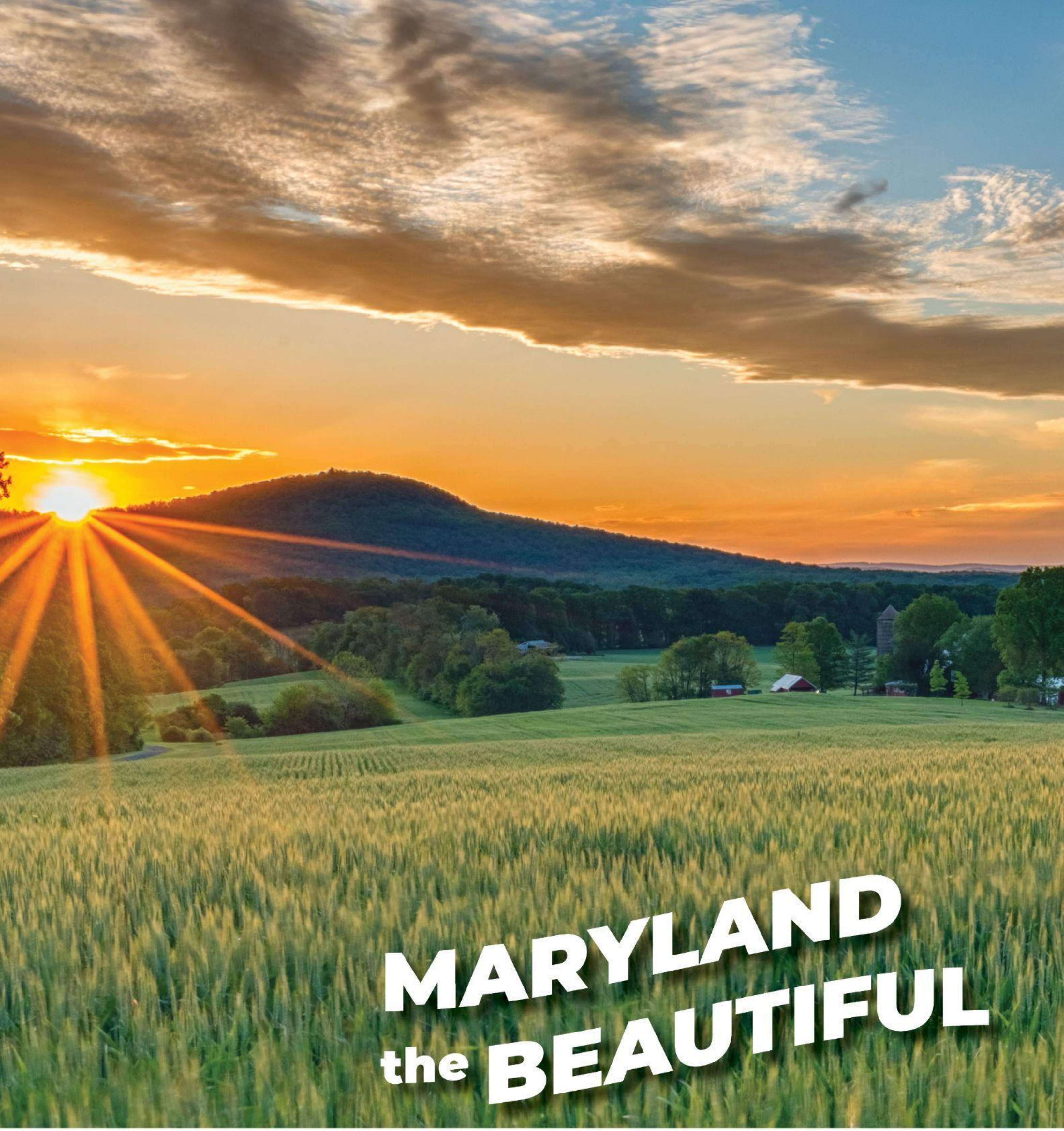


MARYLAND the BEAUTIFUL

Sustainable Growth Subcabinet
Annual Report FY2025

Introduction

The Maryland the Beautiful Act (CH546), enacted in 2023 in recognition of the multiple benefits derived from protected lands throughout the state, established ambitious land conservation goals to conserve 30% of the state by 2030 (30 by 30) and 40% of the state by 2040 (40 by 40). Through the combined efforts of state agencies, local governments, the federal government, and nonprofit land trusts, the first goal to conserve 30% of Maryland land was achieved in 2024, well in advance of the 2030 goal year.

