Maryland Conservation
# PARTNERSHIP PRESS

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## A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, *JEN NELSON, MASCD*

Maryland's November 3, 2026, general election will help shape the next chapter for agriculture and conservation across our state. Voters will select statewide leaders and all 188 members of the General Assembly, setting the stage for decisions affecting our farms, natural resources, and local communities.

The election will quickly give way to preparations for the legislative session, which convenes January 13, 2027. It is likely we will see new Committee Leadership in both the House and Senate Chambers which presents a fresh opportunity for advocacy on behalf of our districts. The incoming general assembly will continue to work through budgetary constraints, housing supply shortages, and the rising cost of energy for Marylanders.

The state's fiscal outlook will shape nearly every discussion in Annapolis. Maryland faces a projected fiscal 2028 budget gap approaching $3 billion, and agencies have been directed to prepare spending reductions. That pressure will intensify competition for resources and require conservation advocates to demonstrate both the environmental benefits and practical value of continued investment.

For the Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts, the central challenge will be protecting the people and programs that turn conservation goals into measurable results on farms and in local communities.

Throughout the session, district supervisors and staff can strengthen the message with local examples of projects completed, producers assisted, conservation practices installed, and needs that remain unmet. Connecting those results to specific budget decisions will help legislators understand what is at stake.

The objective is straightforward for the 2027 Legislative Session: sustain Maryland's conservation capacity while ensuring that public investments deliver lasting benefits for agriculture, water quality, and communities.

## NRCS IN MARYLAND ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS FOR CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

NRCS accepts applications year-round, however interested agricultural producers in Maryland should apply by November 13, 2026 to be considered for fiscal year 2027 funding.

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## LEGISLATIVE UPDATE FROM PROVIDENCE STRATEGIES LOBBYING FIRM, *BY MICHAEL MASON*

**Championing Conservation: Preparing for the Upcoming Legislative Session**

As the General Assembly session approaches, the Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts (MASCD) is gearing up to ensure that local soil conservation districts have the tools, knowledge, and relationships needed to effectively advocate for our state's agricultural and natural resources.

**Mark Your Calendar: Legislative 101 Training on December 15**

Whether you are a seasoned district supervisor or new to local conservation leadership, navigating state government can feel daunting. To help our network prepare, we are hosting a **Legislative 101 Training on December 15**.

This interactive session will break down the mechanics of the Maryland General Assembly, covering everything from how bills move through House and Senate committees to understanding critical milestones like prefiling deadlines and Crossover Day. Attendees will gain actionable advice on when and how to engage lawmakers during the fast-paced 90-day session.

**Enhanced Resources: Updated Advocacy Toolkit**

To support your outreach efforts, we are currently updating our online **Advocacy Toolkit** at mascd.net/advocacytoolkit. The refreshed portal will feature downloadable fact sheets, issue briefs, talking points, and step-by-step guidance on communicating district priorities. Be sure to bookmark the page and check back regularly as new materials are added ahead of the session opening.

**What to Expect: Conservation Funding Outlook**

Agricultural conservation programs—including technical assistance funding and capital programs like the Maryland Agricultural Cost-Share (MACS) Program—remain vital to meeting Maryland's soil health and Bay restoration goals. However, tight state revenues mean every dollar in the state budget will face intense scrutiny. Protecting baseline funding for district operations and cost-share assistance will be a top priority. Demonstrating the direct return on investment—how state funding leverages federal grants, supports local farm operations, and improves local water quality—will be essential to safeguarding these critical financial resources.

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Partnership Press is published quarterly by Maryland's Conservation Partners: MD Department of Agriculture, MD Association of Soil Conservation Districts, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, USDA Farm Service Agency, University of Maryland Extension, and the State Soil Conservation Committee.

# SSCC Report

*Information from the State Soil Conservation Committee*

## A MESSAGE FROM LORETTA COLLINS, SSCC EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

The SSCC took a break in August to focus efforts on the summer MASCD meeting. Thanks to all that made that meeting a success.

### SSCC ADMINISTRATION

*Area Representatives:* Secretary Atticks recently appointed Robert Butz, long-serving Supervisor for the Montgomery Soil Conservation District, to be the Central Area Representative on the SSCC. The Central Area includes Montgomery, Howard, Baltimore County, Harford, and Cecil Districts.

### ADDRESSING POLLUTION IN AG SETTINGS

The SSCC and MASCD staff worked together to compile and synthesize feedback from the Districts regarding a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between MDE and MDA on procedures to address pollution complaints related to agricultural operations. District feedback was presented to the MASCD audience in August and will be considered in updating draft MOU language. Periodic updates on draft progress will be presented at SSCC meetings.

### HISTORY AND FUTURE OF THE SSCC

In September, Loretta Collins delved deep into the physical archive of the SSCC and MASCD to provide a brief history of the SSCC, MASCD, MDA and Districts since the beginning of the conservation movement of the 1930s. This history provided context for how each entity has evolved over time including the changing nature of their respective responsibilities. This is a beginning step in discussions of how the SSCC can continue to serve as an effective leader in Maryland conservation into the future.

### SOLAR PROJECTS ON AG LAND

In October, Alisha Mulkey, MDA, presented draft recommendation for MDE to reconcile State license conditions and State erosion and sediment control requirements for vegetative cover on solar installations. Recommendations are based on small group discussions and communications with MDE.

## SUPERVISOR APPOINTMENTS

- Cecil: R. Van Funk, Jr.
- Cecil: John B. Gonzalez
- Charles: William "Wes" Tomlinson
- Harford: Kimberly Archer-Lewis
- Howard: J.G. Warfield
- Talbot: Gavin C. Roe
- Wicomico: Robert H. Guy
- Worcester: Christopher R. Bunting

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**Key Winter Events: Winter Meeting & Day in Annapolis**

Mark your calendars for two premier MASCD winter events in 2027:

- **Winter Meeting (February 16, 2027):** Join colleagues from across the state for key policy discussions, updates from partner agencies, and preparation for our legislative engagements.
- **Day in Annapolis (February 17, 2027):** Supervisors and district leaders are strongly encouraged to schedule appointments in advance with their local delegates and senators to discuss conservation priorities face-to-face in the State Capitol.

**The Power of Year-Round Relationships**

While our Day in Annapolis provides a high-impact focal point during the legislative session, true advocacy starts long before February and extends well beyond it. Polished policy briefs and legislative meetings carry far more weight when built on a foundation of year-round partnership.

State delegates and senators rely on local district supervisors and staff as trusted, nonpartisan experts in natural resource management. Inviting legislators to district meetings, farm tours, or conservation project walk-throughs throughout the year transforms abstract policy into real-world impact. Establishing these connections early ensures that when key budget decisions or critical conservation votes arise, your elected officials already know who to turn to for local guidance.
Together, through proactive preparation, updated tools, and clear local voices, we can make a compelling case for Maryland's conservation districts in the upcoming legislative session.

## NRCS IN MARYLAND ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS FOR CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

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"Maryland farmers are leaders in conservation and land stewardship" said NRCS State Conservationist Suzy Daubert. "This funding can help farmers further their stewardship legacy while keeping their operations productive, profitable and sustainable for future generations. Maryland agricultural producers and forest landowners can apply for NRCS program funding any time by visiting their local NRCS office." Programs include:

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP): The Agricultural Land Easement component of ACEP enables producers to protect their agricultural land from development by enrolling it in a permanent Agricultural Land Easement. The Wetland Reserve Easement component of ACEP helps landowners protect, restore and enhance wetlands which have been previously degraded due to agricultural uses.
- Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA): Available in select states, this program helps farmers manage financial risk through diversification, marketing, and conservation.
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP): CSP helps producers build on existing conservation efforts while strengthening their operation.
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): EQIP provides producers with the technical and financial resources they need to address resources concerns on their land including improved water and air quality, increased soil health, reduced soil erosion, improved natural vitality and more.
- NRCS is also providing additional financial assistance nationwide through the Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP), which enables producers to implement whole-farm regenerative practices through a single application for EQIP and CSP.

Additionally, producers can apply to participate in a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project. The ranking date for RCPP applications is November 13, 2026.

## MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE'S HEALTHY SOILS COMPETITIVE GRANT FUND OPEN

The Maryland Department of Agriculture's Healthy Soils Competitive Grant Fund will open on **November 2, 2026, and accept applications through January 8, 2027**. This program offers up to $50,000 to help Maryland farmers and organizations advance their soil health goals by funding innovative practices that minimize soil disturbance while maximizing cover, biodiversity, and living roots over three years.

Since 2023, the Healthy Soils Competitive Grant Fund has backed 71 projects across the State.

Some of the practices supported include:

- Alternative inputs combined with intensive cover cropping to reduce synthetic chemical use.
- Reduced tillage equipment and field trials for vegetable production.
- On-farm improvements, such as upgraded composting systems and annual cover crops for summer grazing.
- Selected agroforestry practices.

Thanks to a Climate Pollution Reduction Grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, this upcoming grant cycle expands funding for the following agroforestry practices:

- Alley Cropping.
- Hedgerow Planting.
- Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment.
- Silvopasture.
- Tree and Shrub Establishment.

"Maryland farmers understand that caring for the soil is an investment in the future of their land," said **Maryland Secretary of Agriculture Kevin Atticks**. "This year's expanded range of eligible agroforestry practices will support our producers' commitment to protecting our state's natural resources while building more productive, resilient farms."

The Healthy Soils Competitive Grant Fund is open to all Maryland farmers, farmer collectives and agricultural organizations.

There are no minimum or maximum acreage requirements, and recipients will receive 30% of the funding upfront. The remainder of the funds will be distributed annually following verification of progress.

Funds may cover conservation practices, equipment purchases, labor, research and administrative costs that are required to meet project goals.

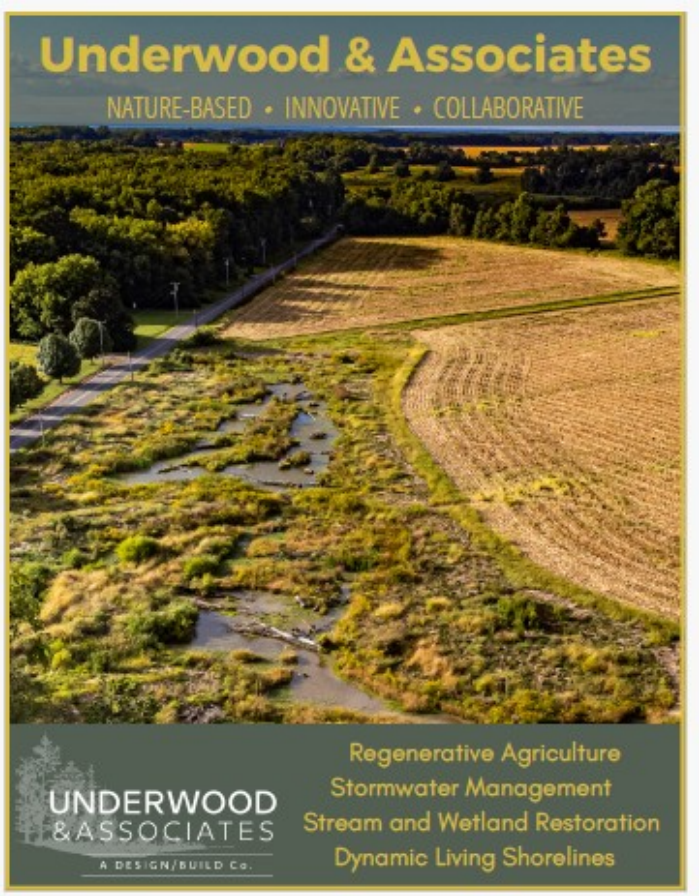
Applicants must provide documentation of compliance with Maryland's Nutrient Management Program.

The submission deadline is **11:59 p.m. EST on January 8, 2027**. Award recipients will be notified by May 31, 2027.

Please visit the Healthy Soils Competitive Grant Fund website for more information and to apply.

Please contact Nick Miller, administrator of the Healthy Soils Competitive Grant Fund, at nicholas.miller2@maryland.gov or (410) 980-2350 with any questions.




## PERSONNEL NOTES

### NRCS WELCOMES...

**Brianna Allen**, RC&D PSS, Queen Anne's County
**Diana Burch**, RC&D Planner, Carroll County
**Jack Case**, RC&D Soil Conservation Technician, Prince George's County
**Kolby Custer**, RC&D Forester, Allegany County
**Tarik Dembly**, Soil Conservationist, Talbot County
**Lucia Gonzalez Goyco**, RC&D PSS, Charles County
**Mark Parish**, RC&D Forester, Lower Eastern Shore
**Matthew Tagle**, RC&D Soil Conservation Technician, Prince George's County
**Kendalyn Washington**, Soil Conservationist, Anne Arundel County

### NRCS BIDS FAREWELL TO...

**Erin Baker**, Soil Conservationist, Caroline County
**Shawn Belt**, Horticulturalist, Plant Materials Center
**Adam Gabor**, RC&D CREP Planner, Upper Eastern Shore
**Phil King**, State Soil Scientist for MD & DE
**John Knowles-Kellett**, RC&D PSS, Prince George's County
**Lauren Koerner**, Soil Conservationist, Worcester and Somerset counties.

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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.

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