give local governments significantly greater flexibility to pursue solutions that meet local needs and advance equity

FOREST GOALS AND DEFINITIONS – A gain in forest, with clear metrics.

- Affirms the Hughes Study potential for a net gain in forest cover
- Sets a companion goal for net gain of tree canopy (*This allows progress in ALL areas, not just suburban and rural areas with better access to large forested areas.*)
- Favors directional goals over numeric thresholds – make forest gain a performance standard
- Makes definitions consistent with state/regional accountability framework

FOREST CONSERVATION ACT – A more protective & equitable standard, with added flexibility.

- Protects priority forest and reduces fragmentation
- Calibrates the replanting ratio and accommodates local priorities and innovation
- Fills gaps & rebalances mitigation banking
- Narrows utility generation exemption to reflect modern and growing energy sources

FOREST MANAGEMENT PLANS – Equitable access for suburban & urban forests.

- Makes certain smaller forested areas eligible for forest management plans and associated incentives