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Testimony before the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
SB 437 Agriculture - University of Maryland Extension - Urban Farmer Assistance
March 9, 2022
Favorable

Mister Chair and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for considering the important issue of expanding support for urban agriculture. For over 100 years, University of Maryland Extension has provided education and assistance to the state of Maryland and its people in the areas of agriculture, youth development, public health, and environmental responsibility, and we strive to continue that long-standing tradition. Our expert faculty and support staff engaged over 400,000 residents last year, delivering programs in person and online, serving all 23 counties and Baltimore City. As Dean of the University of Maryland's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, I wanted to share information and my excitement with you about expanding our impact in urban agriculture.

Urban agriculture in Maryland

In a 2018 University of Maryland (UMD) Extension survey, Maryland urban farmers indicated the majority of them grow vegetables, fruits, and cut flowers in land-based production systems using raised-beds, in-ground growing, and high tunnels. They balance numerous goals, including producing food for themselves and their communities, creating jobs, and providing income for their families. Urban farmers reported barriers to success such as access to financial services, land or buildings, labor, water, and marketing assistance. In addition, they had difficulty navigating local policies and bureaucracy, and finding product price points realistic for the community and profitable for the farmer (Little et al. 2019). In a 2020 survey of Northeast US urban growers, sustainable pest management, urban soil management, and specialty crop production were the most requested training topics. Respondents rated Extension as a relevant resource and wanted more access to Extension support (Richardson et al. unpublished data).

Benefits of urban agriculture

Urban agriculture offers important advantages to the community such as access to fresh, locally-grown produce, hands-on STEM education opportunities for children, community connection with food production, and local control of a portion of the food supply.

Expansion of urban agriculture technical support

UMD Extension is uniquely positioned to serve urban farmers. Our mission is to conduct applied research and provide research-based educational programming to increase producer profitability while conserving resources by using cutting-edge technologies and

practices. The UMD Extension Agriculture and Food Systems (AgFS) Program has one urban agriculture educator located in Baltimore City; urban farmers consider her a phenomenal resource for their operations. Extension is a trusted information source. Urban farmer participants in AgFS Extension classes and workshops reported they will change their farming practices based on what they learned. On average, participants reported that programs increased their likelihood to have soil tested (80%), use integrated pest management (75%), and write a farm business plan (82%). Technical assistance clients reported that 100% of them will take action based on the information received, with 40% reporting the information will help them improve their business. After coaching sessions, 92% of participants reported it helped them identify next steps for their businesses.

Impact of the proposed bill on UMD Extension

The proposed SB437 would expand UMD Extension's ability to support Maryland urban farmers by providing funding to hire two additional full-time Extension faculty dedicated to conducting applied research, delivering educational programming, and providing technical assistance to urban farmers. Urban farmers identified two areas of needed expertise: (1) controlled-environment and urban agriculture production methods and (2) farm and agribusiness management. These UME educators would build relationships with urban farmers across Maryland and expand urban agriculture research and education programming to address the aforementioned barriers urban farmers consider important.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I urge a favorable report on SB437.

Sincerely,



Craig Beyrouthy, Dean and Director
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References

- Little, N. G., McCoy, T., Wang, C., & Dill, S. P. (2019). Results of a needs assessment of urban farmers in Maryland. *Journal of the National Association of County Agricultural Agents*, 12(1), 1–8. <https://www.nacaa.com/journal/452eeb58-36c3-44ac-978d-f2999c49ddb9>
- Little, N. (2021). What is urban agriculture? University of Maryland Extension Factsheet 1169 <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/what-urban-agriculture>
- Richardson, M., Thompson, M.J., Carson, A.D., Taylor, J.R., Rangarajan, A. VanVranken, R., Hanumappa, M. Little, N.G. (unpublished data) A profile of urban agricultural growers, organizations, their needs, and differences based on profit status in the northeastern United States.