

Department of Legislative Services
 Maryland General Assembly
 2025 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

Senate Bill 736 (Senator Folden)
 Education, Energy, and the Environment and
 Budget and Taxation

**Natural Resources - Wildlife Damage Prevention and Reimbursement Fund -
 Establishment**

This bill establishes a Wildlife Damage Prevention and Reimbursement Fund in the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to provide (1) reimbursement for damage caused by deer, geese, and other wildlife to crops and other agricultural products and (2) grants for projects to prevent damage caused by deer, geese, or other wildlife.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: General fund expenditures increase by \$623,900, and higher education expenditures increase by \$130,200, in FY 2026; out-years reflect annualization and ongoing costs. Special fund revenues and expenditures increase correspondingly by \$500,000 annually beginning in FY 2026.

(in dollars)	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030
SF Revenue	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000
GF Expenditure	\$623,900	\$587,600	\$591,000	\$594,700	\$598,200
SF Expenditure	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000
Higher Ed Exp.	\$130,200	\$95,600	\$99,400	\$103,400	\$107,300
Net Effect	(\$754,000)	(\$683,200)	(\$690,400)	(\$698,100)	(\$705,600)

Note: () = decrease; GF = general funds; FF = federal funds; SF = special funds; - = indeterminate increase; (-) = indeterminate decrease

Local Effect: Potential increase in local government grant revenues and expenditures beginning as early as FY 2026.

Small Business Effect: Potential meaningful.

Analysis

Bill Summary:

Wildlife Damage Prevention and Reimbursement Fund

The bill establishes the Wildlife Damage Prevention and Reimbursement Fund, administered by the Secretary of Natural Resources, to reimburse a person for damage caused by deer, geese, and other wildlife to crops and other agricultural products. It includes a General Assembly finding that it is in the public interest to provide funding for such reimbursement. The bill does not apply to damage caused by a domesticated animal or a black bear.

DNR must also accept requests for grants from the fund for projects that seek to prevent damage caused by deer, geese, or other wildlife.

The fund consists of (1) proceeds from the sale of a conservation deer stamp or decal that may be purchased at a cost of \$5 for each stamp or decal; (2) gifts, grants, and contributions to the State that are designated for inclusion in the fund; and (3) money appropriated in the State budget to the fund. Each fiscal year, the Governor may include in the annual budget bill an appropriation of at least \$50,000 to the fund.

DNR must adopt regulations to carry out the bill's provisions governing the fund.

Reimbursement

DNR may reimburse a person from the fund for damage caused by deer, geese, or other wildlife to the person's crops or agricultural products if (1) the person has followed all relevant wildlife damage preventive measures recommended by the department; (2) the damage amount is determined by an extension agent of the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service ("University of Maryland Extension" (UME)); and (3) the department has verified that the damage was caused by deer, geese, or other wildlife. Subject to available funding, a person may be reimbursed from the fund for damage caused by deer, geese, or other wildlife in an amount not less than \$200 and not more than \$5,000 per year.

Grants

In determining eligibility for grant funding, DNR must consider projects that (1) reduce the availability of attractants to deer, geese, or other wildlife in communities, including agricultural communities; (2) have local community support or a detailed plan to build local community support; (3) are cost-effective investments that have the potential to

continue to be effective beyond the timeframe for the grant funding; or (4) include matching funds or an in-kind match. DNR may not award grant funding for stand-alone research, data collection, and analysis, or the direct generation of revenue or profit.

Entities eligible for a grant include (1) local governments; (2) parks and recreation departments; (3) landowners; (4) farmers; (5) businesses; (6) tribes; (7) institutions of higher education; and (8) nonprofit organizations.

Grant funding must be capped at an amount that leaves at least 10% of the total annual appropriation to the fund available for wildlife damage reimbursement.

Current Law: There is a Black Bear Damage Prevention and Reimbursement Fund established in statute that is similar to the fund established by the bill, but addressing black bear damage. Chapter 565 of 2023 renamed the fund, from the Black Bear Damage Reimbursement Fund to the Black Bear Damage Prevention and Reimbursement Fund and required DNR to accept requests for grants for projects that seek to prevent damage and reduce conflicts between humans and black bears through nonlethal methods, in addition to use of the fund for damage reimbursement. Chapter 565 also increased the maximum amount of damage reimbursement from the fund per person per year to \$5,000 and authorized the Governor to include in the annual budget bill an appropriation of at least \$50,000 to the Fund.

