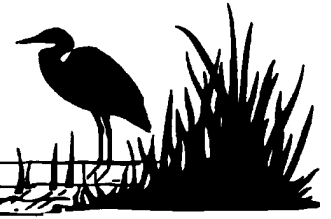


PARTNERSHIP PRESS

Maryland Conservation



Summer 2026 Volume 33 Issue 3

A MESSAGE FROM JEN NELSON, MASCD EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MOVING CONSERVATION FORWARD TOGETHER: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR UPDATE

Following our 2026 MASCD Annual Meeting at the Hyatt Regency Chesapeake Bay in Cambridge (August 3–5), we reflect on a highly productive summer marked by significant progress across our programs, policy collaborations, and youth education initiatives. Our soil conservation districts continue to show incredible leadership in expanding practice implementation and strengthening partnership efforts across Maryland.

Key Policy & Governance Engagement

Over the past month, MASCD and SSCC gathered essential district input on the draft MDE/MDA Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), specifically regarding Soil Conservation Districts' role in resolving agricultural water pollution cases. Thank you to everyone who provided feedback individually and during local Area Meetings—your operational insights were vital as we finalized this collaborative framework with state leadership at the Annual Meeting.

At the national level, MASCD represented state association executive directors on the NACD Member Services & Business Models Design "Sprint" Team. Meeting weekly, this strategic planning group formulated recommendations to help NACD effectively serve conservation districts of all organizational capacities nationwide.

Youth Education Excellence & Awards

We have fantastic news from the national stage! After winning the 2026 Maryland Envirothon at Mount St. Mary's University, the Montgomery County Team from Richard Montgomery High School traveled to Mississippi to represent our state at the NCF-Envirothon (July 19–25). The team earned an impressive 8th-place national finish—a tremendous achievement to break into the top 10 on the national stage!

MASCD looks forward to the 2027 NCF Envirothon hosted right here in Maryland!

Additionally, nominations for the 2026 Leopold Conservation Award officially closed on July 15. Thank you to all the districts that took the time to nominate their Cooperators of the Year!

Funding & On-the-Ground Initiatives

We continue to advance critical conservation funding opportunities across the state:

- **NFWF Tax Ditch Grant:** Approximately \$500,000 in implementation funds and \$50,000 in Public Drainage Association (PDA) incentive funds remain available for wetland restoration, floodplain reconnection, two-stage ditches, and riparian buffers.

- **Producer-Led Watershed Pilot Projects:** Following conversations with board supervisors, MASCD is advancing two alternative state-coordinated project concepts to support localized conservation outcomes.

- **Maryland Bay-Friendly Farming Program:** Outreach remains active—please continue directing potential candidate farms to bayfriendlyfarms.com for program details and online applications.

District Support & Looking Ahead

We are continuing to provide operational resources and technical assistance for our member districts:

- **ADA Website Compliance:** District staff can access reference materials following Missy's hands-on session on ADA-compliant website requirements and site audits.
- **Meeting Materials:** Meeting materials will be available online shortly!

Upcoming Calendar Reminder:

- **August 24–27, 2026:** NACD Northeast Region Meeting, Wilmington, DE

MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE INVESTS \$670,000 IN INNOVATIVE SOIL HEALTH AND AGROFORESTRY PRACTICES

The Maryland Department of Agriculture recently announced \$670,000 in grant funding to assist farms and organizations in adopting conservation practices that benefit the climate, soil and water.

The Healthy Soils Competitive Fund awards grants of up to \$50,000 to qualifying applicants to support three years of enhanced soil health and [agroforestry](#) practices. It was established in 2023 following recommendations from the Soil Health Advisory Committee.

Nineteen projects across the state of Maryland will implement the following innovative conservation practices and share progress updates throughout the grant period:

(Continued on page 3)

SSCC



Report

*Information from the State Soil Conservation Committee***A MESSAGE FROM LORETTA COLLINS, SSCC
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY****NRCS UNVEILS NEW CONSERVATION PRIORITIES
TO KEEP WORKING LANDS IN WORKING HANDS**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is putting farmers first and reaffirming this commitment by updating its strategic priorities, motto and mission and vision statements for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). These updates complement NRCS's historic role in providing practical, voluntary, and locally led conservation solutions for producers. The new NRCS motto and mission and vision statements are:

Motto: Keeping Working Lands in Working Hands

Mission Statement: We deliver practical, voluntary, and locally led conservation solutions that help producers conserve natural resources, strengthen agricultural production, and keep working lands productive for generations to come.

Vision Statement: An America where working lands remain productive, resilient, and in the hands of those who steward them. NRCS is also updating its strategic priorities to guide agency operations, program delivery, stakeholder engagement and modernization efforts through fiscal year 2026 and beyond.

NRCS's seven priorities include:

- Preserve and protect agricultural land;
- Shift to outcome-based conservation and farmer empowerment;
- Re-center field engagement and strengthen technical expertise;
- Expand wildlife conservation and outdoor access;
- Strengthen partnerships by streamlining processes and accountability;
- Optimize mission delivery by strengthening workforce culture; and
- Modernize NRCS infrastructure and technology.

Learn more about the priorities at nrcs.usda.gov/about/priorities.

**USDA ANNOUNCES COLTON L. BUCKLEY AS CHIEF
OF THE NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION
SERVICE**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced the appointment of [Colton L. Buckley](#) as Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the nation's primary private lands conservation agency. Buckley, who currently serves as Associate Chief of

NRCS, brings extensive leadership experience in conservation and agriculture policy to the role. As Associate Chief, he has overseen the agency's financial and technical assistance programs, management and strategy, science and technology, soil science and resource assessment deputy areas, and partnerships division. Previously, he served as Chief of Staff for NRCS and as Chief Executive Officer of the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils.

