

PARTNERSHIP PRESS

Maryland Conservation



Fall 2025 Volume 32 Issue 4

A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, JEN NELSON, MASCD

BRIDGING SCIENCE AND PRACTICE: CONSERVATION DISTRICTS CAN HELP LEAD THE WAY

One topic that generated significant interest at our 2025 Annual Meeting was a presentation by Alex Soroka and Andrew Sekellik from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). Their session, titled “*Hydrogeologic Framework of Maryland: Basic Concepts with a Focus on Nutrient Transport*,” explored the interactions between groundwater and surface water, the factors influencing nutrient movement, and the concept of lag time. (All presentations from the meeting are available at tinyurl.com/MASCD2025.)

Their presentation resonated with me because it closely connects to the work of conservation districts—though it’s not yet fully integrated into our efforts. Lag time, the period between when a new conservation practice is implemented and when its water quality benefits become measurable, is critical to understanding why results from our work may take years to appear. For conservation planners working with farmers, understanding the hydrogeology of an area can also guide which practices are most effective in specific settings. Recognizing how nutrients are transported unevenly across the landscape helps explain why we see improving trends in some areas of the Chesapeake Bay watershed but slower progress in others.

Our members are the ideal audience for this information because we are uniquely positioned to apply it in our daily work. Conservation districts were designed to be **local, responsive, and flexible**—qualities that complement our state and federal partners. District boards and staff understand the local landscapes and resource needs within our counties. We have trusted relationships with farmers and residents, enabling us to identify the right policies, programs, and incentives to encourage voluntary participation in conservation practices.

In some of the more vulnerable areas of our landscape, we’re not seeing the water quality improvements we expected from our efforts to date. Some of this may be explained by lag time, but it may also signal a need for new approaches. Recent reports, such as the CESR Report, note that “opportunities exist to improve the effectiveness of pollution reduction efforts and accelerate improvements in living resources by building on the data, knowledge, and experience gained over decades of effort.” We’re also seeing a focus on targeting resources where they’ll be most effective in Maryland’s legislative budget analyses and in initiatives like the

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MDA’S HEALTHY SOILS COMPETITIVE FUND NOW ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS

The Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) will accept grant applications for its Fiscal Year 2026 Healthy Soils Competitive Fund from **November 3, 2025, through January 9, 2026**.

This program offers financial support to eligible farmers and organizations to adopt innovative soil health practices, enhance their stewardship of soil and water resources, and promote soil health awareness within the agricultural community. Grant recipients will receive up to \$50,000 to support three years of enhanced soil health practices.

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LEGISLATIVE UPDATE FROM PROVIDENCE STRATEGIES LOBBYING FIRM, BY MICHAEL MASON

Maryland’s 2026 General Assembly will convene on January 14th amid tight budgets, climate goals, and demands on working lands. For Soil Conservation Districts (SCDs), the session is going to center on funding stability, staffing, and on-farm practices that meet water-quality and resilience targets without squeezing producers.

Expect debates over operating and capital budgets affecting the Maryland Agricultural Water Quality Cost-Share (MACS) Program, cover crop incentives, conservation equipment, and technical assistance. Staffing will be a headline issue. Districts continue to compete for adequate staffing and the continued funding for conservation practices. Permitting and procurement modernization—digital plan review, programmatic permits, and faster small-project approvals—may also advance. In addition, the legislature will likely be taking up issues revolving around agritourism and adequate facilities for guests.

A potential 2025 “Special Legislative Session” is being discussed in Annapolis as a contingency. Triggers could include revenue actions to address structural deficits, transportation funding patches, court-driven redistricting, or urgent economic-development packages.

Providence Strategies will be hosting bi-weekly legislative calls again this Session – please email to be included on the distribution list.

Providence Strategies is the lobbying firm for the Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts please contact Mike Mason at mason@providence.llc.

SSCC



Report

Information from the State Soil Conservation Committee

A MESSAGE FROM LORETTA COLLINS, SSCC EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

The SSCC thanks St. Mary's Soil Conservation District for hosting the October SSCC meeting. Traveling around the state has been well received and we hope to continue doing so in 2026.

Highlights of recent SSCC meetings are summarized below. For more details, SSCC monthly meeting minutes can be accessed on MDA's [State Soil Conservation Committee webpage](#).

SSCC ADMINISTRATION

Officer Elections: Van Funk (Central MD Area Representative) was reelected Chair. Amy Posey (Southern MD Area Representative) was elected Vice-Chair.

