

Critical Area Commission

For the Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays

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NEW PUBLICATION!!

[Bay Smart -
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Martin O'Malley, Governor
Anthony G. Brown, Lt. Governor

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest and most productive estuary in the United States. The Bay is nearly 200 miles long and is fed by 48 major rivers,

100 smaller rivers, and thousands of tiny streams and creeks. The Bay's diverse and complex watershed covers 64,000 square miles and provides habitat for 2,700 species of plants and animals. The watershed is also a major population center where 15 million people live, work, and recreate. Population in the watershed is expected to increase to 18 million by the year 2020.



As early as the 1960s, there was a growing awareness that the resources of the Chesapeake Bay watershed were declining largely due to the tremendous pressure placed upon sensitive resources by a rapidly expanding population. In response to concerns about the quality and productivity of the Chesapeake Bay, the General Assembly enacted a comprehensive resource protection program for the Bay and its tributaries.

The Critical Area Act, passed in 1984, was significant and far-reaching, and marked the first time that the State and local governments jointly addressed the impacts of land development on habitat and aquatic resources.

Margaret McHale, Chair

The law identified the "Critical Area" as all land within 1,000 feet of the Mean High Water Line of tidal waters or the landward edge of tidal wetlands and all waters of and lands under the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. The law created a statewide Critical Area Commission to oversee the development and implementation of local land use programs directed towards the Critical Area that met the following goals:

- Minimize adverse impacts on water quality that result from pollutants that are discharged from structures or conveyances or that have run off from surrounding lands;
- Conserve fish, wildlife, and plant habitat in the Critical Area; and
- Establish land use policies for development in the Critical Area which accommodate growth and also address the fact that, even if pollution is controlled, the number, movement, and activities of persons in the Critical Area can create adverse environmental impacts.

The Commission developed criteria that were used by local jurisdictions to develop individual Critical Area programs and amend local comprehensive plans, zoning ordinances, and subdivision regulations. The programs that have subsequently been adopted by local governments are specific and comprehensive. They are designed to address the unique characteristics and needs of each county and municipality and together they represent a comprehensive land use strategy for preserving and protecting Maryland's most important natural resource, the Chesapeake Bay.

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