For Immediate Release

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Maryland Takes Additional Steps to Protect Bees and Other Pollinators
Bill to prohibit pesticides that harm pollinators in designated State pollinator habitat lands passes 2017 General Assembly session; heads to Governor’s desk

Annapolis, MD (April 11, 2017) – The Maryland General Assembly has passed SB 386/HB 830, which would prohibit pesticides known to harm pollinators on designated state pollinator habitats, with bipartisan majorities in both the Senate and the House of Delegates.

Advocates are celebrating the bill as another major action to protect bees and other pollinators. This includes both last year’s Pollinator Protection Act, which made the General Assembly the first legislature in the country to restrict consumer use of neonicotinoid pesticides, as well as legislation to expand pollinator habitat on state agency lands.

“We are thrilled that Maryland is doing even more to protect our bees, birds, butterflies and other pollinators, which are so crucial to our food supply and environment,” said Bonnie Raindrop, legislative chair of the Central Maryland Beekeepers Association. “Having just lost all of my bee hives over the winter, I can say firsthand that the threat is real, and we need to do all we can to protect these essential creatures.”

The bill amends last year’s Pollinator Habitat Plans law, sponsored by Delegate Steve Lafferty (D-42A), which requires the State Highway Administration and Maryland’s Departments of Natural Resources and Environmental Services to establish a pollinator habitat plan for lands owned or managed by that agency. Advocates say lack of sufficient habitat is a key factor in declining pollinator health.

This year’s bill ensures that designated State pollinator habitats do not use pesticides labeled as toxic to pollinators or use seeds or plants treated with a neonicotinoid pesticide. The bill allows exceptions for public health emergencies and gives state agencies freedom to designate which of their lands are protected pollinator habitat and which are not.

Proponents of the bill say lower-toxicity alternatives to neonics are widely available, and many neonic-free plants and seeds are no more expensive than plants treated with neonics.

A preponderance of research confirms that neonicotinoid (“neonic”) pesticides kill and harm bees, birds, butterflies and other pollinators. Other pesticides are also known to be toxic to pollinators, as well.

The House bill was sponsored by Delegate Anne Healey (D-22), while the Senate bill was sponsored by Senator Shirley Nathan-Pulliam (D-44). Both legislators were the lead sponsors on the Pollinator Protection Act last year.

“Keeping state pollinator habitats free of certain toxic pesticides will help bees and other pollinators survive and thrive in our state,” said Ruth Berlin, executive director of the Maryland Pesticide Education Network. “We had to make sure that state pollinator habitats would not end up harming the very
species we were trying to protect. We are so thankful to all our legislative champions, and we look forward to Governor Hogan signing the bill into law.”

Maryland bees continue to die at alarming rates. Maryland beekeepers lost 56 percent of their hives last year, which follows a 61 percent loss in 2015. Experts say annual losses beyond 15 percent are unsustainable for beekeepers.

The federal government has taken similar precautions against toxic pesticides. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service phased out neonic use, and it is now prohibited on national wildlife lands. The National Pollinator Health Strategy, which provides guidance for designed landscapes, advises that “chemical controls that can adversely affect pollinators should not be applied in pollinator habitats” and federal facilities use seeds and plants that do not contain systemic insecticides.

The Smart on Pesticides Maryland coalition, spearheaded by the Maryland Pesticide Education Network, works to protect Marylanders and the natural systems we depend upon from the toxic impacts of pesticides. The coalition includes 78 organizations, and institutions representing communities, businesses, health care providers, farmers, environmentalists, waterkeepers, interfaith congregants as well as environmental justice, public health and wildlife advocates.