Raised on his grandparents' cattle ranch outside Gatesville, Texas, Buckley has deep roots in production agriculture, and advocacy for practical, producer-led conservation solutions. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Services and Development from Tarleton State University and a Master of Arts in Communication from Liberty University. His career includes roles at national and local conservation organizations, rural economic development entities, and service on multiple advisory boards—including the Texas A&M University System Board of Regents, to which he was appointed by Governor Rick Perry.

**LEGISLATIVE REPORT - BY MICHAEL MASON,
PROVIDENCE STRATEGIES**

Maryland's political calendar is heating up as state lawmakers prepare to return to Annapolis for a special session August 3rd-5th, with the 2026 general election set for November 3rd. The special session is expected to focus on congressional redistricting, adding another major issue to an already active election season. Lawmakers are expected to take up legislation tied to a proposed constitutional amendment on congressional district boundaries. The debate comes at a time when candidates, voters, and political leaders are all looking ahead to November, when Marylanders will cast ballots in races for governor, Congress, and the General Assembly.

The special session is likely to draw significant attention because of its potential impact on how Maryland is represented in Washington. With the General Assembly limiting the session to redistricting-related issues, the outcome could shape the political landscape well beyond this summer.

As the state moves toward the fall election, both the special session and the campaign season are expected to remain in the spotlight. For Maryland voters, the coming months will be an important period for watching how decisions in Annapolis could influence the future of the state's congressional map and its broader political direction.

Please contact Mike Mason at mason@providence.llc for updates and questions.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

NRCS UNVEILS NEW CONSERVATION PRIORITIES TO KEEP WORKING LANDS IN WORKING HANDS

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MDA INVESTS \$670,000 IN INNOVATIVE SOIL HEALTH AND AGROFORESTRY PRACTICES

(Continued from page 1)

- Baltimore City: Development of soil health resources for equestrians.
- Baltimore County: Pollinator habitat and conservation cover enhancement project.
- Calvert County: Use of innovative equipment to enhance adaptive grazing.
- Caroline County: Agroforestry and pasture improvements for enhanced adaptive grazing.
- Carroll County: Innovative use of a roller crimper for expanded cover cropping and delayed termination.
- Charles County: Establishment of an alley cropping system in a culturally significant vegetable operation.
- Frederick County: Agroforestry, reduced tillage in vegetable production and innovative equipment to enhance adaptive grazing.
- Harford County: Soil biology analysis and trailing compost extraction project.
- Howard County: Establishment of a silvopasture and improved adaptive grazing systems for an equestrian operation.
- Prince George's County: Alley cropping and reduced tillage systems for vegetable production.
- Washington County: Implementation of an agroforestry project.

"Healthy soils are the foundation of productive farms, thriving ecosystems and long-term resilience," said Maryland Secretary of Agriculture Kevin Atticks. "It's exciting to see more Maryland farmers embracing innovative conservation practices each year. With applications increasing more than 16% over last year, this program is helping producers invest in practices that strengthen their operations while protecting our natural resources for future generations."

Since its inception, the grant program has supported 88 projects across the state. Funding for the Healthy Soils Competitive Fund is made possible through the Moore-Miller Administration's implementation of the [Climate Solutions Now Act](#) and a [Climate Pollution Reduction Grant](#) awarded to the [Atlantic Conservation Coalition](#) by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The 2026-2027 grant cycle will open in November 2026. For more information about the program and the most up-to-date information, please visit our [website](#).

ENVIROTHON

RICHARD MONTGOMERY HIGH SCHOOL WON 1ST PLACE AT THE 2026 STATE ENVIROTHON HELD AT MOUNT ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY



On June 10th and 11th, the Maryland Envirothon held its 35th annual competition at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland. There were 16 teams from 16 counties vying for the top winning spot. On Wednesday afternoon June 10th, the students were at the 5 training stations being trained by the natural resource professionals

until a storm let loose dumping over 1 inch of rain in a very short time period. We had to pause the training day and later reconvened in the Knott Auditorium on campus. Their natural resource trainers were very awesome and creative, along with 80 resilient high school competitors still ready to learn, despite Mother Nature's upper hand that day so we could finish the training sessions. On Thursday the 11th, students were tested on those 5 areas they learned about the day before. After the competition ended, the team from Richard Montgomery High School from Montgomery County took 1st place. They earned the opportunity to represent Maryland at the 2026 NCF-Envirothon Mississippi in July 2026. The team members were Sophia Wang, Anthony Magana Sanchez, Jerry Chen, Alan Lu, Judah Davis, and Ms. Lissa Vincent was the team's advisor.

While in Mississippi, the team from Montgomery County, along with 41 other teams from Canada and the United States, learned more about Aquatics, Soils, Forestry, Wildlife, and the Current Environmental Issue – Non-Point Source Pollution. Mother Nature's wrath hit the Maryland team again in Mississippi with 100+ degree temperatures on the training day and testing day. During the midweek, the teams went to a waterpark for some high heat relief. The next day the teams were sequestered for 6 hours to prepare a 20-minute presentation. On Friday July 24th, the teams conducted their presentation to a panel of 5 judges who critiqued the presentation. After the competition ended, the Maryland team placed 8th with a score of 601 out of 700. Congratulations to the Richard Montgomery High School Envirothon Team.

the CAMPBELL FOUNDATION

Collaboration from the Ground Up

The Campbell Foundation is proud to announce the launch of **Conservation Concierge™** — a tool that makes it easier to find and apply for conservation funding.

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www.fielddoc.com/groundwork

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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 202-353-9733.

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