Senator Sarah Elfreth
Legislative District 30
Anne Arundel County

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Budget and Taxation Committee

Subcomittees

Capital Budget

Pensions

Chair, Public Safety,
Transportation, and Environment

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Joint Committee on the Chesapeake and
Atlantic Coastal Bays Critical Area

Chair, Joint Subcommittee on
Program Open Space/Agricultural
Land Preservation

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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

March 8, 2024

Testimony in Favor of SB 932
Best In Show

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

I respectfully request a favorable report of Senate Bill 932 - Best In Show - to leverage State funding to its fullest potential by incentivizing multiple environmental interventions on agricultural land.

In May 2023, the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee of the Chesapeake Bay Program published the Comprehensive Evaluation of System Response (CESR) report[1]. Authored by Dr. Denise Wardrop, Dr. Kurt Stephenson, and over 80 scientists from across the watershed, the CESR report investigated the progress, successes, and issues related to the health of the Chesapeake Bay. The report noted that while there has been progress made in the decades since the first Bay agreement, our efforts are falling short in meeting our goals.

The report noted that agriculture is the largest remaining source of nutrient loads to the Bay, including increased dissolved phosphorus levels in river systems surrounding the Bay. Livestock impact these nutrient loads significantly, particularly phosphorus, and according to scientists, traditional interventions like cover crops and no-till do not significantly alter inputs. Growing populations have exacerbated environmental degradation through development as well as increasing the need for food, leading to expansion of agricultural land to grow more crops and support livestock[2]. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations reported in 2023 that agricultural expansion is responsible for nearly 90% of worldwide deforestation, making the industry a leading driver of biodiversity and habitat loss. Their report presented a critical question - **"How can agriculture continue to feed growing populations while contributing to the urgent restoration of the planet's ecosystems?"**[3]

While the findings of the CESR report are alarming, Maryland's agricultural community responded with great urgency to the opportunities ahead. The report includes recommendations to ensure policy matches with these scientific findings. One recommendation made by scientists in the report calls for a focus on better targeting of and incentivizing interventions. "Additional funding alone is unlikely to achieve desired nutrient and sediment reductions," the CESR report explains. "Achieving and sustaining substantial future pollutant reductions will require a willingness to develop and adopt new implementation approaches and technologies." **The call to action is clear - we needed to get creative, think bigger, and target better.** SB 932 is designed to do just that.

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[1] https://www.chesapeake.org/stac/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CESR-Executive-Summary.pdf
[2] https://ugc.berkeley.edu/background-content/population-growth
[3] https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/1646202/

Senate Bill 932 establishes the Best In Show Program within the Maryland Department of Agriculture to incentivize the implementation of multiple Best Management Practices (BMPs) on Maryland's farmland. The Anne Arundel Soil Conservation District describes agricultural BMPs as "tools that farmers can use to reduce soil and fertilizer runoff, properly manage animal waste, and protect water and air quality on their farms while achieving multiple positive environmental outcomes. These tools often improve a farmer's bottomline as well by reducing operating costs"[4]. SB 932 empowers MDA to address emerging environmental concerns by utilizing the newest science to target high priority BMPs in the watersheds that require the most attention. The bill takes note of high priority BMPs based upon the findings of the CESR report, including natural filters, vegetative environmental buffers, wildlife and pollinator habitat, shallow water and aquatic organism habitat, agricultural land transition practices, and agricultural ditch management practices. By leaning on the newest available science, regularly assessing emerging environmental concerns, and focusing efforts on the most pressing interventions, Maryland farms can be sure that their efforts have the greatest environmental impact.
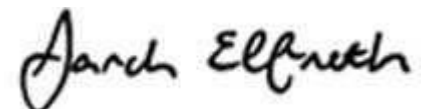
Senate Bill 932 leverages existing funding for agricultural and environmental conservation by establishing a grant program to incentivize holistic approaches on agricultural land. The program establishes a Maryland Agricultural BMP Best In Show Account for Fiscal Years 2026 through 2030 from which competitive grant funds will be disbursed. State funds may be allocated to this account from the Bay Restoration Fund, Chesapeake And Atlantic Coastal Bays 2010 Trust Fund, Clean Water Commerce Account, and any other agricultural cost-share funding. This funding will be allocated to projects which fall under the scope of the original funding source while being applied to the related BMPs under the grant program. This approach ensures that State funds are used to get the greatest possible outcomes with the largest environmental impact.

Senate Bill 932 targets interventions to support communities overburdened by pollution. The CESR report expressed concern for "regional mass imbalance" occurring in areas where nutrient pollutants are building up faster than they can be taken out through the ecosystem, overburdening communities and contributing to public health challenges. Communities in Somerset, Wicomico, and Western Worcester are negatively impacted by high concentrations of ammonia and particulate matter pollution in the air as a result of increasing numbers of livestock. These pollutants can be mitigated through targeted BMPs. SB 932 requires that MDA, DNR, and MDE develop a publicly available digital map indicating which areas of Maryland are subject to a regional mass imbalance, consequently overburdened, and are of highest priority for interventions through the Best In Show program. By closely monitoring nutrient outputs to identify concentrations of pollution, funding and intervention can be prioritized and targeted most effectively.

Senate Bill 932 has been a wonderfully collaborative effort among legislators, State agencies including the Maryland Department of Agriculture, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Maryland Department of the Environment, and the agricultural community to ensure that this bill is both innovative and implementable.

I urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 932.

Sincerely,

Senator Sarah Elfreth
District 30

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[4] https://www.annearundelscd.org/agriculture/best-management-practices/