



Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts

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House Bill 1535 - Department of Agriculture - Urban Agriculture Grant Program

Committee: Environment & Transportation

March 6, 2020

MASCD Position: Favorable w/ Amendment

The Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts (MASCD) represents the 24 districts throughout the state of Maryland that spearhead the design and implementation of conservation practices in primarily agricultural but also urban and suburban landscapes.

Urban agriculture is a growing and very important sector of Maryland agriculture. House Bill 1535 seeks to support this vibrant and growing community through a grant program. This bill establishes an Urban Agriculture Grant Program within the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) and an Urban Agriculture Grant Fund to support the program. The bill requires at least \$400,000 annual allocation.

The amendment MASCD seeks is a change in funding source to the unclaimed property fund. The source as drafted is Program Open Space which is currently used for other programs such as Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation, Rural Legacy, Maryland Forests and others that are all already oversubscribed.

There are currently twenty urban farms operating in Baltimore City doing everything from beekeeping to growing vegetables and flowers vertically and in hoop houses. MASCD first became aware of this growing community of farmers when we were asked about providing conservation planning services. Baltimore City does not have a soil conservation district, although we are working on it and have been for nearly twenty years, so other districts including Baltimore County to fill that void. What we learned through those interactions is that it is very difficult for urban farmers to get access to cost share programs as well as financing. While the cost share programs are adapting at the federal and state level, there is still a need. Additionally, this grant program would have a meaningful impact for farmers who cannot get financing for projects due to zoning and land ownership issues.

Soil conservation, Extension and the Natural Resource Conservation Service have all worked with urban farmers to improve their land, conservation and grow their businesses. Urban farmers face unique issues such as soil quality, stormwater management on non-agricultural parcels, neighbors and much more. But they are passionate, dedicated and resilient in dealing with those issues. This grant program would go a long way to helping current urban farmers and hopefully attracting more.

MASCD respectfully requests your support for House Bill 1535.