

LEEF Listening Session

Maryland Department of Agriculture
October 10th, 2024



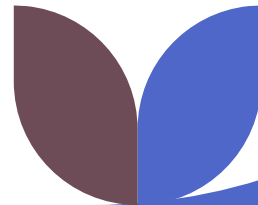
Objective: MDA is thinking holistically about how to balance the need for accelerating conservation efforts with the realities of modern farming. **We envision a program that recognizes the value of environmentally engaged farming** - applied conservation practices, preserving green space, participating in valuable on-farm research, contributing to building equitable and resilient food systems, and more. Together we are able to better recognize the efforts of all farmers as we work towards a healthier watershed. Along the way, we hope to foster stronger connections between farmers, conservation partners, our research institutions, and our neighbors.



Why?

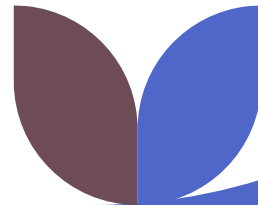
MDA has a long history of financial assistance through cost-share of conservation practices, driven strongly by our need to meet water quality goals. Maryland farmers stepped up! Even outside of these programs, Maryland farmers have led the nation in areas such as conservation tillage management and continually meet the demands of farming in an environmentally sensitive area.

Now, looking beyond 2025 and what's next for watershed strategies, we want to incentivize all the great work being done, from climate-smart practices to improving wildlife habitat, alongside community benefits from our farm operations.



What? Leaders in Environmentally Engaged Farming (LEEF)

A recognition program. It's a prioritization tool. It's to further encourage participation in conservation efforts, and explore more meaningful ways to incentivize farmers for being involved in the conversation around the future of restoration. The Program also aims to allow farmers to better tell their story of all the work they do — in a recognizable way — to include land management alongside the food and community served.

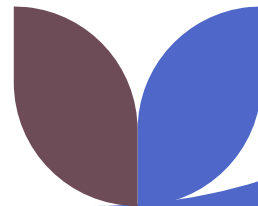


Who?

Any farm operation could be eligible.

All farms and all farmers are part of the solution as we collectively work towards environmental goals, and the commitment to feeding our communities.

Meets farmers where they are - acknowledging practices they're doing well and encouraging growth where there is opportunity to engage.



How?

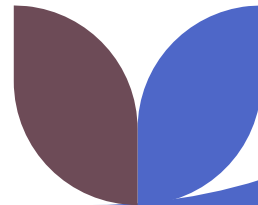
This is where you come in. We have a core idea...

That needs shaping.

That needs partners.

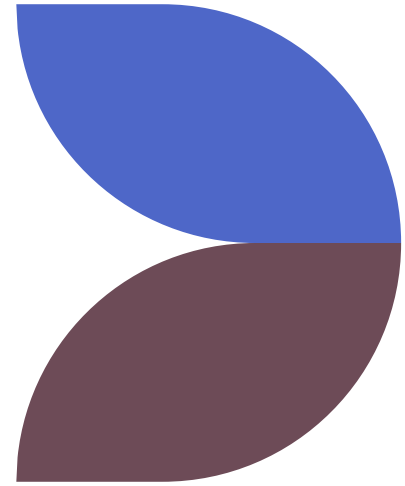
That needs to serve our agricultural community, its neighbors and our environment.

Aligns MDA priority to ensure that farmers remain economically sustainable, while also meeting environmental goals and continuing to feed our communities.



Proposed Framework

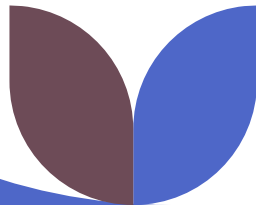
- Practices
- Tiers
- Incentives
- Collaborations



Practices

Conservation Practices

- MDA utilizes federal standards to account for and report progress towards environmental goals – Chesapeake Bay TMDL, carbon sequestration, GHG reductions. The list is growing.
- **Looking to hear about new and innovative practices**, so they may become recognized in our accounting.

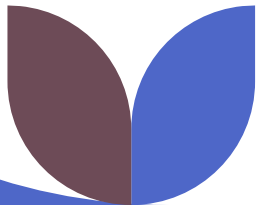




Practices

Community Best Practices

- These practices are more broadly defined and could capture efforts related to selling or donation of Maryland farm products to food banks; mentoring new and beginning farmers; a focus on ag education or environmental justice, GAP certification, participating in the Maryland's Farmers Market Nutrition Program; or partnering with an institution of higher education to conduct field-based research — *for example*.
- **Looking to hear about other ideas that contribute towards serving our community and provide benefits of environmental, social, and climate resiliency.**



Conservation Practices

Conservation Tillage

Nutrient Input Reductions

Cover Crops

Natural Filters

Wildlife and Pollinator Habitats

Healthy Soils Practices

Adoption of on-farm renewable energy

WIP eligible (NRCS and RI)

Creditable towards climate goals, and growing list of environmental initiatives

And more...

Community Best Practices

Facilitating work experience focused on agriculture in underserved communities

Participating in the Maryland's Farmers Market Nutrition Program

Partnership with Food Banks or Nonprofit Organizations to address food insecurity

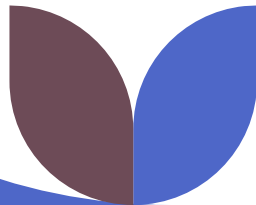
Participation in Maryland's Certified Local Farm and Fish Program

Mentorship of new and beginning farmers

And more...

