



Maryland Department of Agriculture

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Maryland Department of Agriculture

Legislative Comment

Date: February 8, 2023

BILL NUMBER: HB 152

SHORT TITLE: DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE - URBAN AGRICULTURE
GRANT FUND

MDA POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

HB 152 would alter the purpose and contents of and the requirements and qualifications under the Urban Agriculture Grant Fund (the Fund) in Sections §2–2001, §2–2003, and §2–2004 of the Agriculture article. Grants from the Fund are currently only available to applicants in Baltimore City. HB 152 would expand the purview of the Fund to include the entire State of Maryland, however, the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) will continue to take into consideration the unique needs of Baltimore City as a growing urban agriculture area. As the agriculture industry continues to grow within urban areas of Maryland, the MDA recognizes the importance of supporting local food production, accessibility to fresh and healthy food, and promoting agricultural education. MDA believes it is vital to provide financial assistance to urban farmers and urban agriculture entrepreneurs for the establishment or expansion of agricultural operations to improve food security and nutrition, as well as providing income generation and urban green space redevelopment opportunities.

In 2022, MDA established a Small Farm and Urban Agriculture Program. This new program is dedicated to provide financial assistance to support small-scale agricultural operations located in urban, peri-urban, rural, and suburban areas. It also aims to increase community access to healthy foods by helping farmers improve their management of natural resources by adopting Bay-friendly and climate-smart farming practices. Currently, this Program manages a Small Acreage Cover Crop Program and is finalizing regulation to administer the Urban Agriculture Water and Power Infrastructure Grant Program.

While MDA is very supportive of the proposed legislation to provide assistance to urban farms across Maryland, certain provisions may present a challenge in terms of program administration. In order to provide administrative consistency and to reduce potential confusion among complementary programs supporting urban agriculture, MDA recommends aligning the

application review, approval, and grant distribution process with those established in the Urban Agriculture Water and Power Infrastructure Program, rather than establishing and implementing an independent review panel. This reduces the administrative burden and potential delay in providing grant funding to qualifying applicants. Further, to maximize the available funding, MDA recommends withdrawing the ability for non-profit organizations from applying for grant funding for the purpose of redistributing the grant funding to eligible urban agricultural producers. MDA is well positioned to distribute funding directly to awardees, thereby further expediting the payment process and eliminating 15% administrative overhead costs.

Thank you for your consideration of a favorable request with amendments.

If you have additional questions, please contact Steve Connelly, Deputy Secretary, at steve.connelly@maryland.gov or (410) 841-5881.