



Mr. Dan Murphy
Manager, Division of Habitat Conservation and Restoration
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
177 Admiral Cochrane Drive
Annapolis, MD 21401-7307

Dear Mr. Murphy:

Please register the **support** of the undersigned members of the Chesapeake Conservation Partnership (CCP) for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) proposed action to establish the Southern Maryland Woodlands National Wildlife Refuge as described in the Draft Environmental Assessment and Land Protection Plan (Draft EA/LPP).

The Chesapeake Conservation Partnership (CCP) is a coalition of more than 100 partner organizations working at every level within the watershed to extend the conservation of culturally and ecologically important landscapes to benefit a vibrant, healthy, and sustainable quality of life for the Chesapeake region. CCP provides a forum to advance conservation through collaborative efforts, networking, influencing policy and funding, and sharing best practices. It works to build the financial, scientific, social, and policy capacity to achieve both short-term and long-term landscape conservation goals and to support the partners in carrying out specific land protection actions.

The CCP was established in 2009 and helped spearhead conservation and public access goals in response to President Obama's Executive Order 13508, *Chesapeake Bay Protection and Restoration*. The CCP was initially focused on the goal of protecting an additional 2 million acres of important fish and wildlife habitats within the watershed by the year 2025. More recently, in response to the alarming decline of species and habitat loss in the Chesapeake and beyond, the CCP has increased the goal to equitably conserve 30% of the land in the Chesapeake Bay watershed by 2030. This is in concert with land conservation goals established by the state of Maryland, conservation partnerships across the globe and the federal government. The project is in line with the America the Beautiful Initiative as called for by both President Biden's Executive Order 14008, *Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, and the Chesapeake Executive Council's Directive No. 21-1: *Collective Action for Climate Change*. The establishment of the Southern Maryland Woodlands National Wildlife Refuge is directly aligned with the CCP land conservation priorities, including conserving vulnerable and at-risk species and their habitats. The establishment of the refuge would provide additional federal funding sources to complement the ongoing work by partners, especially by members of the Southern Maryland Conservation Alliance.

The USFWS proposed action is complementary to other land conservation initiatives actively supported by the CCP, including the Chesapeake Watershed Investments for Landscape Defense (Chesapeake WILD) Act signed into law in 2020. Chesapeake WILD is a network in action for



wildlife conservation, laying out a vision for collaborative conservation that emphasizes diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) practices and policies, as well as accessibility. The framework is organized around five focal areas: Fish and Wildlife Habitats, Climate Change, Community Partnership, Public Access, and Water Quality, all of which would be advanced by the USFWS's proposed action.

We are pleased to see that the Draft EA/LPP incorporates Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, which requires all federal agencies to incorporate environmental justice into their missions. As stated in the Draft EA/LPP, "The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) considers a population within a given geography to qualify as an Environmental Justice population when the total minority population is greater than 50% or when the minority population is decidedly greater than the surrounding geographic area, typically the State. The minority population within the six-county area that contains the AOI is 62.6%, while Statewide minorities make up 50.6% of the total population." We trust that once established, the USFWS will uphold its responsibilities for environmental justice, especially when developing visitor services for surrounding communities, thereby ensuring the equitable distribution of the refuge's benefits.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

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President
The Piedmont Environmental Council

Bill Crouch
Maryland State Director
The Conservation Fund

Joel Dunn
President and CEO
Chesapeake Conservancy

Lydia Lawrence
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Nature Forward

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