

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 28, 2016

The Honorable Daniel M. Ashe
Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street NW, Room 3331
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Ashe,

As Members of Congress committed to the restoration the Chesapeake Bay, as well as the region's rivers and streams, we are very concerned about a potential federal funding shortfall of \$150,000 for the annual submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) survey. This aerial survey of the entire Bay and its tidal tributaries has been conducted every year since the 1980's and provides a critical snapshot and benchmark for the health of the Bay. There are concerns that the Chesapeake Bay Program will cut this survey from annually to biennially, which we believe would be a mistake.

The restoration of SAV, or sea grasses, is a critical indicator of the success of the Bay restoration efforts. Sea grasses are essential to the health of the Bay. They filter harmful pollutants and provide critical habitat and food for fish, blue crabs, waterfowl and other species. One ambitious goal is to restore water clarity enough to support 185,000 acres of SAV, and this survey is the only mechanism to measure that. Furthermore, the Chesapeake Bay will not be removed from the Clean Water Act's List of Impaired Waters until this goal is met for three consecutive years.

The cost for the SAV survey in 2016 is \$687,000. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has committed \$360,000 toward its completion. Virginia state agencies will provide \$132,000 and \$45,000 will be provided by Maryland. This totals \$537,000, leaving a shortfall of \$150,000 in FY16 funds to complete the survey and analyze the data.

The survey is used for permitting and regulatory work, and to gauge Bay health and impacts on fish and wildlife. The survey receives direct funding from only one federal agency, the EPA. EPA has filled the gap as other agencies have reduced or eliminated their funding. The following federal agencies have eliminated their contributions while still utilizing data from the survey to fulfill their regulatory role in the Bay:

- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – Eliminated all funding support- last funding amount was \$85,000 in 2012.
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service – Eliminated all funding support– last funding amount was \$35,000 in 1998.

- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – Eliminated all funding support—last funding amount was \$20,000 in 2014.

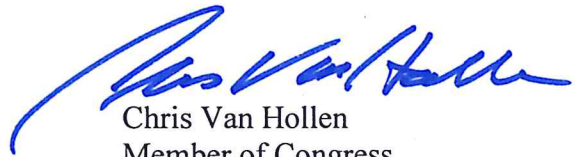
We appreciate that the EPA has partially filled the funding gap left by others in the past. We hope those federal agencies that benefit from this study will fulfill their responsibilities toward our shared Chesapeake Bay restoration efforts and restore funding to this critical program in FY 16 and in future years.

If this survey is allowed to lapse, or become reduced in size, federal and state regulators will be without critical data to determine permit issuance, regulatory decisions, and management actions. A key measurement of whether the Bay is getting better, or worse, will be lost, and actions necessary to stem any decline will be delayed without this key information. We urge you to ensure that this does not happen and that your agency will, at a minimum, restore funding to the levels that you last contributed to this program. Thank you and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



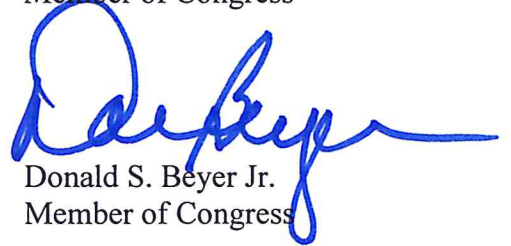
Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress



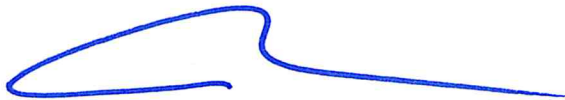
Chris Van Hollen
Member of Congress



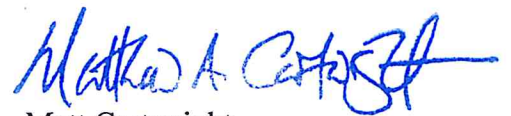
Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



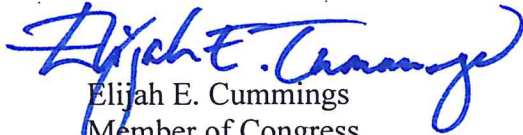
Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress




John K. Delaney
Member of Congress



Matt Cartwright
Member of Congress



Elijah E. Cummings
Member of Congress



Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Dan Ashe, Director, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
The Honorable Jo-Ellen Darcy, Assistant Secretary of the Army
The Honorable Kathryn D. Sullivan, Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and
Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator