

PARTNERSHIP PRESS

Maryland Conservation



WINTER 2026 VOLUME 33 ISSUE 1

A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR - BY JEN NELSON

Leading from the Field: Piloting a Producer-Led Approach

Maryland's conservation partnership has long been built on a foundation of collaboration. For decades, our state and federal partners have worked closely with the agricultural community, incorporating farmer feedback into cost-share programs and technical standards. However, as we look toward the ambitious 2040 goals set by the revised Chesapeake Bay Agreement, a new approach is gaining momentum: producer-led watershed groups.

These groups don't replace our existing partnerships; they enhance them. By taking the lead, producers are moving from being participants in conservation to being the primary architects of innovative, scalable strategies.

MASCD's 2026 Producer-Led Pilot

To turn this concept into reality, MASCD has released a Request for Proposals (RFP) to fund a single, producer-led pilot group in 2026. This grant is designed to provide one district with the seed funding necessary to formalize a farmer-led cohort.

The goal of this pilot is to demonstrate how local leadership can accelerate the adoption of high-impact practices. Districts are encouraged to identify a watershed where a core group of producers is ready to take the reins, test new ideas, and serve as a blueprint for the rest of the state.

Innovation as a Scale-Up Strategy

While traditional programs offer a reliable menu of practices, producer-led groups serve as "innovation hubs." These farmers are uniquely positioned to test emerging strategies in real-world conditions before they are integrated into broader state policies. Whether it's trialing new precision-application technologies or experimenting with complex "soil health stacks," these groups provide the data and peer-to-peer proof needed to scale up success.

When a neighbor sees a new practice working both for the watershed and the bottom line, the "social proof" drives greater voluntary adoption.

A Platform for New Approaches

Producer-led groups are the ideal laboratory for testing the "innovative approaches" recently discussed at our MASCD meetings. Because these groups are local, responsive, and flexible, they can explore models that might be difficult to implement at a statewide level initially:

- **Pay-for-Performance:** Rewarding farmers for actual environmental outcomes.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Collaborating with private-sector supply chains on new incentive structures.
- **Proactive Outreach:** Farmers talking to farmers, reaching those who might not traditionally walk into a district office.

The District as a Key Partner

Conservation districts remain the essential "boots on the ground" support system. We provide the technical expertise, engineering, and administrative backing that allows producers to focus on leadership.

By supporting these groups, we aren't just meeting a target; we are ensuring that the people who know the land best are the ones leading us toward a more resilient 2040.

A MESSAGE FROM PROVIDENCE STRATEGIES

The 2026 Maryland Legislative Session Begins

The Maryland General Assembly has convened for the 2026 Legislative Session, marking the start of a critical 90-day period that will shape state policy and budget priorities for the year ahead. Lawmakers are entering Session amid continued fiscal pressure, with the Moore Administration and legislative leaders focused on balancing budget constraints while addressing competing demands across state programs.

As committees organize and bills are introduced, early attention is centered on the State budget, local government impacts, and policy proposals affecting agriculture, conservation, and land use. Budget decisions made during the opening weeks of Session will be especially consequential, setting the tone for how programs are funded and administered moving forward.

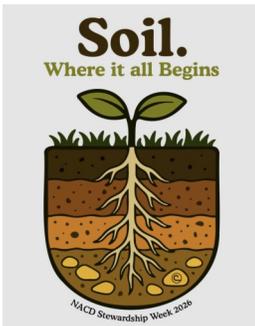
Providence Strategies is actively tracking legislation that will impact conservation programs, agricultural operations, and the implementation responsibilities of local partners. We are engaging with policymakers, agencies, and stakeholders to ensure issues affecting soil conservation districts and the agricultural community are clearly understood as the legislative process unfolds.

The early weeks of Session are often the most important for shaping outcomes. Providence Strategies will continue to provide strategic guidance and timely updates as the General Assembly advances toward adjournment.

Please join us for our weekly MASCD legislative calls held on Monday mornings – For meeting information, contact Mike Mason at mason@providence.llc.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

2026 STEWARDSHIP AND EDUCATION THEME IS ANNOUNCED!



The 2026 NACD Stewardship Week theme, **Soil. Where It All Begins**, celebrates the incredible power of soil to support life in all its forms. Soil is not just the ground we walk on. It is the starting point for healthy food, clean water, thriving habitats, and resilient communities. From backyard gardens to forests and city parks, everything begins with what is beneath our feet.

Soil does a lot more than grow plants. It holds water, cycles nutrients, and provides homes for billions of living organisms that help keep nature in balance. It keeps roots in place, helps prevent flooding, and supports wild-

life and people alike. The trees in our neighborhoods, the food on our tables, and the natural places we love all depend on healthy soils.

Conservation districts across the country work every day to protect this vital resource. Through education, technical support, and local partnerships, they help landowners and communities keep soil healthy, productive, and resilient.

