



Testimony, Favorable with Amendments, House Bill 262 – Department of Agriculture - Maryland Agriculture Commission and Young Farmers

January 24, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in **SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS** of **HB262** on behalf of ShoreRivers, a river protection organization serving Maryland's Eastern Shore with more than 2,000 members. Our mission is to protect the waterways of Maryland's Eastern Shore through science-based advocacy, restoration, education, and engagement.

HB262 proposes establishing a Youth Farmer Committee tasked with:

1. Raising public and governmental awareness of the importance of young and beginning farmers to Maryland agriculture.
2. Identifying and addressing issues impacting young and beginning farmers and making recommendations to the Maryland Agricultural Commission.
3. Convening quarterly to fulfill its mandate.

Under this legislation, committee members are nominated annually by the Secretary of Agriculture and must meet criteria, including being Maryland residents under 45, deriving at least 50% of their income from agricultural activities, and reflecting regional diversity and industry variety to the extent practical.

ShoreRivers supports this bill because it prioritizes the voices and leadership of the next generation of agricultural decision-makers. These individuals play a crucial role in safeguarding Maryland's agricultural economy while also fostering sustainable land stewardship practices. On the Eastern Shore, where agriculture contributes over \$1 billion annually to the state's economy and supports 3,717 jobs, protecting farmland and waterways is essential to sustaining both local communities and ecosystems.

In 2022, ShoreRivers launched the **Next Generation Land Stewards** program to empower and connect rising agricultural leaders on the Eastern Shore. This initiative focuses on helping young landowners establish conservation goals for their properties while fostering peer support. Workshops have covered vital topics such as conservation easements, habitat management, and incentive programs for implementing buffers and wetlands. This experience has shown us that integrating conservation into farm management is not just beneficial but essential for balancing agricultural productivity with environmental health.

Recommended Amendments

To strengthen HB262 and ensure its success, we respectfully request the following amendments:

1. **Incorporate Conservation Education:**
Include language emphasizing the committee's role in pursuing education on conservation practices and water quality as vital components of farm resource management. This addition will align the committee's mission with Maryland's goals for sustainable agriculture and environmental stewardship.

ShoreRivers

Isabel Hardesty, Executive Director
Annie Richards, Chester Riverkeeper | Matt Pluta, Choptank Riverkeeper
Ben Ford, Miles Wye Riverkeeper | Zack Kelleher, Sassafras Riverkeeper

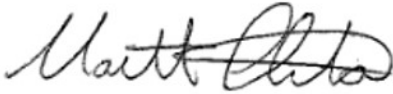
2. **Clarify Expectations and Time Commitments:**

Recognize the significant demands placed on young farmers and adjust the responsibilities of committee members accordingly. For instance, requiring committee members to “communicate to the general public” about the challenges facing young farmers may be an overly burdensome expectation for a volunteer group balancing farm management and other responsibilities. A more collaborative approach to outreach could be considered.

By adopting these amendments, HB262 can not only elevate the voices of young farmers but also ensure their ability to contribute meaningfully without overextending themselves. Moreover, including conservation education in the committee’s scope will foster a more sustainable future for Maryland’s farms, waterways, and communities.

Thank you for considering our testimony. We look forward to working alongside the Maryland General Assembly to support the next generation of agricultural leaders in Maryland.

Sincerely,



Matt Pluta,
Choptank Riverkeeper on behalf of ShoreRivers.