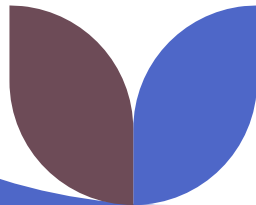
Points

- Practices would have weighted points assigned, according to intensity of a practice and/or according to their value in reaching statewide goals (e.g. a practice that both provides high efficiency in addressing water quality as well as being a climate-smart practice).
- Practice weights can also be assigned based on the location of a priority BMP, if it falls within the critical area, *for example*.
- Practices being used for LEEF certification must cross between both conservation practices and community practices.
- Farm size would not influence available points.



Points

- Points will be drafted by MDA and then reviewed with key stakeholders at a future date.
- Documentation or site verification needs, to be decided. MDA already serves as the accounting agency for the agricultural sector, tracking progress towards environmental goals, and provides field assessment for verification of practices back into the model.



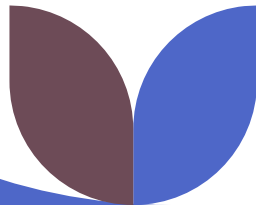
Tiers

Mirroring LEED...

- Platinum (80+)
- Gold (60-79)
- Silver (50-59)
- Certified (40-49)

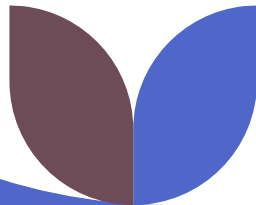
Point groupings could differ.

Tiers would both acknowledge practices in place, and unlock greater incentives.



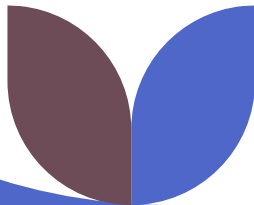
Incentives

- Cost-share already provided through participation in programs, looking for additional feasible and creative drivers.
- *Examples being* - prioritization for funding to buy equipment, prioritization for contracts with vendors.
- Incentives built into the program, as well as the ability to leverage as a certification of good stewardship - with anyone from customers to business partners.
- Future incentives could include priority access to programs and grants, tax incentives, etc.
- **What would be on your list?**



Collaboration: Partnerships and/or Incentives

- Coordination between state agencies -
 - Streamlined permitting?
 - Input on new practices?
- Coordination with outside funders -
 - Partners recognizing certification in their applications?
- Coordination between ag, environment, and conservation organizations, as well as with research institutions.



How it all works together

Voluntary

Dynamic and evolving as the science and program evolves

Review completed on an annual basis

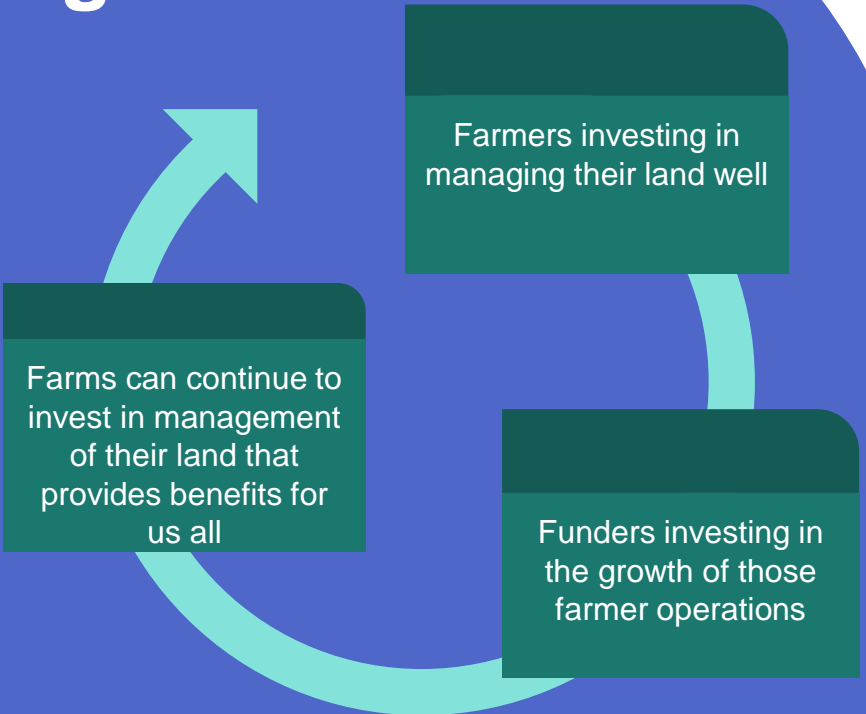
MDA commits to helping message the LEEF brand and building it's value



How could it be leveraged?

Farm is Silver LEEF certified, recognizing them as good stewards on both the conservation and community front — could that be leveraged when applying for infrastructure grants to build processing plant?

Investing back into an operation that is committed to conservation and community, supporting local economy by assisting them with tools to grow their operation, building resilient food systems by adding to the “missing middle.”



Farms can continue to invest in management of their land that provides benefits for us all

Farmers investing in managing their land well

Funders investing in the growth of those farmer operations



How can it help farmers tell their story?

Communication to consumers — Maryland consumers are aware of our impact on the Chesapeake Bay and this provides a clear way to know they are not only buying their groceries at the local market, they are supporting a farm that contributes to cleaner water for us all.

Conservation is a value-add for the state, this recognizes that in a way that can be used to make informed purchases when buying local.



How does it connect us to innovation?

Participation in field trials, being early adopters, bringing that information back to MDA and conservation partners allows for:

- program alignment
- confidence for funding new practices
- better understanding of practice performance and value



Feedback Session and Discussion

- Practices
- Incentives
- Collaborations
- Structure
- Other initial thoughts and ideas?

