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
mda.maryland.gov

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MARYLAND AGRICULTURAL COMMISSION

Draft Minutes

June 10, 2026
Location: 50 Harry S. Truman Parkway, Annapolis MD 21401
HYBRID - Google Meet: https://meet.google.com/uhi-gbov-kjc
Or dial: (US) +1 385-988-0495 PIN: 144 513 232#

Present:
Amy Crone, Chair Wade Butler Kellie Hinkle
Kelly Lewis, Vice Chair Eleanor Leak Gordon Kretser
Hunter Pusey Jenell Eck McHenry Darren Jarboe
Keith Parker Stefanie Reiser

MDA Staff:

Harrison Palmer Steve Connelly Martin Proulx
Sec. Kevin Atticks Hans Schmidt

Guests:
Kamal Essaheb- Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs
Joe Moley - Governor's Office of Community Initiatives

Call to Order

The June 2026 Maryland Agricultural Commission meeting was called to order by Amy Crone at 10:04 am. Amy noted that the meeting would be brief because there was not a quorum of members present to conduct business.

Approval of Minutes

Due to lack of quorum, the April meeting minutes were not approved. Members were instructed to share any comments or corrections on the minutes with Rachel Jones.

Presentations

Immigration Trends in Maryland

- Kamal Essaheb from the Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs presented data on immigration trends, noting that immigrants comprise between one-fifth and one-quarter of the Maryland workforce, with high concentrations in construction, hospitality, health care, and agriculture.
- They reported that immigration arrests in Maryland have increased to approximately 20 arrests per day under the current federal administration, a significant rise from the previous rate of four to five arrests per day. Kamal observed that while this is a gradual increase rather than a sharp spike, there are credible reports of increased enforcement, particularly involving vehicle stops on the Eastern Shore.
- The majority of arrests in Maryland are occurring "at large" rather than through jail transfers, which creates a reverberating fear within the immigrant community. They noted that 60 to 70 percent of those arrested have no criminal convictions, meaning these actions are impacting long-term, law-abiding residents and their families.
- Concerns regarding the potential termination of TPS designations for nationals from El Salvador, Haiti, and Venezuela. They emphasized that a Supreme Court decision regarding Haiti is expected in the coming weeks, and if designations end, thousands of workers on the Eastern Shore could lose their legal work authorization, creating a humanitarian and economic cliff.
- Kamal discussed ongoing volatility in visa policies, including H2A and H2B programs, and noted that administrative changes, vetting updates, and interview appointment availability have created difficulties for employers. He acknowledged hiccups in the H2B supplemental administration which impacts non-agricultural employers such as seafood and poultry processors.
- The Maryland Chamber of Commerce has partnered with the law firm Barry Appleman to provide education and resources to Maryland employers regarding rapidly changing immigration policies. More details on webinars and office hours for this initiative will be provided in the coming weeks.
- Kamal described the formation of a task force to combat fraudulent schemes targeting immigrants, such as scammers posing as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents or attorneys.
- **Discussion on Workforce and Immigration Impacts**: Kelly Lewis asked for a breakdown of legal versus illegal immigrant workers in the workforce data. Kamal Essaheb and Joe Moley clarified that existing estimates are based on national research and offered to follow up with the requested data in the chat. Wade Butler shared that some growers are bringing in local law enforcement to brief workers on their rights in an effort to calm nerves regarding potential ICE interactions.

Committee Reports

None given due to lack of quorum.

Commodity Reports

Agricultural Education – Dr. Melissa Welsh

N/A

Agribusiness – Vacant

Aquaculture – Johnny Shockley

N/A

Biofuels – Vacant

Committee on Young Farmers – Jenell Eck McHenry

The committee is still working on defining its membership and structure, with plans to finalize these details over the summer.

Consumer – Kellie Hinkle

St. Mary's County just closed out the Manufacturing Promotion Fund Grant. It was very beneficial to craft alcohol manufacturers, many saw an increase in sales particularly in their tasting rooms.

Controlled Environmental Agriculture – Vacant

Dairy – Jeni Mallott

N/A

Direct Farm Market – Amy Crone

The meat processing training program, which currently supports four individuals, and noted that a "Meat Institute for the Northeast" event is being planned for the Baltimore vicinity. Regarding farm direct programs, she noted that farmers markets are open and reminded members of the annual bill cookout scheduled for July 17. Amy expressed concerns regarding the proposed relocation of federal agencies out of Washington, D.C., noting that it is causing stress for the workforce and may lead to a loss of 70 to 80 percent of senior staff. They highlighted that the Food and Nutrition Service and Agricultural Marketing Service, both essential to local producers, have already seen significant staff reductions.

