

**KATIE FRY HESTER**  
*Legislative District 9*  
Howard and Montgomery Counties

Education, Energy, and  
Environment Committee

Chair, Joint Committee on  
Cybersecurity, Information Technology  
and Biotechnology



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**THE SENATE OF MARYLAND**  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony in Support of SB34 – Department of Agriculture – State Ombudsman for Value Added Agriculture**

January 22nd, 2023

Chair Feldman, Vice-Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee:

Thank you for your consideration of SB34 - Department of Agriculture - State Ombudsman for Value-Added Agriculture. As you all know, agriculture remains Maryland's number one commercial industry to this day – employing more than 350,000 individuals and driving \$20.6B in economic activity each year. In recent years, much of this industry's growth has come from "value added agriculture," where farmers not only produce raw agricultural inputs, but process them into specialty products such as soaps, gourmet food products, or alcoholic beverages.

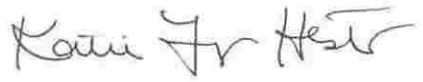
However, this industry faces several challenges to its future success. In particular, the lack of access to processing inspections within the state of Maryland has severely limited farmers' operational capacity. This barrier is especially difficult for aspiring farmers to overcome, and have grown so significant that last year, the state budget required the Department of Agriculture to establish a Task Force to study the feasibility of returning to state-level meat processing inspections instead of relying on federal inspectors. As part of the Task Force's final report, they explicitly recommended the establishment of an Ombudsman within the Department to assist new and existing businesses in their effort to navigate local, state, and federal regulations.

SB34 codifies this recommendation and directs the Ombudsman to prioritize implementation and resolution of the Task Force's findings. However, SB34 then expands the position to serve as the primary point of contact for individuals engaged in, or interested in engaging in, the value added agriculture industry. This would include providing information regarding state and federal regulations, liaising between state and federal partners, and any other duties assigned by the Secretary.

Our farms face a multitude of obstacles here in Maryland, but growth in value added agriculture

and agritourism present promising bright spots for small, family-owned businesses all across our state. They also present significant value for Marylander consumers, who increasingly seek transparency and sustainability in their food systems. For these reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report for SB34

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katie Fry Hester". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "K" and "H".

Senator Katie Fry Hester  
Howard & Montgomery Counties