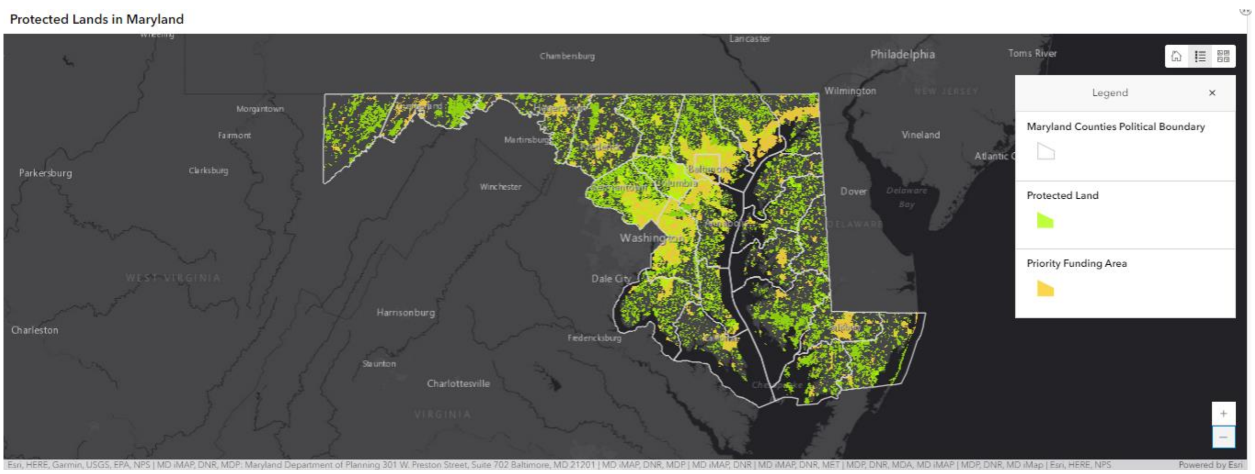
The Maryland the Beautiful Act requires the Sustainable Growth Subcabinet to provide an annual report on the state's progress on or before December 1 of each year. This report provides an update on acres conserved and highlights key actions taken.

Future annual reports, along with future five-year updates to this plan, will provide more information on ongoing initiatives, funding, statistics, updated projections, and additional actions to meet the 40% goal by 2040.

Progress to Date

Update on Acres Conserved

Maryland state agencies use the Maryland Protected Lands Dashboard to track progress towards each state-level land preservation goal. The Maryland Department of Planning (MDP), Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Maryland Environmental Trust (MET), and Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) work collaboratively to collect data from various sources (federal, state, local, and NGO). MDP updates the dashboard quarterly. Acres protected are also reported as part of the agencies' annual Managing for Results (MFR) submissions.



Data collected that are counted towards the state conservation goals include the following land preservation categories:

- MET easements
- MALPF easements
- Local Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) and Transferable Development Rights (TDR) easements
- Local cluster subdivision remainders
- Private conservation organizations, such as local land trusts
- Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO)
- Rural Legacy easements
- Federal program easements, such as Forest Legacy or CREP
- POS state-side easements

- Local recreation facilities and parks, including those funded with POS local side
- DNR state lands
- Federal parks and conservation properties

According to the Maryland Protected Lands Dashboard, 1,908,893 acres have been protected in Maryland as of the end of FY25.[1]

There are 6,189,629 land acres in Maryland, so Maryland has conserved 30.84% of its land as of the end of FY25. The goal of 30% conserved land in advance of 2030 was met at the end of 2023.[2] If the most recent 5-year trend (June 30, 2020 - June 30, 2025) of land preservation (1,908,893 acres - 1,773,458 acres = 135,435 acres) continues through FY40, Maryland will have preserved an additional 406,305 acres by June 30, 2040, for a total of 2,315,198 acres, which will be less than the 2,475,852 acres needed to achieve the 40% by 2040 goal.

Highlighted Actions from the Five-Year Plan

While the state has met the first goal established in the Maryland the Beautiful Act to protect 30% of Maryland's land well in advance of the 2030 goal, state agencies continue to look ahead to how to accomplish the ambitious goal of protecting 40% by 2040. In addition to continuing to conserve land through the state's land conservation programs, state agencies work with stakeholders and partners to advance land conservation. The items listed below are examples of work completed in 2025 in support of the actions identified in the Sustainable Growth Subcabinet Five-Year Plan.

[1] Best available data as of August 21, 2025. This is our best estimate for the end of fiscal year 2025 acres preserved.

[2] Note that acreage protected with state funds is included in state program reporting so when a private conservation organization, such as a local land trust, uses state funds to place an easement on a property, the acreage is not attributed as land conserved by the private conservation organization. Distinguishing between lands conserved by private conservation organizations through government funding versus through private funding is a difficult but important task to ensure that we are not double counting preserved lands. MET, MDP and DNR worked together over the past two years to identify critical data needs, in conformance with the Chesapeake Bay Program data standard, and then developed a spreadsheet and instructions to improve the collection of private conservation organization data.

Ongoing Actions

A. Continued to foster and grow partnerships with land trusts and local governments to facilitate conservation projects
    a. DNR, MET, and MALPF worked with land trusts and local governments throughout 2025 on conservation projects.