Equine – Ann Merryman

N/A

Farm Bureau – Paula Linthicum

N/A

Field Crops – Vacant

Food Processing – Nikita Bocharov

N/A

Forestry – Hunter Pusey

The governor signed an executive order on June 1 to promote the use of in-state wood as a preferred building material for publicly funded state construction projects. This is a huge deal for MD's forestry industry. Thanks Sec. Atticks and the Governor.

Fruit – Wade Butler

The frost and freeze events on April 8 and April 21 had a devastating impact on the small fruit and tree fruit industry, with some growers experiencing near-total crop loss. They noted increased interest in crop insurance among growers and expressed concern over the potential loss of research facilities at USDA Beltsville. He also highlighted challenges with Maryland heat stress regulations and noted an upcoming twilight meeting at the University of Maryland research farm on June 25.

Hemp – Stefanie Reiser

Stefanie Reiser discussed the federal ban on certain hemp products that is scheduled to take effect in early November due to changes in THC allowance limits. They noted that while there have been efforts to fix this through legislation and amendments, there is currently no identified legislative vehicle to reverse the change before the deadline.

Livestock – Eleanor Leak

The pork industry is managing herd growth and disease prevention amid pork shortages. The sheep industry is experiencing strong consumer demand and rising prices, while the cattle industry faces low cattle numbers, high production costs, and concerns over beef imports from Argentina.

New and Beginning Farmers – Vacant

Nursery, Landscape & Greenhouse – Kelly Lewis

The nursery industry is currently experiencing dry conditions and is still in the process of assessing damage from the April 21 freeze.

Organic – Emma Jagoz

N/A

Poultry – Zach Evans

N/A

Related Services – Keith Parker

Reported on the completion of the Specialty Crop Block Grant program and discussed working with farmers across Southern Prince George's on controlled environment agriculture, hydroponics, and aquaponics. He participated with the University of MD's Beginning Farmer's Workshop. He also noted that House Bill 1342, which addresses controlled environment agriculture, is still being worked through with members of the legislature. He is also meeting with City of Bowie Economic Development Corporation officials to discuss incorporating new types of farm systems with controlled environment agriculture .

Socially Disadvantaged Farmers – Vacant

State Grange – Dr. Richard Stonebraker

N/A

Turf – Gordon Kretser

Gordon provided an update on pollinator habitat research, noting that a scientific journal article was recently published regarding a study that modeled the effects of pollinator habitats on existing solar farms on the Eastern Shore. While applicants for solar sites pledge to provide these habitats, execution has been inconsistent. The committee is working to bring this to the attention of the Public Service Commission and soil conservation districts, though they have encountered friction where some inspectors reject plans that do not include standard turf grass.

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

Approximately 84 layoffs have occurred. Lisa Gonzalez has been hired as the new program director as well as the current placement of nine student interns. They also noted that Maria Hawk, an administrative assistant, is leaving, and the search for an assistant director for the program is ongoing.

Urban and Small Farmers – Vacant

Value Added Agriculture & Agritourism – Janna Howley

N/A

Vegetable – Russell Shlagel

N/A

Veteran Farmers – Peter Scott

N/A

Veterinary – Dr. Marianne Bailey

N/A

Viticulture – Rachel Lipman

N/A

Maryland Department of Agriculture Staff Updates

Secretary Kevin Atticks

- **Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) Freeze and Drought Response**: The Governor submitted a request to the USDA for a disaster declaration related to the freeze. Additionally, the state is waiving the 51% fruit mandate for vineyards due to crop losses and is working to expedite permitting processes and explore options for tax relief.

- **Livestock Health Concerns**: The livestock industry and state veterinarian are closely monitoring the threat of screwworm and have adjusted certification requirements for livestock entering the state to ensure animals are healthy and free of wounds. The USDA is currently implementing a strategy of breeding sterile flies to prevent the pest from reproducing. While the issue was eradicated in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, six animals have recently tested positive in Texas and New Mexico, emphasizing the importance of monitoring livestock transport to prevent further spread.
- **Forestry Executive Order and Maryland Wood**: The forestry executive order now requires the state to prioritize the use of Maryland wood. The Department of General Services is actively incorporating Maryland wood into state procurement, although it is not currently part of the certified local program.
- **Southern Association of State Departments of Agriculture Conference**: Atticks announced that the MDA is hosting the Southern Association of State Departments of Agriculture (SASDA) conference in Cambridge next week.