Districts also provide free [educational resources](#) to schools, families, and community groups to inspire the next generation of soil stewards and help people of all ages connect with conservation in meaningful ways. Whether it is helping farmers manage erosion or supporting school gardens in town, conservation districts lead the way in caring for the land. When we take care of soil, we are taking care of everything it supports. That is why soil is where it all begins.

Throughout August 2025, the NACD Stewardship and Education team will begin releasing the 2026 Education Materials. Resources will be made available in phases, starting with contest materials, hands-on project sheets, and student activity and coloring pages.

The full Instructor Guide will follow shortly thereafter. Submissions for the 2026 Stewardship and Education theme contests will open on March 1, 2026.

SOIL HEALTH CHAMPIONS NETWORK

Established in 2015, the NACD Soil Health Champions Network (SHCN) is a group of over 380 farmers, ranchers, woodland owners, gardeners, and land managers of all kinds who are dedicated to implementing and promoting the soil health principles on their operations and in their communities.

Soil Health Champions lead by example, demonstrating that soil health looks different all across the country, but the guiding principles remain the same.

Champions have a working relationship with their local conservation districts and USDA service centers whether through programs, projects or outreach opportunities, and many are recognized as community leaders and early adopters of conservation initiatives.

Head straight to the map of all the Soil Health Champions [here!](#) Are you interested in becoming a Soil Health Champion? NACD Soil Health Champions receive:

Membership in an exclusive Network where they can exchange best management practices, tell success stories, and learn how to make improvements in their own operations. NACD believes this network will play a key role in driving a countrywide movement to improve America's soils.

2026 POSTER CONTEST

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A **quarterly, soil health bulletin** with Network news and relevant conservation research and outreach opportunities.

National recognition for their work to advance soil health in the first [eResource](#) of every month and in every edition of [The Resource](#).

The association also features soil champs on our website (click on the map below to meet our current Soil Health Champions) and showcases their achievements at NACD meetings and events.

For more information, visit <https://www.nacdnet.org/> and click on "Get Involved".



SSCC



Report

Information from the State Soil Conservation Committee

A MESSAGE FROM LORETTA COLLINS, SSCC EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

For the first time in 2025, the SSCC moved some of its monthly meetings out of Annapolis (Washington, Caroline, Wicomico, and St. Mary’s Counties). This change has been received positively and the SSCC will continue this effort in 2026. The March 2026 meeting is expected to be held in Baltimore County. Happy 2026 and stay warm!

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

The SSCC approved its workplan for 2026 (subject to change based on timeliness and speaker availability).

FOREST TO AG LAND CONVERSIONS

The SSCC established a small work group to discuss and clarify concerns related to forest clearing for agricultural production. The group includes district managers from across the state, as well as representatives from MDE, DNR, and NRCS. A summary report is expected to be reviewed by the SSCC in spring 2026.

SUPERVISOR APPOINTMENTS

- Allegany SCD – Amanda Paul
- Baltimore County SCD – Walter “Toby” Mays, III
- Carroll SCD – Janet O’Meara
- Dorchester SCD – Christopher Wayne Griffith
- Garrett SCD – Patrick Sines
- Harford SCD – Richard Holloway, Jr.

Contact Information:

Loretta Collins, **Executive Secretary, SSCC**
 Phone: 410-841-5863
 Email: loretta.collins@maryland.gov
 50 Harry S. Truman Parkway
 Annapolis, MD 21401

Next Meeting: The State Soil Conservation Committee will meet virtually on **February 19 from 9:30 AM to Noon.**

For more information, please email loretta.collins@maryland.gov

Timing	Topic
Monthly	Supervisor Training: Short trainings (5-15 min)
	"Good News" stories from Soil Conservation Districts
On-going	Farm Bill/USDA Updates
	Budget shortfall: Impacts on agricultural programs
January	2026 Workplan Approval
	Preview: Legislative Session
	DNR Agroforestry Projects Underway
	Climate Pollution Reduction Grants
February	Early Update: Legislative Session
	Carbon Sequestration/Climate Resiliency/ MDA Healthy Soils
March	Forest Clearing Workgroup update
	MD Agricultural Water Quality Cost-Share (MACS) practices and component flat rates
April	Erosion & Sediment Control Discussion: needed updates to MD Standards and Specifications manual
May	Updated CAFO permit
	Post-Session: Legislative outcomes
June	Chesapeake Bay Program updates
July	Update on the Leaders in Environmentally Engaged Farming (BFF) program, Bay-Friendly Farming (BFF) updates
	Envirothon (post-nationals) and our hosting of NCF Event
September	Producer-Led Initiatives; The Whole Watershed Act
October	MDA Nutrient Management regulations
November	Reserved for future issue
December	Workplan 2027
TBD: Pending more info	MOU: MDA/MDE Addressing pollution from ag lands
TBD: Pending more info	Conowingo Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP)

PERSONNEL NOTES

NRCS WELCOMES...

