Dear Senator Warner:

On behalf of Lynnhaven River NOW, I write to urge you to oppose Sections 586 and 587 of H.R. 8845, the Fiscal Year 2027 Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, and any similar provisions in the final funding bill that would undermine federal support for oyster sanctuary restoration in the Chesapeake Bay.

In the Lynnhaven River, we have seen firsthand what long-term oyster restoration, science-based management, and protected sanctuary reefs can make possible. When Lynnhaven River NOW was founded in 2002, only about 1 percent of the river was open for shellfish harvest. Today, after more than two decades of work by local, state, federal, nonprofit, and community partners, 52 percent of the river is open for shellfish harvesting. That progress is not accidental. It is the result of sustained investment in water quality, oyster planting, and more than 150 acres of sanctuary reefs that provide habitat, filtration, and reproductive capacity for the river's recovery.

Sections 586 and 587 would put this model at risk. Section 586 would make federally supported oyster restoration eligible for commercial harvest after only three years. That requirement conflicts with the very purpose of sanctuary reefs. Sanctuaries are designed to remain protected so oysters can grow larger, reproduce more effectively, build three-dimensional reef structure, filter water, and support the broader ecosystem over time. Opening these reefs to harvest after a short period would flatten the habitat, remove older, more productive oysters, and convert restoration investments into short-term extraction rather than long-term recovery.

Section 587 would also restrict funding for sites labeled as underperforming after five years unless new certification requirements are met. Restoration is not always linear, especially in tributaries facing sedimentation, stormwater runoff, disease pressure, and other water quality challenges. The places most in need of continued investment should not be cut off from the very funding they need to recover. In the Lynnhaven, progress has taken decades of persistence. A provision penalizing challenging sites would run counter to the patient-adaptive approach that successful restoration requires.

Oyster restoration is not a choice between conservation and working waterfronts. The Lynnhaven's recovery shows the opposite. Protected reefs, improved water quality, and expanded shellfish harvest can reinforce one another when managed responsibly. Sanctuary reefs help rebuild the ecological foundation that supports oyster larvae, fish habitat, cleaner water, aquaculture, and future harvest opportunities. Today, we have several thriving commercial oyster farms in the Lynnhaven River. Undermining sanctuary protections would weaken that balance and jeopardize one of the region's most successful restoration stories.

The Chesapeake Bay, and its tributaries, are home to the largest oyster reef restoration effort in the world. Federal leadership, especially through NOAA, has been essential to that success. Congress should build on this momentum, not insert appropriation riders that undercut restoration science, local progress, and the partnership commitments already made across the watershed.

We respectfully urge you to oppose Sections 586 and 587 of H.R. 8845 and ensure that the final FY2027 Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies funding bill protects continued federal investment in oyster sanctuaries in all Chesapeake Bay tributaries.

Thank you for your leadership and your continued commitment to the health of our Virginia waterways, the Chesapeake Bay, and the communities that depend on them.

Sincerely,

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