



Maryland Department of Agriculture

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MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

LEGISLATIVE COMMENT

DATE: February 21, 2020

BILL NUMBER: HOUSE BILL 1176

SHORT TITLE: AGRICULTURE - MARYLAND HEALTHY SOILS GRANT PROGRAM

MDA POSITION: INFORMATION

EXPLANATION:

This bill would provide new revenue of \$300,000 annually to the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) in support of promoting the adoption of soil health practices consistent with the Healthy Soils Program established in §2-1901 of the Agriculture Article. In establishing a funding source for the Healthy Soils Grant Program, MDA is instructed to define eligibility and funding criteria for applicants, and to use evaluation tools for tracking the carbon sequestration potential of implemented practices. Lastly, MDA would submit an annual report to the General Assembly on grants issued in the previous year.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Maryland Healthy Soils Program was established in 2017 for the purposes of improving the health, yield, and profitability of Maryland soils; increasing biological activity and carbon sequestration in the soils; and promoting the adoption of healthy soils practices among Maryland farmers. To carry out the Program, MDA was charged to provide incentives to farmers in the form of research and education, technical assistance, and financial assistance, subject to available funding. However, no additional funding source was provided to MDA at the time the Healthy Soils Program was created.

Since 2017, MDA has taken concrete steps to fulfill the objectives of the legislation. Highlights include the following:

- Addition of a new incentive in the 2019-2020 cover crop season for an extended season cover crop. This incentive delays termination of the cover crop until after May 1, 2020, which increases the biomass on the field and maintains a living root longer.

- The Secretary has named a Soil Health Advisory Committee to support the development of MDA's Healthy Soils program.
- Secured two key grants of ~\$1 million each to further adoption of soil health practices at the pilot scale.
- Created a dedicated webpage for soil health resources and program updates https://mda.maryland.gov/resource_conservation/Pages/Soil-Health.aspx.
- Participation in farmer outreach events to promote soil health and advance farmer participation in existing grants.
- Included the MDA Healthy Soils program in the recently released draft MDE report Greenhouse Gas Reduction Act Plan, and an associated menu of recommended practices that build soil carbon. MDA anticipates working with our Soil Health Advisory Committee to review the preliminary menu to develop a program framework that further encourages adoption of practices.
- Maryland, as a US Climate Alliance member state, is considering the role of soils and forestry to address climate change. MDA staff are part of state working group (includes MDE, DNR, and UM) to address these strategies on our working landscapes.

The passing of HB 1176 would create a secured, renewing fund source that would allow the Department to proceed to the next phases of executing its Healthy Soils Program. Proper regulations would be developed to set program eligibility and priorities, and the Soil Health Advisory Committee would offer recommendations on incentive structures consistent with the available budget. Additionally, a known annual budget would leverage MDA's existing program delivery infrastructure to maximize conservation on Maryland farms.

If you have additional questions, please contact Cassie Shirk, Director of Legislation and Governmental Affairs, at cassie.shirk@maryland.gov or 410-841-5886.