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Susan O'Neill, Chair

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Testimony in Support of
Senate Bill 34 – Department of Agriculture – State Ombudsman for Value – Added Agriculture
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment
January 25, 2023

The Rural Maryland Council **supports** Senate Bill 34 – Department of Agriculture – State Ombudsman for Value-Added Agriculture. This bill will establish the State Ombudsman for Value-Added Agriculture as a position within the Department of Agriculture.

The Rural Maryland Council has long supported increased opportunities for agriculture and the forest products industry enterprises. Value-added production enables farmers to incorporate additional revenue streams into existing operations. Value added agriculture enables primary producers to access secondary markets by transforming raw agricultural products and altering it in a way to increase it's worth to the consumer and producer- think milk to cheese, tomatoes to salsa, wood to furniture. Grow and Fortify's Economic Analysis Value-Added Agriculture in Maryland published in February 2020 reports that value added agriculture provides nearly 74,000 jobs, has an economic impact of over \$20.6 billion annually, and adds nearly \$875 million to the State's fiscal resources.

Due to the complex and cross sector impact related to zoning, permitting and inspections, some farmers have difficulty navigating government and regulatory structure. We believe that a State Ombudsman for Value-Added Agriculture would work to improve farm viability by working with the farmers to navigate the complex regulatory structure.

As envisioned under this bill, the State's Ombudsman for Value-Added Agriculture will work alongside other appointed positions to support producers to enable stronger farms across Maryland through increased profit margins for farmers and rural Maryland.

The Council supports and encourages Value-Added agriculture and the benefits it brings to both farmers and the State's economy. The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of Senate Bill 34.

The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) is an independent state agency governed by a nonpartisan, 40-member board that consists of inclusive representation from the federal, state, regional, county, and municipal governments, as well as the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. We bring together federal, state, county, and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to identify challenges unique to rural communities and to craft public policy, programmatic or regulatory solutions.

"A Collective Voice for Rural Maryland"