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**Maryland Legislature Passes Bills Strengthening Clean Water Protections and Ensuring Equity**

*Three bills improve the state’s regulation, enforcement, and public notice under the Clean Water Act*

(Takoma Park, MD) - In a victory for protecting clean water and addressing environmental injustices, the Maryland legislature passed three bills that significantly improve the monitoring and enforcement of pollution permits, require an evaluation of environmental injustices for new permits, and ensure community members have a seat on the Patuxent River Commission.

“The Clean Water Act, which turns 50 this year, is a powerful law, but only if states make the investments necessary to ensure equitable protections and enforcement,” said Betsy Nicholas, Executive Director of Waterkeepers Chesapeake. “And when states are not doing their job, the Clean Water Act also gives people the right to step in and demand action. These three bills demonstrate the power of community advocates to push state agencies to do their jobs.”

A state has the responsibility under the federal Clean Water Act to protect public health and the environment by controlling what is discharged into our waterways, and to ensure transparency and public participation in the regulation of polluting facilities. These bills make certain that the state does not shirk these responsibilities.

“The Environment - Discharge Permits - Inspections and Administrative Continuations” Bill (SB492/HB649) sponsored by Sen. Paul Pinsky (District 22), and Del. Sara Love (District 16), and supported by a broad coalition of community groups, requires the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) to clear the backlog of more than 200 outdated or expired water pollution control permits, nicknamed “zombie permits”, and update them by 2026, and to inspect facilities deemed in significant noncompliance with their discharge permits once per month.

"Lack of adequate staffing has slowed permitting and enforcement processes, which has endangered the public. It is past time that we not only speak out against it, but take action to reverse it," said Senator Paul Pinsky (District 22). "This bill ensures that MDE conducts routine inspections and issues penalties so we can stop chronic violations and protect our communities."

Several high-profile failures to adhere to pollution permits were uncovered recently after nonprofit groups including Blue Water Baltimore and ShoreRivers flagged issues for MDE. Specific problems were later revealed at Baltimore’s wastewater treatment plants and at the Valley Proteins facility on
Maryland’s Eastern Shore following MDE inspections. This new law aims to address such issues by requiring more frequent inspections at facilities to identify violations before they significantly harm the environment and communities.

"We shouldn’t have to wait until people get sick or nonprofit organizations report violations and issue reports on MDE’s weak inspection and enforcement record to get MDE to do its job," said Delegate Sara Love (District 16). "Facilities with significant violations that are operating on discharge permits that expired over 15 years ago need to be a thing of the past."

"For years we’ve been dealing with pollution from the oldest zombie permit in the state, which has also been in significant violation of their discharge permit that expired over 15 years ago. The state’s lack of oversight and control of the situation represents a regulatory failure," said Matt Pluta, Director of Riverkeeper Programs at ShoreRivers. “If MDE were operating with the resources and framework identified in this legislation then the pollution impacts to downstream communities and waterways could have been prevented."

“The proactive inspections required by this bill are good for Maryland residents, the environment, and the regulated permit holders,” said Alice Volpitta, Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper at Blue Water Baltimore. “The quicker MDE can bring a polluter back into compliance, the cheaper it will be to fix the problems that led to the pollution in the first place.”

“The Environment – Permit Applications – Environmental Justice Screening” Bill (SB818/HB1200) sponsored by Sen. Arthur Ellis (District 28), and Del. Melissa Wells (District 40) requires an identification and disclosure of existing pollution sources when a permit is being requested for a new polluting facility, and that this information be provided to communities early in the permitting process.

“For many communities, environmental injustice compounds a legacy of social, economic, and political disenfranchisement. This bill requiring environmental justice screening to identify potential injustices before a new polluting project is approved is a simple, but important step to bring justice to so many of our communities overburdened with pollution,” said Del. Melissa Wells (District 40). “The screening process can be used to identify needed projects that prioritize economic and labor needs of historically low-income and redlined communities.”

Many communities face barriers in accessing information regarding proposed construction of new industrial facilities, in particular low-income communities of color who often bear the brunt of such development projects. This lack of information has left many communities powerless to advocate for themselves, unable to request changes be made to proposed developments in order to prevent harm to their communities’ health.

“Too often, communities learn about a proposed development too late to have meaningful input on the permitting process,” said Staci Hartwell, Chair for environmental and climate justice with the NAACP Maryland State Conference. “Now, communities that have borne the harmful impact of too many
industrial facilities polluting the air and water will have the information and data needed to protect the
health of their residents.”

“The Patuxent River Commission-Membership” Bill (SB367/HB716): When Secretary of Planning Robert
McCord went outside of his jurisdiction and did not reappoint several community advocates, including
Patuxent Riverkeeper Fred Tutman, to the Patuxent River Commission, the public outcry was loud.
Maryland legislators acted quickly to introduce and pass bipartisan legislation sponsored by Sen. Paul
Pinsky (District 22) and Del. Mary Lehman (District 21) to make the Patuxent Riverkeeper a permanent
seat and add additional citizen seats to the Patuxent River Commission.

"The Patuxent River Commission is a vital forum where community voices should be able to speak truth
to power. Legislation returning the Patuxent Riverkeeper seat -- and adding more citizen seats to the
state’s only river commission -- passed overwhelmingly in the Maryland General Assembly, vindicating
the importance of community engagement in the issues that matter in our watershed," said Fred
Tutman, the Patuxent Riverkeeper. "The constructive outrage from the people all across Maryland helped
pass this bill and has given us a renewed mandate in the fight to save the Patuxent River, plus the moral
support and authority to persevere."

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Waterkeepers Chesapeake fights for clean water and a healthy environment by supporting 17
Waterkeepers throughout the Chesapeake and coastal regions as they protect their communities, rivers,
and streams from pollution. https://waterkeeperschesapeake.org. Learn about the Clean Water Act 50th
Anniversary Campaign at https://cwa50.org

ShoreRivers protects and restores Eastern Shore waterways through science-based advocacy,
restoration, and education. It is home of four Riverkeepers for the Sassafras, Chester, Choptank, and
Miles-Wye Rivers. https://www.shorerivers.org

Blue Water Baltimore, home of the Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper, is a local 501(c)(3) nonprofit
watershed organization with a mission to restore the quality of Baltimore’s rivers, streams, and Harbor to
foster a healthy environment, a strong economy, and thriving communities.
https://bluewaterbaltimore.org

Patuxent Riverkeeper conserves, protects and replenishes Maryland’s longest and deepest intrastate
waterway, the Patuxent River. Through strategic advocacy, restoration and education, our goal is
long-term sustainability for the ecosystem of the entire Patuxent River basin and the people who rely on

NAACP Maryland State Conference The NAACP is the largest volunteer civil rights and social justice
organization in the country. https://www.naacpmaryland.org