



Maryland Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary

Wes Moore, Governor
Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor
Kevin M. Atticks, Secretary
Steven A. Connelly, Deputy Secretary

Maryland Agricultural Commission

Agriculture | Maryland's Leading Industry
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MARYLAND AGRICULTURAL COMMISSION

Minutes

March 11th, 2026

Location: 50 Harry S. Truman Parkway, Annapolis MD 21401

Join Zoom Meeting <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/83578378249?pwd=IYwslt3x57cy6bltL3JUclSQMs2tsu.1>

Meeting ID: 835 7837 8249 Passcode: 018187

Commission Members Present:

Amy Crone, Chair
Kelly Lewis, Vice Chair
Gordon Kretser
Darren Jarboe
Wade Butler

Russell Shlagel
Janna Howley
Raj Kathuria
Stefanie Reiser
Kelly Hinkle

MDA Staff Present:

Steve Connelly
Harrison Palmer
Kristin Hanna
Anne Litz
Cassie Shirk
Hans Schmidt

Matt Scales
Audrey Broomfield
Rachel Jones
Susan Kivioja
Lauren Moses
Martin Proulx

Guests:

George Turner, USDA FSA
Brian Cadden
Stacy Kubofcik
Joe Milone
Kelsey Keadle
Lindsay Thompson

Johnathan Cribbs
Sierra Criste
Piper Kohlenberger
Shelby Watson-Hampton

Call to Order:

The March 2026 Maryland Agricultural Commission meeting was called to order by Amy Crone at 10:02 AM.

Approval of Minutes:

A Motion to approve the January 2026 meeting minutes was made by Kelly Lewis, seconded by Darren Jarboe, and unanimously approved .

Presentations:

- **Martin Proulx, Director, Maryland Department of Agriculture Marketing and Agriculture Development**
 - Introduction to the Marketing and Agricultural Development Program
 - An overview was presented on the newly merged marketing and agricultural development capacities. This consolidation aims to improve synergy between agricultural development resources and the promotion efforts of the Maryland's Best brand.
 - The program will focus on several key pillars, including strengthening the Maryland's Best brand, which functions as a membership organization for local product growers and supporters. Key initiatives include the Buyer Grower Expo, summer and offseason campaigns, and incorporating seafood promotion.
 - The program continues to utilize the statewide guidance document published in October 2025, which focuses on value-added agriculture and agritourism. Subsequent legislative actions related to this document include proposed regulations for on-farm processing and the removal of revenue caps associated with meat licenses.
- **Kristin Hanna - Launch of the New Maryland's Best Logo and Rebrand**
 - The new Maryland's Best logo was presented. It features a clean background and brighter colors to enhance visibility in retail and on signage. The logo is intended to signify trust, quality, and local pride while helping consumers quickly identify Maryland-grown and harvested products.
 - The marketing program emphasizes that the logo is only one part of the overall brand, which is built through consistent efforts such as social media, billboards, TV, radio ads, and media engagement. Consistent and confident use of the new logo by the team and all members is essential for its success.
 - The logo was initially launched to partners in February at the Maryland Expo. The public launch is scheduled for May and June, coinciding with the biggest spending period in the marketing department. Partners are being asked to use the logo on packaging, market signage, menus, and online stores. Branded items are available at no cost and can be ordered at marylandsbest.maryland.gov.

- Maryland's Best Annual meeting will be at MDA on March 23, 2026., in person or virtual.
- Governor's Buy Local Cookout - Will be held in mid July 2026.
- Discussion covered the lack of funding for marketing, particularly seafood. A \$1 million appropriations request was submitted for the seafood marketing program. The seafood marketing promotion fund is a special fund derived from surcharges on tidal fishery licenses, while Maryland's Best relies heavily on federal funding, primarily the Specialty Crop Block Grant.
- **Matthew Scales - Seafood Marketing Activities and Industry Engagement**
 - Active engagement continues with the Waterman's Caucus, the Eastern Shore delegation, and the Aquaculture Coordinating Council. Current campaigns include "Sip and Shuck," which runs through the end of March, highlighting Maryland oysters with local beer, wine, and spirits. Oyster Week will kick off on March 20th.
- **Martin Proulx - Farmers Market and Food Access Program Updates**
 - The farmers market annual conference was held recently. The Maryland Market Money program is approaching its first full year under the Department of Agriculture. Resources for farm and food access programs, including navigation of regulatory frameworks and nutrition programs (WIC, SNAP), are available to farmers markets and retail stores.
 - The Department of Health's proposed bill seeks to create a seasonal food service license for agritourism enterprises. This bill aims to allow agritourism businesses to engage with visitors without committing to permanent infrastructure for seasonal operations. The bill is still proceeding through the legislative process.

