



Maryland Department of Agriculture

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BILL NUMBER: HB 72
BILL TITLE: Natural Resources - Edible Forests and Foraging Program
MDA POSITION: INFORMATION

The Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) respectfully submits this letter of information regarding *House Bill 72 – Natural Resources – Edible Forests and Foraging Program* and the development and benefits of Edible Forests, also known as "Food Forests." As Maryland continues to prioritize resilient food systems and urban greening, edible forests represent a permanent, low-maintenance solution to community nutrition and environmental stewardship. This legislation seeks to codify the "Food Forests and Foraging Program" within the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), establishing a framework for the legal harvest of plant materials on state lands and the creation of a dedicated fund to support the development of edible forests.

An edible forest, or "food forest," is a perennial polyculture system modeled after natural woodland ecosystems. Unlike traditional orchards or row-crop farms that focus on a single layer of production, an edible forest utilizes a sophisticated seven-layer design to maximize vertical space and promote self-sustaining nutrient cycles. These forests offer multifaceted benefits for Maryland communities, serving as a powerful tool for both social and environmental health. By providing free, fresh, and nutritious food in public spaces, these systems help mitigate "food deserts" in urban and suburban areas. Once established, their inherent biodiversity creates a closed-loop nutrient cycle that minimizes the need for weeding, pruning, or synthetic fertilization. Beyond food production, edible forests strengthen climate resilience by utilizing deep root systems and high organic matter to sequester carbon and manage stormwater runoff—a vital service for the protection of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Furthermore, the diverse bloom times across the various forest layers provide a consistent, season-long food source for bees, butterflies, and other essential pollinators.

HB 72 establishes a "Food Forests and Foraging Program" within the Department of Natural Resources to align state land management with Maryland's goals for a resilient and equitable

future. This legislation creates a legal means for foraging on state land through a formal permitting process, which includes a fee-waiver provision for individuals demonstrating financial need. Revenue captured from these permits is diverted into a dedicated "Food Forests and Foraging Fund," a non-lapsing resource designed to support administrative costs and the expansion of edible forests across state lands. While the Department of Natural Resources manages an existing model in Centreville, this bill grants the discretion to deploy similar forests statewide, utilizing a pilot program approach to better understand the impacts on natural resources and revenue management before full-scale implementation.

While the MDA recognizes the alignment of this program with Maryland's resilience and food security goals, success depends on fees to support administrative costs associated with the necessary management of a full scale program. A limited pilot program would allow the State to better understand the impacts of foraging on natural resources and the actual revenue capture before committing to a statewide scale.

MDA appreciates the consideration of the above information in the Committee's deliberations.

If you have additional questions, please contact Harrison Palmer, MDA Chief of Staff at Harrisonb.palmer@maryland.gov or (410) 980-9887.