Deputy Secretary Steve Connelly

- **Secretarial Disaster Declarations**: Outlined the three methods for obtaining a secretarial disaster declaration: a request by the governor based on a 30% crop loss, a determination by the state FSA director after assessments, or an automatic designation via the United States Drought Monitor. On April 17, nine Maryland counties and two contiguous counties received a drought disaster designation. MDA is awaiting announcements regarding Somerset and St. Mary's Counties.
- **High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza**: MDA, Delaware Department of Agriculture, United States Department of Agriculture, poultry companies, and the Delmarva Chicken Association met to review response strategies and plan for the spring of 2026.

Hans Schmidt, Assistant Secretary of Resource Conservation

- **Cover Crop Program**: MDA is releasing information on the cover crop program, noting that they have incorporated feedback received from the previous year. The funding levels remain consistent with the previous year's allocation.
- **Urban Agriculture Grant Program**: Applications for the Urban Agriculture Grant Program will open in June. This program supports urban farms by providing funding for capital improvements, sustainable practices, and educational programming.
- **Agency Strategic Plan**: Every agency is required to provide a strategic plan by July. A survey is available on the MDA website for public input, and all organizations are encouraged to participate to help shape the plan.
- **Nutrient Management Plans**: Emergency regulations were submitted to the Administrative, Executive, and Legislative Review committee to allow for five-year nutrient management plans for concentrated animal feeding operations and pasture operations. These regulations were approved and are now effective.

Martin Proulx, Marketing and Value Added Agriculture

- **Maryland Post-Harvest Infrastructure Grant**: The Maryland Post-Harvest Infrastructure Grant is part of a 10 million dollar bucket within the Rural Health Transformation Program. This grant supports farm-specific equipment for aggregation, cold storage, distribution, and minimal processing, similar to the Resilient Food System Infrastructure program. The application window is limited to 18 rural counties and closes this Sunday.
- **Maryland's Best Website and Branding**: Recently MDA launched the updated Maryland's Best website, which features a new brand and logo. The team is continuing to consolidate listings to create a comprehensive resource, and Martin encouraged stakeholders to help spread the word.

- **Maryland's Ice Cream Trail and Summer Campaign**: Maryland's Ice Cream Trail, which supports farm-based creameries and the dairy industry, has launched for the summer. Also, MDA is launching its largest marketing campaign, Eat Well, Buy Local, which includes various media advertisements such as radio, television, and billboards.
- **On-Farm Food Service Facility License**: HB 272 passed, addressing the lack of scalability in existing agritourism licensing. The bill establishes a seasonal on-farm food service facility license specifically for agritourism enterprises to replace the current temporary license that limits operations to 90 days per year.
- **Agri-Tourism Public Engagement Meetings**: The Maryland Department of Health is initiating a public process to develop regulations for the new on-farm food service facility license. This process includes one virtual kickoff meeting and four in-person public stakeholder meetings occurring throughout the summer and fall to prepare for the next agri-tourism season.
- **Seafood Marketing Workgroup**: A seafood marketing workgroup was formed following the failure of HB 1212. At the request of elected officials, MDA is engaging the public to assess opportunities and challenges in seafood marketing. Two large public meetings are scheduled for early and mid-August on the western and eastern shores.
- **International Marketing Trade Mission**: The marketing and agricultural development team will engage with a National Association of State Departments of Agriculture inbound trade mission, hosting representatives from Thailand and Vietnam to showcase Maryland agricultural products and export opportunities.
- **Irrigation and Risk Management Task Forces**: Announced the development of an Irrigation Task Force to improve water access and streamline MDE permitting, as well as a Producer Education and Risk Management Task Force to enhance support from the FSA and the Risk Management Agency.

Harrison Palmer, Chief of Staff

- **Irrigation and Risk Management Task Forces**: The development of an Irrigation Task Force to improve water access and streamline Maryland Department of the Environment permitting is underway, as well as a Producer Education and Risk Management Task Force to enhance support from the FSA and the Risk Management Agency.
- **Joint Chairman Reports**: MDA is preparing two JCRs. The first will highlight efforts to expand agricultural industry apprenticeships, and the second will evaluate potential finished product tax credits for agricultural producers using Maryland products in value-added processing.
- **Disaster Relief Block Grant Request**: Sec. Atticks signed a joint letter with several neighboring states requesting a federal block grant from congressional delegations to mitigate agricultural damages from the freeze and ongoing drought.
- **Beltsville Ag Research Center**: MDA is working closely with the congressional delegation regarding the future of the USDA BARC and the loss of its research operations.

New Business

N/A

Old Business

N/A

Public Comment

N/A

Closing the meeting, Amy reminded attendees that there is no meeting next month, with the next full commission meeting scheduled for September.

Meeting Adjourned at 11:16 AM

Respectfully Submitted by Rachel Jones, Director of Special Projects