Committee Reports:

Gordon Kretser - Watershed Strategies Committee Update

The committee discussed the Chesapeake Bay agreements and expressed concern over the potential reduction in budgets that support the cover crop program, a vital tool for reducing nutrient runoff. Ideas for maximizing the cover crop program included creating new specifications for seeding to reduce input costs and increase the number of participating acres. The committee desires to be included in the discussions prior to potential new agreement program, and is keeping an eye on the management of solar on ag land as would like to be included in discussions of MDA/MDE/SCD handbook rewrite.

Harrison Palmer - Legislative Affairs Committee Update

- Crossover is approaching for legislative bills. The top priority departmental bill extending the sunset of the Maryland Horse Industry Board has passed the House and is now in the Senate. The agency is tracking about 300 bills specific to MDA operations, including

those concerning invasive trees, the neonicotinoid ban, and solar siting in the priority preservation area.

- Legislation on Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs)
 - House Bill 395/371 addresses the moratorium on new CAFO construction resulting from a lapse in the Department of the Environment (MDE) general primary permit. The bill seeks to repeal the language prohibiting construction under certain circumstances during an administrative extension before the new permit is renewed.
- Russell Shlagel - Minimum Wage Bill Concerns
 - Strong opposition was expressed to House Bill 1229 / Senate Bill 886, the minimum wage bill. Stakeholders believe it would severely harm Maryland agriculture by imposing unmanageable wage increases tied to the cost of living. Concerns include the impact on specialty crop farmers who rely on temporary labor and provide subsidized housing, potentially eroding farmer equity and hurting small, beginning, and urban farmers.
- Stormwater Management Bill
 - House Bill 1071 is targeted to address stormwater management challenges statewide, particularly in Montgomery County. This bill enables and codifies joint responsibility and delegation of authority to Soil Conservation Districts to approve stormwater management plans for agritourism enterprises, ensuring they are treated as agricultural and not commercial operations.
- Commission Stance and Legislative Testimony
 - Unless the commission formally takes a position on legislation, members must not reference their role as an appointed member of the Maryland Ag Commission when testifying or submitting comments. Formal positions require approval through the Governor's office.

Commodity Reports:

Consumer – Kellie Hinkle

Farmer's Markets are ramping back up in St. Mary's County. Seen uptick in interest in value added bakers. Thank you to Matthew Scales for sharing MDA's message surrounding Blue Catfish with St. Mary's County grocers.

Direct Farm Market – Amy Crone

Farmer's Market season is upon us. Folks are busy planting and making sure certifications are up to date. Farm Bill is undergoing process right now. Funding for nutrition program funding is looking to see a 20% decrease in funding, particularly in SNAP. Farmer's Market Nutrition Program is working through language to combine two programs, Seniors and WIC into one program so they can be funded at a consistent rate.

Farm Bureau – Paula Linthicum

No items for discussion today.

Wade Butler - Fruit

Coming off of a particularly cold and snowy winter, hoping there will be a reduction in insects detrimental to fruit. There appears to be minimal winter injury on fruit trees and strawberries. Some orchards are behind on pruning. Drought concerns continue. H2A is extremely important to the industry. Cautiously optimistic for fruit season.

Stephanie Reiser - Hemp

Things are still not looking good at the federal level for hemp. Provision included last year to kill industry is still in effect. There have been no successful opportunities for extension to regulate the industry. Farm Bill likely is not a vehicle for work around. Extremely worried for industry, but continues to work on Hill. Many are not planting this year.

Nursery, Landscape & Greenhouse – Kelly Lewis

- After a cold and somewhat snowy winter, Spring business has started to gear up for the Nursery and Landscape industry in Maryland. Most companies seem optimistic and have good spring bookings and jobs lined up. Many who ship to northern customers have seen delays because of late snows in the northeast. For the rest of my report, I want to include a summary of a survey commissioned by the MNLGA.
- Below is the Executive Summary of the 2024 Economic and Statistical Survey commissioned by the Maryland Nursery, Landscape and Greenhouse Association.
- Executive Summary
 - The 2024 Maryland Horticulture Industry Survey, administered by the Schaefer Center for Public Policy at The University of Baltimore on behalf of the Maryland Nursery, Landscape, and Greenhouse Association (MNLGA), provides a comprehensive assessment of the economic performance, workforce characteristics, and operational practices within Maryland's horticulture industry. The study examines year-over-year trends in sales, regional performance, labor and wages, and conservation practices, offering valuable insight into the overall health and direction of the industry. The Rural Maryland Council provided funding for the survey.
- Sales Trends
 - Maryland's horticulture industry continued its overall growth trajectory from 2023 to 2024, with total estimated sales increasing from \$1.68 billion to \$1.76 billion. Growth is projected to continue into 2025, reaching an estimated \$1.84 billion. Key findings include:

- Industry Segment Performance
 - Landscapers drove sector growth with a 12% increase in sales from 2023 to 2024 and project an additional 9% increase for 2025.
 - Growers and retailers experienced modest declines in 2024; growers anticipate a small rebound in 2025, while retailers expect a slight continued decline.
- Plant Market Composition
 - Woody plants accounted for 36% of all plant sales. Herbaceous perennials made up 25%, and annuals comprised 23% of sales. By growing method, above-ground containers represented 39% of sales, followed by greenhouse production (26%) and field-grown plants (23%).
 - Sourcing and Distribution
 - 39% of sales came from plants sourced within Maryland. 72% of total estimated sales remained in the state in 2024, with 23% shipped to other Eastern states.
- Factors Limiting Growth
- Respondents identified several key challenges impacting industry growth:
 - High operating costs (36%)
 - Labor costs (35%)
 - Labor availability (29%)
 - Economic conditions (27%)
 - Weather variability (27%)
 - Conservation Practices
- Environmental stewardship remains a central focus among industry participants:
 - 25% of respondents reported land enrolled in preservation or conservation programs, encompassing 3,166 acres statewide. 55% reported using Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices. The primary motivation for conservation adoption was a commitment to best management practices for environmental protection.
- Regional Performance
 - The Central and Western Maryland region continues to anchor the state's horticultural economy, accounting for \$1.3 billion (or 71%) of total 2024 estimated sales:
 - Wholesale plant sales: \$643 million
 - Retail plant sales: \$533 million
 - Other regions contributed:
 - Southern Maryland: \$310 million
 - Multiple Regions: \$92 million
 - Upper Shore: \$90 million
 - Lower Shore: \$16 million
- Workforce and Wages

- The industry employed an estimated 21,271 workers in 2024, including unpaid and seasonal labor, with most employees working more than 150 days per year. Average wages varied by role:
 - Managers: ~\$31/hour
 - Supervisors: ~\$26/hour
 - Experienced laborers: ~\$19/hour
 - Inexperienced laborers: ~\$16/hour
- Industry Concerns
 - Survey respondents highlighted ongoing challenges affecting the industry's sustainability and growth:
 - Labor issues: availability, cost, immigration policy, and reliability of the H-2B visa program.
 - Economic pressures: rising material and labor costs, competition from large retailers, and unfair competition from illegal labor. Regulatory challenges: concerns about overregulation, gas-powered equipment restrictions, and the native plant mandate.
 - Additional comments referenced climate change, marketing needs, and support for small business development.

Gordon Kretser - Turf

Sod growers are doing well, will be a busy next few months with installations for new home building.

UMD College of Agriculture and Natural Resources – Dr. Darren Jarboe

- Dean Wendy Powers hosted Dr. Jaye Hamby, director, USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and his colleagues. They explored research, teaching, and Extension programs being conducted in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (AGNR) at the University of Maryland, College Park.
- Dean Powers, AGNR associate deans, and members of the Maryland Council for Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching (CARET) delegation visited USDA and Congressional and Senate offices to highlight the importance of continued federal investment in agricultural research, education, and Extension.
- UME will hire the fifth cohort for Creating Leadership and Professional Development Through Extension Internships for summer 2026. The deadline for applications is March 22.
 - <https://extension.umd.edu/news-events/news/extension-internship-applications-now-open/>
- UME's Precision Agriculture and Women in Agriculture Conferences were highly successful in highlighting the use of precision technologies in Maryland agriculture and women's leadership, respectively.

- Andy Kness, AgFS educator in Harford County, joined the 2025–26 National Association of County Agricultural Agents Board of Directors.
- Dr. Amanda Grev was recognized for her service on the American Forage and Grassland Council Board.
- The Agricultural Nutrient Management Program has received 1,171 plan requests, 829 of which have complete information. The team has completed 712 plans through March 6, an 86% completion rate. Farmers served, number of plans completed, and total acres planned are tracking similar to previous years through January 31.
- Sam Harrison was selected to serve as AgFS agent associate in Talbot County. He has served as an AgFS nutrient management advisor since 2023. He graduated from the University of Maryland, College Park with a B.S. in agricultural and resource economics and received certificates in agribusiness and sustainable agriculture from the Institute of Applied Agriculture.
 - Sam grew up in Talbot County.
- Sara Kidd was selected to serve as AgFS agent associate in Frederick County. Sara previously served as an extension associate for North Carolina State University at the Center for Environmental Farming Systems. Sara holds an associate's degree in sustainable agriculture from Lenoir Community College, a B.S. in environmental studies from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, a M.S. in agricultural and extension education and a certificate in instructional design from North Carolina State University where she is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Agricultural and Human Sciences Department. She is a Maryland native.
- Gracie Mason, Rob Mehlman, and Rashmi Sahu joined the ANMP as nutrient management advisors in Baltimore, Harford, and Montgomery Counties, respectively.
- Dr. Cheng-I Wei, interim chair of the Nutrition and Food Science Department and former dean of the AGNR, retired at the end of February.
- The search for a new assistant director and program leader for the 4-H Youth Development Program is underway. Semi-finalists are being interviewed this week.
- The current UME AgFS openings are:
 - AgFS Extension
 - LEAD Maryland agent associate: Four candidates will give presentations at the Wye REC.
 - AgFS county educator, Prince George's County: Funding is being secured for the position.
 - Agricultural Nutrient Management Program
 - Program director and faculty specialist: The position description will be revised and reposted in spring.
 - Two nutrient management advisor positions are currently open.