State Fiscal Effect:

Department of Natural Resources – Reimbursement and Grant Funding

Although the bill does not establish a mandated appropriation to the fund and authorizes the Governor to include in the annual budget bill a minimum of \$50,000, this analysis assumes that general fund expenditures increase by \$500,000 annually, the minimum amount assumed to be necessary for a meaningful grant and reimbursement program, considering the significant level of wildlife damage to crops and other agricultural products in the State indicated by DNR and UME. DNR has indicated \$50,000 is not sufficient for a meaningful program.

Special fund revenues to and expenditures from the fund increase correspondingly by \$500,000 each year, reflecting receipt of the general fund appropriation and spending on grants and reimbursement. Special fund revenues and expenditures further increase by an indeterminate, but assumed to be relatively minimal, amount received from purchases of the conservation deer stamp or decal and any gifts, grants, or contributions designated for inclusion in the fund. Based on experience with the Black Bear Damage Prevention and Reimbursement Fund, DNR does not expect these revenues to be significant.

This analysis assumes that DNR distributes the full amount of available funding for grants and reimbursements each year. Because the bill does not explicitly state that the fund may be used for DNR’s administrative costs, it is assumed that general fund expenditures increase further to cover such costs, which are discussed below.

Department of Natural Resources – Administrative Costs

General fund administrative expenditures increase by \$123,873 in fiscal 2026, which accounts for the bill’s October 1, 2025 effective date. This estimate reflects the cost for DNR to hire one natural resources biologist to (1) manage the damage reimbursement and grant funding and the conservation deer stamp or decal and (2) assist UME extension agents, as needed, with site visits to determine damage amounts. DNR indicates that existing staff cannot absorb this additional work. The estimate includes a salary, fringe benefits, one-time start-up costs (including the purchase of a vehicle), and ongoing operating expenses.

Position	1.0
Salary and Fringe Benefits	\$56,754
Vehicle	50,000
Operating Expenses	<u>17,119</u>
FY 2026 DNR Admin. Expenditures	\$123,873

Future year administrative expenditures reflect a full salary with annual increases and employee turnover as well as annual increases in ongoing operating expenses.

University of Maryland Extension – Administrative Costs

Higher education expenditures increase by \$130,157 in fiscal 2026, which accounts for the bill’s October 1, 2025 effective date. This estimate reflects the cost for UME to hire one extension agent to supplement existing agriculture and food system extension agents’ efforts in determining damage amounts for claims submitted for reimbursement by the fund and assisting with training provided to those agents. It includes a salary, fringe benefits, one-time start-up costs (including the purchase of a vehicle), and ongoing operating expenses. The estimate assumes that:

- the fund is administered on a first-come, first-serve basis, so that agents only evaluate damage amounts for claims that can be paid in full, up to the \$5,000 limit, to the extent of available funding (not for an unlimited number of claims); and
- extension agents need to evaluate in the range of 100 claims each fiscal year (*e.g.*, if \$250,000 of the \$500,000 of funding is allocated to reimbursement and on average \$2,500 is reimbursed per person).

Position	1.0
Salary and Fringe Benefits	\$63,038
Vehicle	50,000
Operating Expenses	<u>17,119</u>
FY 2026 UME Admin. Expenditures	\$130,157

Future year administrative expenditures reflect a full salary with annual increases and employee turnover as well as annual increases in ongoing operating expenses.

Local Fiscal Effect: For any local governments, including local parks and recreation departments and local institutions of higher education that receive grant funding, local grant revenues and expenditures increase, beginning as early as fiscal 2026.

Small Business Effect: There is a potentially meaningful benefit for small businesses – particularly farmers – under the bill. There is the potential to both receive reimbursement for wildlife damage as well as the potential to receive a grant from the fund to implement a project that seeks to prevent wildlife damage.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: HB 1511 (Delegate Ruth, *et al.*) - Rules and Executive Nominations.

Information Source(s): Calvert and Prince George’s counties; Maryland Association of Counties; Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission; University System of Maryland; Morgan State University; St. Mary’s College of Maryland; Maryland Department of Agriculture; Department of Budget and Management; Department of Natural Resources; Department of Legislative Services

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