B. Continued work on refining data and reporting procedures

    a. MET, MDP, and DNR presented at the MET Roundtable on May 15, 2025. This included updates on the state's efforts to collect comprehensive land trust and local conservation organization data, information on Maryland's land data and GIS layers, and a deeper dive into the state's mapping and planning tools.

C. Continue working with federal partners to optimize the use of federal grant funds in Maryland

    a. DNR had regular coordination meetings with the National Park Service to discuss and review Land and Water Conservation Fund grants during 2025.

D. Expand the use of park equity analysis in the siting of new parks and facilities and incorporate MDE's EJ screening tool to advance environmental justice for underserved and overburdened communities

    a. DNR, in consultation with the Greenspace Advisory Board, completed the FY25 grant round for the Greenspace Equity Program. The Greenspace Equity Program was established in 2023 through legislation (Chapter 487 of 2023) to provide grants to eligible applicants for enhancing the public health and livability of overburdened and underserved communities by implementing projects to preserve, create, and improve public greenspace. Funding for the program was authorized from the state share of Program Open Space in FY25. DNR received 40 applications requesting a total of $12 million in grant funding. Twenty-two projects were selected for funding, including new trails, parks, urban farms, gathering spaces, community woodlands, and gardens. The majority of the grants were approved by the Board of Public Works on June 11, 2025, with the remaining grants approved at subsequent meetings.

b. The Governor included $7 million for the program in the FY26 budget. The funds were restricted by the General Assembly for three specific projects so a competitive grant round will not be held in FY26.

Short Term Actions

A. Review small procurement limits which are creating challenges with obtaining the necessary real estate due diligence
   a. DNR has reviewed small procurements related to due diligence for land acquisitions and identified processes that decreased the time it takes to complete those small procurements.

B. Review all statutory provisions and policies and procedures to identify opportunities to provide for operational parity among conservation easement programs and to increase efficiency
   a. DNR introduced Departmental legislation in 2025, Chapter 443 of 2025, Natural Resources - Public Lands - Acquisition, Staffing, Operations, and Funding, that passed the General Assembly and included several provisions to improve the Department's ability to operate, manage, and acquire land. Specifically, the legislation includes language to address operational parity and increase efficiency for conservation easements. The bill codifies the Department's authority to use an easement valuation system (EVS) and allows other entities to hold title/easements with Board of Public Works approval which makes the POS Stateside easement process more consistent with the Rural Legacy Program and CREP Permanent Easement Program processes.

C. Examine whether the wetland mitigation, MS4 stream restoration, forest mitigation, and Tier II antidegradation mitigation acres meet the definition of conserved lands in the bill. If so, develop a process to collect and report that data.
   a. MDP initiated discussions with DNR Forest Service staff and MDE Wetlands and Waterways staff regarding the availability and scope of forest mitigation and wetland mitigation GIS data, and the steps necessary to identify permanently protected forest and wetlands from the GIS data that are not also protected through our federal, state, local or other land preservation efforts.

Both MDE and DNR indicate that additional work would be needed to accomplish this goal.

2025 Legislative Session

The FY26 budget as introduced included full funding for the state's land preservation programs funded by transfer tax revenues. While proposed funding amounts were lower than recent years due to decreased transfer tax revenue estimates and under-attainment from FY24, the amounts proposed were in accordance with statute. However, due to budget shortfalls, the Budget Reconciliation and Financing Act of 2025 was amended to divert $25 million per year from FY26 through FY29 of revenue from the transfer tax that would otherwise be distributed to Program Open Space State Land Acquisition, the Rural Legacy Program, and the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Program. As noted in the Five-Year Plan, achieving 40 by 40 will be challenging and will depend on future funding for land preservation programs, willing sellers, and continued cooperation from all state, local, and federal partners. It is estimated that the $100 million diverted from FY26 to FY29 would protect approximately 20,000 acres of land statewide.

DNR's departmental legislation, Chapter 443 of 2025, Natural Resources - Public Lands - Acquisition, Staffing, Operations, and Funding, enacted in 2025 included several provisions to improve the Department's ability to operate, manage, and acquire land. In addition to the easement parity provisions described above, the legislation makes several key fiscal and operational changes. The changes include setting a formula for the Department requesting additional positions as acres are acquired and increasing funding opportunities for operations including authorizing the Department to create affiliated foundations and utilize limited funding from the Program Open Space (POS) Stateside land acquisition fund balance in certain circumstances. These provisions aim to increase the long-term sustainability of the Department to manage existing lands and continue acquiring lands to meet state land conservation goals and the continued demand for public access from citizens. The bill also provides local jurisdictions with increased flexibility to spend their POS Local funds on either acquisition or development projects if they have met their land acquisition goals which ensure protected lands provide meaningful access to Marylanders.