Area Representatives: Secretary Atticks reappointed Amy Posey (Prince George's Supervisor) for Area 2-Southern and appointed Anne-Meredith Webster (Worcester Supervisor) for Area 5-Lower Shore.

The SSCC welcomed George Turner, USDA-FSA State Executive Director, to the SSCC membership.

The SSCC welcomed Greg Sandi, recently confirmed as MDE representative to the SSCC.

GUIDANCE FOR DECISION-MAKERS ON AGRITOURISM

MDA's [Statewide Guidance and Analysis Document for Value-Added Agriculture and Agritourism](#) was created to educate State and Local agencies and officials on the diversity and evolution of agricultural industries, including agricultural processing and Agritourism, for the sake of regulatory and policy-based decision making. The document intends to: 1. Familiarize local officials with the trends, challenges, and opportunities in Value-Added Agriculture across the State of Maryland; 2. Provide examples and benchmarks of how an effective regulatory framework can accommodate this evolving industry; 3. Unclutter the existing web of how farms and agricultural activities are regulated, offering clarity and opportunities to strengthen the regulatory framework in Maryland. The SSCC was briefed on the process of document development as well as associated opportunities and challenges. Speaker: Martin Proulx, MDA

SUPERVISOR APPOINTMENTS

- Cecil SCD – Alice Crothers
- Talbot SCD – Kyle Hutchinson
- Worcester SCD – Valeria Nasir

FARMERS HAVE A NEW VOICE AT THE CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

The Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC) of the Chesapeake Bay Program was formed to provide the agricultural sector — including farmers, soil and water conservation districts, and industry partners — with a direct voice in the development and implementation of policy, modeling and best-management practice (BMP) decisions that affect the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The committee supports the Bay-wide goals for nutrient and sediment reductions by engaging the farm community in conversations about how agriculture can help meet restoration objectives while remaining economically viable. Through its quarterly meetings and sub-committees, the AAC helps shape how agricultural practices are represented in the watershed model, advises on how BMP credits are calculated, and works to bridge the often-complex interface between agencies, researchers and practitioners. The group has already offered feedback on the revised Chesapeake Bay Agreement to ensure that economically viable agriculture is recognized as a priority in the new agreement, and will present recommendations to the Chesapeake Executive Council in December.

In conjunction with these efforts, Jen Nelson was selected as Coordinator of the Agricultural Advisory Committee. In this role she serves as the staff lead for the group, helping organize meetings, coordinate stakeholder engagement, and manage communications among the

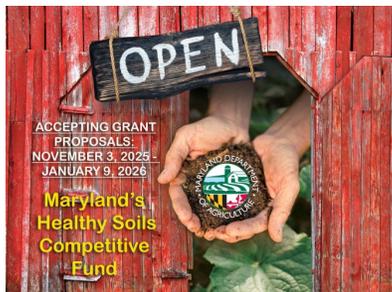
committee members and the broader Bay-partnership network. Nelson brings to the position a background in environmental science and farm-sector outreach and will complement her role with MASCD. Her selection signals a strong commitment by the program to ensure that agriculture's voice is heard in the Bay-restoration discourse, and that the AAC is positioned as a practical link between policy development and on-the-ground farm implementation.

MARYLAND FARM & HARVEST

Maryland Public Television's popular original series **Maryland Farm & Harvest** returns for its **13th season on Tuesday, November 11**, with the first of 13 new half-hour episodes. A preview of the new season is available on MPT's YouTube channel [HERE](#). For more info: [mpt.org](#).



MDA'S HEALTHY SOILS COMPETITIVE FUND NOW ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS



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Grants are available to farmers and agricultural organizations for innovative, next-level soil health projects. We support expanded soil health and new management systems that minimize soil disturbance, maximize soil cover and diversity, and increase living roots. Please visit the [website](#) to learn more and download an application.

ENROLLMENT PERIOD FOR MARYLAND'S 2025-2026 CONSERVATION BUFFER INITIATIVE BEGINS NOVEMBER 1ST

The Maryland Department of Agriculture is excited to announce that the 2025-2026 enrollment period for its popular **Conservation Buffer Initiative** will run from **November 1st, 2025 through April 30, 2026**. To help Maryland meet its ambitious tree planting goals, qualifying farmers who plant forest buffers through this program will receive a one-time **\$1,000/acre signing bonus** for trees along with the program's standard incentive payment.

