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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

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Testimony in Opposition of  
House Bill 357 – Agriculture – Confinement of Egg-Laying Hens in Commercial Egg  
Production - Prohibitions  
House Environment and Transportation Committee  
February 14, 2024

The Rural Maryland Council opposes House Bill 357 – Agriculture – Confinement of Egg-Laying Hens in Commercial Egg Production - Prohibitions. This bill prohibits a certain farm owner or operator from knowingly confining egg-laying hens in an enclosure in a certain manner, subject to certain exceptions, on and after January 1, 2026; prohibiting a business owner or operator or a farm owner or operator from selling shell eggs or egg products under certain circumstances on and after January 1, 2026; and specifying that a certain certification be obtained in a certain manner to sell shell eggs and egg products.

The Council opposes HB357 because it will create economic hardship to egg-laying farmers by banning their traditional practices and forcing them to make costly changes to their existing barns to sell their product – the result would be a 41% increase in cost production to retrofit existing barns and an 119% increase in labor.

For the health of the birds, cages are used as a form of protection and are an approved animal agriculture practice. By moving to a cage-free operation, the hen mortality rate increases significantly due to more bacterial habitat being introduced in the barn. Lastly, these farms are contracted with out-of-state companies that will just drop their contracts with the farms and then these farms will have to create a new demand for their eggs in a market where there is already an oversupply of cage-free eggs. This bill would put the Maryland egg-laying farms, that farm this way, out of business. Currently, the industry is about 5% of all poultry (approximately \$50 to \$60 million in sales), which means a lot of growers would be negatively affected.

Furthermore, egg laying operations consume about 3 million bushels of corn directly from Maryland grain farmers each year. This represents about 4% of the total corn production in the state. If forces to transition on such a short timeline, many of these farms would go out of business and Maryland grain farmers would lose this market.

The Rural Maryland Council supports the State's poultry industry – the largest agricultural sector in Maryland and requests that you oppose House Bill 357.

The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) is an independent state agency governed by a nonpartisan, 40-member board that consists of inclusive representation from the federal, state, regional, county and municipal governments, as well as the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. We bring together federal, state, county and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to identify challenges unique to rural communities and to craft public policy, programmatic or regulatory solutions.

*“A Collective Voice for Rural Maryland”*