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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

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Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 389 – Department of Agriculture – State Ombudsman for Value-Added Agriculture  
Environment and Transportation Committee  
February 15, 2023

The Rural Maryland Council **supports** House Bill 389 – Department of Agriculture – State Ombudsman for Value – Added Agriculture. This bill will establish the State Ombudsman for Value-Added Agriculture as a position in the Department of Agriculture.

The Rural Maryland Council has long supported agriculture and value-added agriculture because it offers diverse enterprises and additional revenue streams, plus increased profit for farmers and rural Maryland. Value added agriculture is important because it's a way to take a raw agriculture product and alter it in a way to increase it's worth to the consumer - think tomatoes to salsa, hemp to CBD oil, wood to furniture.

Value added agriculture provides increased opportunity for Rural Maryland as well as agriculture opportunities in rural and urban environments. Grow and Fortify's Economic Analysis, Value-Added Agriculture in Maryland, 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.

As envisioned under this bill, the State's Ombudsman for Value-Added Agriculture will work with value-added producers to help navigate the regulatory processes and overall support this growing industry.

The Council supports and encourages value-added agriculture and the benefits it brings to both farmers and the State's economy. We understand this bill in the Senate (SB34) has been amended to change the position title from Ombudsman to Specialist. The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support with amendment of House Bill 389.

*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"**