

# Forrest Hall Farm, Inc.

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March 11, 2022

Re: Testimony – HB 0646  
Funding for Tri-County Council of So MD/SMADC

Dear Environmental & Transportation Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you in support of HB 0646 which will continue to fund the Tri- County Council/Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission (SMADC) through the use of the Cigarette Restitution Funds coming into the State from the Cigarette Companies Master Settlement Agreement. These funds are continual, non-lapsing funds designated only for use by the Maryland State Health Department and the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission. These funds are not available for any other use. They involve no tax dollars. SMADC receives a small portion of this funding which is due to sunset in 2025. There is no sunset for the larger portion for the Health Department funding. I speak to you as a Southern Maryland farmer and as the current chair of SMADC.

As you all know, the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission was established by statute at the time of the Tobacco Buyout Program to help Southern Maryland farmers and the Southern Maryland agricultural industry transition from tobacco to other agricultural enterprises – enterprises that would help farms to be viable and profitable and, in turn, preserve agricultural land and help keep agriculture as Maryland's number one industry. Southern Maryland farmers took a hard hit during that time and have spent years navigating through this transition era. Tobacco was our number one ag industry here. With the help of SMADC, however, our new face of Southern Maryland agriculture evolved and it includes an industry-healthy and diverse blend of the existing traditional agriculture of grains and row crops and the new agricultural enterprises that include greenhouses, fruits and vegetables, vineyards, orchards, farm markets, agritourism, direct marketing, aquaculture, forestry, viticulture, and the emerging Southern Maryland Meats industry to name a few. These new enterprises:

- Help our farms to diversify, maintain profitability and this, in turn, preserves agricultural land
- Help to maintain the State's strong agricultural economy
- Helps to provide opportunities in the industry for new and young farmers who have interests in and beyond traditional agriculture. This includes the emerging urban agriculture.
- Help to meet consumer demand for local agricultural products and strengthen our food distribution system chain
- Help to develop agricultural partnerships in the community that include infrastructure projects that will support agriculture for decades to come. A good example of this is the current partnership of SMADC with the St. Mary's County Government to build a Regional Agricultural Center that will serve all of Southern Maryland.
- Continue to build and sustain bridges that connect agriculture to tourism in an effort to draw visitors to our regions of the State that will contribute economic support both industries and local governments

Additionally, SMADC's expertise and success during this transition period has led other areas of the State to look to the commission for help in growing agricultural enterprises state-wide. A good example of this is the State-wide Market Money Farmers Market Program that creates access to fresh and healthy farm produced products to low income and underserved populations. This program helps both farmers and consumers and helps to create an overall healthier Maryland.


As you can see, the work of the Southern Maryland Agricultural Commission and It's funding is vital in our region, has become valued State-wide and is important to keeping Agriculture Maryland's number one industry. We respectfully ask that you vote to pass HB 0646 to avoid a funding sunset and make SMADC funding a mandate for use of the Cigarette Restitution Funds coming to our State being mindful of the fact that this is not a new mandate but an extension of an existing one.

Now, on a personal note - my family owns and operates a Maryland Century Farm in St. Mary's County. For over 100 years this was a tobacco farm. Today 5 generations of our family have farmed this land. For the first 4 generations tobacco was their only crop. It was all they knew. It was all their operation was set up to produce. The tobacco Buyout years were difficult. Thankfully, our State government had the wisdom and vision to create the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission. It saved us. SMADC provided information, education, access to grants, exposure to new enterprises, experienced mentoring and the like. So, here we are 20 years later. Our farm prospers and is profitable. We now operate a much more diverse operation so that all of our financial eggs are no longer in one basket. What we once saw as a disaster as the tobacco era ended, we now consider a blessing. What we see very clearly now as vital is for next generations to have the same access and support from SMADC as we had so that as new generations step in to operate our Southern Maryland farmland and as our new face of Southern Maryland agriculture continues to grow and evolve, our farmers will be ready with SMADC resources on hand to help feed our people, maintain a strong ag economy, keep our Southern Maryland farms - farms and keep Agriculture Maryland's number one industry.

Finally, I feel very strongly about giving back and supporting our regional community. Serving on the Board and accepting an officer position on the commission has been my way of giving back. I can see now, however, that working to help sustain funding for SMADC is the best way to support a sustainable future for agriculture in our region.

Thank you for your time and your consideration of this legislation. It is my sincere hope that you will share the vision of those legislators before you who worked to create the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission.

Respectfully,



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