Related Services - Keith Parker

Legislative Progress — HB 1342

House Bill 1342, introduced by Delegate Caylin Young (45th District), is now before the House Environment and Transportation Committee. The bill establishes a Maryland Controlled-Environment and Hydroponic Agriculture Program Fund, a one-stop permitting portal, zoning flexibility requirements for urban areas, workforce training provisions through community colleges, and state procurement goals for certified local hydroponic farms.

If our recommendations are accepted, this legislation directly advances the infrastructure framing at the center of the Food Ecosystem Framework, treating food production as a permanent public asset rather than a time-limited pilot initiative. Our focus on converting dormant urban assets into reliable local production is precisely what this bill is designed to enable.

I encourage commission members who share this direction to support the bill's infrastructure framing as it moves through the legislative process. I am available to provide additional background or facilitate conversations with Delegate Young's office.

Field-Level Activity — Multi-Asset Model

Separately, and in my capacity as a representative of Piedmont Harvest, I want to note that the coordinated multi-asset model described in the Framework white paper is being actively pressure-tested at the county level in Prince George's County. Verbal partnership commitments have been secured from three asset types: a county-leased government property, a faith-based community development organization, and a private landowner, forming exactly the kind of diversified land-stewardship structure the Framework describes.

A Phase 0 feasibility study is being coordinated at a potential County-leased property as one of the anchor sites. I will continue to share field learnings with the commission as this work progresses, as the implementation experience will be directly useful to the commission's policy direction.

I remain committed to advancing the infrastructure framing within the commission and welcome any questions or conversations from colleagues on either front.

Maryland Department of Agriculture Staff Updates:

Secretary Kevin Atticks:

- Thank you for convening during this busy time of the year. We continue to appreciate those engaging with the legislative process.

Deputy Secretary Steve Connelly:

- There have been five confirmed cases of HPAI in Maryland and three in Delaware this year. Response teams are managing compost virus elimination and security audits to allow restocking. A substantial financial hit to farms affected but industry must be protected, working to eliminate virus completely while still allowing a new flock to be established as soon as possible.

Anne Litz - Maryland Horse Industry Board

- A strategic plan is currently under development and expected for release in September. International delegations from Ireland and the EU are scheduled to visit Maryland farms in the coming months.

Assistant Secretary Hans Schmidt:

- MDA is planning to convene a farmer group to discuss the cover crop program, seeking feedback on recent changes. The program saw a high level of participation in 2025, using all carryover funds, and the current year is projected to spend about \$19 million.
- The state will soon release the Bay report detailing progress toward 2025 goals, with sediment and phosphorus goals expected to be met, and nitrogen being a close call. The LEEF (Farmers in Environmentally Engaged Farming) program is being developed to amplify the conservation work done by farmers, with an advisory committee being formed and pilot farms identified. The goal is to shift the conversation from targeting goals to discussing outcomes and incentives for profitable, conservation-minded farming.
- The deadline for the AIR was extended to April 1st due to printing issues with the paper forms. Hans noted that farmers can file online even before receiving the paper forms and expressed a desire to move to an all-electronic system to save on mailing costs
- Thank you to Darren Jarboe and UMD and NM Program for stepping up to help build the NM Program.

New Business:

George Turner: Conservation and Farmer Bridge Assistance Programs: Enrollment is open for Conservation Reserve Programs (CRP) until March 20th, with a general CRP sign-up running through April 17th. The Farmer Bridge Assistance Program has dispersed about \$25 million to Maryland producers, covering 92% of enrollment. A second component for specialty crop producers will be announced, and these producers must submit their acreage reports by March 15th.

MARBIDCO: USDA has a Value-Added Grant, \$25 million, requires a 100% match, MARBIDCO will help with matching funds. Must apply to MARBIDCO two weeks before the federal deadline (April 1, 2026).

Old Business:

Commission members: Reminder to please submit your video to Amy ASAP

Public Comment:

SMADC - Upcoming farmer workshop series will be Friday (Equine Seminar), info on Facebook, Women in Ag Day, hands on, hosted in Southern Anne Arundel

Meeting Adjourned at 11:55 AM by Kelly Lewis, seconded by Darren Jarboe.

Respectfully Submitted by Harrison B. Palmer, Chief of Staff