



Maryland Department of Agriculture

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Maryland Department of Agriculture

Legislative Comment

Date: February 11, 2025

BILL NUMBER: Senate Bill 428/House Bill 506
SHORT TITLE: **Chesapeake Bay Legacy Act**
MDA POSITION: Support

The Chesapeake Bay Legacy Act is crafted to address Chesapeake Bay health through innovative initiatives that enhance restoration activities and engage our communities. The Department of Agriculture is proud to support two such initiatives being proposed.

First, the bill establishes the Maryland Leaders in Environmentally Engaged Farming (LEEF) program at the Maryland Department of Agriculture and the Leaders in Environmentally Engaged Farming Account in the Department of Agriculture. The LEEF program will establish tiers of recognition (e.g. bronze, silver, gold) to incentivize producer's voluntary participation in the coordinated adoption of conservation and community best practices. Producers can self-select across a suite of conservation and community best practices to build a portfolio of actions unique to their operation and region, and unlock incentives tailored to their priorities and business needs as they advance through the tiers. The LEEF framework is modeled after the LEED rating system for green building construction. The framework will create a consistent way for the diversity of operations across Maryland to engage in programs and practices to improve practices that benefit the environment and community. It will not replace cost-share or other available programs within the department. Rather, it gives all farms, regardless of size or operation type, the ability to demonstrate their involvement in advancing Maryland's environmental goals. LEEF would create a recognizable brand that allows Maryland farmers to tell their unique conservation story and can be leveraged by other agriculture partners (e.g. agribusiness, funders, industry) to also demonstrate their commitment to investing back into farms that provide a value-add to the state through conservation and community practices.

MDA aims for LEEF being attractive for all producers, both early adopters of conservation and new cooperators. The LEEF tiers will prioritize innovation, and not replace available cost-share. The tiers will reward stacking of practices, especially in sensitive areas, and those being

maintained outside of a contractual obligation. For new cooperators, LEEF could alleviate economic hardships of small businesses like maintenance of licenses, priority infrastructure funding, or other options beyond cost-share. MDA will leverage partners and the private sector to reward higher LEEF tiers through incentives that will be diverse and compelling for all participants

Second, the bill would expand the current state definition of “Healthy Soils” to include “Regenerative Practices and Traditions” within the Agriculture Article. The addition builds upon the success of Maryland’s Healthy Soils Program and ensures that the principles of healthy soils are widely applied. The addition of a formal definition for “regenerative practice and traditions” would celebrate the cultural traditions of Black, Indigenous, and farmers of color in agriculture.

Producers in the state are early adopters; many practices that can be considered “regenerative” are already in use by many. Farmers across the state are interested in the health of their soils, responsible stewardship of the land, and are aware of their impact towards the communities that surround them. In this case, the term “regenerative” seeks to consider further ecosystem services that agricultural systems are able to provide, beyond the production of food and resources. Regenerative agriculture, practices, and traditions point to the direction in which agriculture as a whole is moving. There is a need to find a way to maintain the sustainable production of food while reducing environmental impacts in a changing climate while supporting Maryland’s vast and varied communities. These practices can be widely applied and adopted across any production type.

The expansion of the “Healthy Soils” definition will allow MDA to continue to promote sustainable agriculture, while taking into consideration cultural traditions and food, climate justice, and the continued enhancement of our land and ecosystems. We anticipate further program growth and cross-agency collaboration as interest increases among producers and partners. As the Healthy Soils Program is an already established program within the department, we anticipate minimal operational impact. Rather, MDA expects to work closely with our partners at Maryland DNR to leverage the updated definitions to improve land access and tenure on state lands under agricultural leases.

MDA requests a favorable report for SB 428.

If you have additional questions, please contact Rachel Jones, MDA Director of Government Relations at Rachel.Jones2@maryland.gov or (667) 408-0134.