



Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts

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House Bill 687 - Agriculture - Cost-Sharing Program - Fixed Natural Filter Practices

Committee: Environment & Transportation

February 25, 2020

MASCD Position: OPPOSED

The Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts 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.

House Bill 687 defines “Fixed natural filter practice” as: planting of riparian forest buffers; planting of riparian herbaceous cover; tree plantings that are on agricultural land and outside a riparian buffer; wetland restoration; or pasture management, including rotational grazing systems, such as livestock fencing and watering systems implemented as part of the conversion of cropland to pasture. The bill as currently written authorizes the use of the 40% of Bay Restoration Funding currently used solely for cover crops, to also be used for these practices.

MASCD opposed BRF cover crop funding being used to permanent practices as there is already Maryland Agricultural Cost Share funding available for these practices and they are more appropriately funded out of MACS Capitol bond funding.

The bill prohibits state cost-sharing funds from being used to fund a conservation practice that does not address a natural resource concern identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service or result in a conservation benefit. The bill also prohibits a reduction in State cost-sharing rates for riparian forest buffers, riparian herbaceous cover, wetland restoration, or pasture management based on tons of soil saved or an amortization formula. The bill requires that State cost-sharing rates for pasture management be based on the applicable rate established by USDA’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program and State cost-sharing rates paid for the planting of multiple species of cover crops equal or exceed the rates paid for the planting of a single species of cover crop.

While MASCD does not oppose what this bill is trying to achieve in concept, we disagree with putting components of the State cost share programs in statute and believe there are unintended consequences of certain provisions of the bill. There are technical advisory committees in place at the Department of Agriculture, which are public meetings, and meet twice annually to set the policies of the cost share programs. MASCD feels this is the appropriate place for these changes to be made.

MASCD opposes the requirement that multi-species cover crops be cost shared at the same rate as single species cover crops because single species Rye receives the highest credit in the Chesapeake Bay model and allowing a higher payment for this variety helps to incentivize this practice and intern, helps the districts meet their water quality goals. Additionally, MASCD opposes requiring that NRCS rates be used. Currently, districts can set their cost share rates for these practices and in many cases, they exceed the federal cost share rate in order to account for the higher land, labor and materials costs in Maryland.

As a demonstration of the fact that this could all be achieved administratively, please find the attached memo from MDA’s Office of Resource Conservation that eliminates the soil loss amortization formula and therefore eliminates the reduces cost share rate.

MASCD’s mission is to promote practical and effective soil, water and related natural resources programs to all citizens through individual conservation districts on a voluntary basis through leadership, education, cooperation and local direction.

MASCD has communicated to the proponents of this bill that we are willing to work side-by-side with them through the Technical Advisory Committees and with MDA to achieve their intended goals. Placing tenants of the cost share program in statute makes them inflexible from year-to-year and potentially unable to quickly respond to needs necessary to meet our Bay goals.

MASCD respectfully asks for your unfavorable report on HB 687.

Contact: Lindsay Thompson, Lindsay.mdag@gmail.com

From: **Norman Astle -MDA-** <norman.astle@maryland.gov>

Date: Tue, Feb 18, 2020, 5:39 PM

Subject: Notice - Soil Loss Equation for 390 & 512

To: Districts

Cc: Dawn Bradley <dawn.bradley@maryland.gov>, Thomas Bagamsah (MDA)

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Soil Conservation Districts,

Effective today, February 18, 2020, the soil loss eligibility criteria will no longer be used for 1) Pasture Management, 512, and, 2) Riparian Herbaceous Cover, 390.

The respective standards and MACS Manual will be updated in the near future.

Should you have questions please contact the MACS Office.

Regards,

Norman Astle
MACS Administrator