Joel Burley, Resource Conservationist in Kent County

Heidi Lumpkin, Area Programs Specialist, State Office

Tabitha Edwards, District Conservationist, Somerset and Wicomico counties

Timira Lockheart, Acting District Conservationist, Wicomico and Dorchester counties.

Hans Kefauver, Acting District Conservationist, Montgomery and Howard counties.

NRCS CHANGES...

Suzy Daubert, Maryland State Conservationist, is also State Conservationist for Delaware.

NRCS BIDS FAREWELL TO...

Sam Engler, District Conservationist for Montgomery and Howard counties, left federal service.

Ley Rideout, Resource Conservationist in Wicomico County, left federal service.

Kendrick Flowers, Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations, accepted a position with NRCS in Alabama.

Jong Kim, Structural Engineer, accepted a position with NRCS in New Jersey.

Peggy Lowman, Soil Conservationist, accepted a position with NRCS in Delaware.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

USDA LAUNCHES NEW REGENERATIVE PILOT PROGRAM

USDA recently announced a \$700 million Regenerative Pilot Program to help American farmers adopt practices that improve soil health, enhance water quality, and boost long-term productivity, all while strengthening America's food and fiber supply. Administered by NRCS, this new Regenerative Pilot Program delivers a streamlined, outcome-based conservation model—empowering producers to plan and implement whole-farm regenerative practices through a single application.

In FY2026, the Regenerative Pilot Program will focus on whole-farm planning that addresses every major resource concern—soil, water, and natural vitality—under a single conservation framework. USDA is dedicating \$400 million through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and \$300 million through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) to fund this first year of regenerative agriculture projects.

As part of participating in Regenerative Pilot Program, producers must:

- Work with NRCS staff, partners, or technical service providers to conduct a whole-farm assessment.
- Use at least one primary regenerative management practice (see list below).
- Agree to perform soil health testing in the first and last year of the contract (at a minimum) to establish a starting baseline and to record the resulting changes.

The whole-farm assessment includes all resource concerns, and it must meet NRCS planning criteria in the soil and water resource categories.

Primary practices include:

- Conservation Crop Rotation (328)
- Contour Farming (330)
- Contour Orchard and Other Perennial Crop (331)
- Cover Crop (340)
- Drainage Water Management (554)
- Forage Harvest Management (511)
- Forest Stand Improvement (666)
- Irrigation Water Management (449)
- Mulching (484)
- Nutrient Management (590)
- Pest Management Conservation System (595)
- Grazing Management (528)
- Residue and Tillage Management, No Till (329)
- Residue and Tillage Management, Reduced (345)
- Stripcropping (585)

[Learn more about the Regenerative Pilot Program.](#)

MDA LAUNCHES NEW OUTREACH CAMPAIGN

The Maryland Department of Agriculture has launched a new public awareness campaign to educate farmers about the environmental and animal health benefits of fencing livestock out of streams and providing them with a clean, reliable water source.

The campaign spotlights the department's full range of incentive programs to install stream protection practices that benefit herd health and help farmers comply with Maryland's livestock setback requirements for waterways. These include watering facilities, livestock exclusion fencing, stream crossings, buffers and special programs such as the Conservation Buffer Initiative and CREP.

The campaign will run throughout February and features a 30-second public service announcement that will air on local news, cable, and broadcast networks, including Maryland Public Television. Additionally, social media messages will be distributed across various digital platforms.

Farmers and agricultural landowners are encouraged to contact their local soil conservation district to get their projects started, so staff should be prepared to answer inquiries and direct callers to the appropriate personnel.

More information on stream protection practices can be found on the department's [website](#).

Healthy Herds
Start with
Clean Water



GRANTS
NOW
OPEN

- Frost-free waterers
- Stream fencing
- Buffers and crossings

Contact your local soil conservation district.





Restoring with Nature

Stream and Wetland Restoration, Living Shorelines, and more



Visit www.eqrllc.com to learn more

NACD PUBLICATIONS

NACD issues a number of publications to keep member conservation districts informed of recent association activity, the latest news affecting districts and their customers and newly available resources.

Publications are provided to districts free of charge.

eResource - eResource is an electronic collection of weekly news briefs sent to members and partners every Tuesday. You can read eResources online or subscribe to receive.

The Resource - NACD's quarterly print and electronic publication – The Resource – provides in-depth coverage of the association's recent activities and features columns from NACD's CEO, president, and closest partners.

Forestry Notes - NACD publishes Forestry Notes to highlight forestry issues of importance to districts and to showcase district-related forestry projects and success stories. Forestry Notes is funded through a cooperative agreement between NACD and the U.S. Forest Service.

Conservation Clips - Conservation Clips are a weekly round-up of the latest conservation news affecting members and partners. Clips are sent to subscribers electronically every Friday morning.

For more information, visit <http://www.nacdnet.org/news/publications/publications>.

Maryland Conservation PARTNERSHIP PRESS



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 Service, 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 202-353-9733.

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For a digital copy, <https://tinyurl.com/2025MASCDAnnualReport>