Entering its sixth year, Maryland's Conservation Buffer Initiative provides farmers with attractive incentive payments to plant buffers next to streams to improve water quality and support the state's climate goals. Three types of buffers are eligible for funding and free technical assistance from local soil conservation districts under the program: **forest buffers** planted next to waterways, **grass buffers** planted next to waterways or field ditches, and **water-course access control areas** adjacent to pastures. **Payment rates range from \$500 an acre for an existing grass buffer to a maximum of \$4,500 an acre to install a riparian forest buffer with pasture fencing.** Contracts are for 5 or 10 years.

Farmers should contact their [local soil conservation district](#) to get their project started. Applications will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis based on availability of funding. For more information, please visit the [website](#).

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MESSAGE

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Whole Watershed Act. Clearly, our programs are evolving.

If our current model of conservation delivery is insufficient to meet water quality challenges, then conservation districts are the right partners to propose and test innovative approaches. That doesn't mean we can—or should—do it alone, but as the boots on the ground, we bring a unique perspective to the partnership. Should we engage our cooperators through more focused or proactive outreach? Should we propose higher cost-share rates or ranking priorities for targeted areas? Should we explore Pay-for-Performance models or collaborate with corporate partners on new incentive structures? What other strategies could help us advance conservation within our borders?

Ultimately, bridging the gap between hydrogeologic science, on-the-ground conservation and new support for implementation efforts could improve how we approach watershed restoration.

By integrating a deeper understanding of watershed science and innovative approaches into our planning and outreach, we can make our programs more strategic and effective.

The future of conservation will depend not just on the practices we promote, but on how well we align them with the needs of our communities and the natural systems that shape our watersheds.

**NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT TRAINING
AGRICULTURAL NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT TRAINING PROGRAM**

December 4, 2025 and December 15, 2025

The Maryland Department of Agriculture will host its Annual Nutrient Management Update this December to provide the latest program updates, research findings, and practical insights for certified nutrient management consultants and farm operators.

- Participants may choose to attend one of two sessions:
December 4, 2025 - New Midway Fire Company, *New Midway, MD*
- December 15, 2025 - Maryland Department of Agriculture Headquarters, *Annapolis, MD*

The event will run from 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. (registration begins at 9:00). The registration fee is \$30, and payment must be received by November 24, 2025.

Attendees will earn 6 Continuing Education Units (CEUs) toward their Maryland Nutrient Management certification.

To register, please print and mail the [registration form](#) with payment and mail to: Maryland Department of Agriculture, Nutrient Management Program, 50 Harry S Truman Parkway, Annapolis, MD 21401.





Cecil Soil Conservation District

The mission of the Cecil Soil Conservation is to provide the community with information, education, and technical assistance in conserving the county's natural resources.

- ✔ Promoting conservation awareness
- ✔ Field Days, educational events
- ✔ Technical assistance for farmers, landowners and agricultural producers
- ✔ Design Implementation of Best Management Practices (BMPs)

More Information:

410-398-4411, ext 3 www.cecilscd.com



Delmarva Chicken Association helps our members cost-share, install and maintain vegetative environmental buffers and other conservation features.



To learn more, visit dcachicken.com or reach agricultural conservation specialist Liz Warren at warren@dcachicken.com.



FUTURE DATES TO REMEMBER

Nov 20	SSCC Meeting, MDA
Dec 18	SSCC Meeting, MDA
Jan. 1	Happy New Year
Jan. 14	2026 Legislative Session begins
Jan. 15	SSCC Meeting, MDA
TBD	MASCD Board of Directors Meeting, Annapolis
TBD	MASCD Legislative Visits and Luncheon, Annapolis

PARTNERSHIP PRESS NEWSLETTER ONLINE AND ELECTRONICALLY

The quarterly *Partnership Press* is posted on www.mascd.net. Hard copies are available upon request.

Partnership Press

Maryland Conservation

is a quarterly newsletter published for and about the members of Maryland's Conservation Partnership: MD Department of Agriculture, MD Association of Soil Conservation Districts, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, USDA Farm Service Agency, MD Cooperative Extension, and the State Soil Conservation Committee.

The deadline for articles is January 30, April 30, July 30 and October 30. Please direct comments or questions to the Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts at 302-353-9733.

The members of the Conservation Partnership prohibit discrimination in their programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or familial status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact the USDA TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint, write the Secretary of Agriculture, USDA, Washington, D.C. 20250 or call 1-800-245-6340 (voice) or (202) 720-5964 (TDD). Agencies in the Maryland Conservation Partnership are equal employment opportunity employers.