

The budget committees appreciate the submission of Maryland's agricultural strategic plan and understand that there are ongoing stakeholder discussions about implementation of the plan. The budget committees request that the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) submit a report on the status of these discussions, including any information about action items, responsible parties, and implementation status. The report is requested to be submitted by December 1, 2020.

During the 2019 General Assembly, the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) was asked to develop a strategic plan for Maryland agriculture in coordination with the Harry R. Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology. Our top priority was to make this process transparent and inclusive of all sectors across the agricultural industry. The strategic plan gave us a good snapshot of where the industry is and established a list of focus areas for the industry moving forward. The strategic plan included an analysis of the external trends and forces affecting Maryland agriculture, an assessment of the industry's strengths and challenges, and established a vision for a successful future.

The strategic plan identified six "Initiative Areas" for the industry to use as a roadmap as we move forward:

- Market Development
- Infrastructure Development
- Continued Commitment to Conservation
- Workforce Development
- Partnerships for Technical Assistance
- Embracing Technology

Upon submission of the strategic plan, we communicated that the next step would include convening representatives of industry to discuss implementation of the plan.

In January 2020, representatives from MDA, the Hughes Center, Maryland Farm Bureau, Rural Maryland Council (RMC), Maryland Agricultural and Resource Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO), Maryland Agricultural Education Foundation, Grow & Fortify, Mid-Atlantic Farm Credit, Thompson Consulting, and Delmarva Chicken Association met to discuss the implementation of the strategic plan, and identify goals and areas of potential collaboration. Each representative discussed their work in areas identified in the strategic plan. We used the six initiative areas as a starting point and discussed what issues fell under each.

Market Development

- Maryland Food to Maryland Institutions
- Maryland's Best and Agriculture Marketing
- Trade (Domestic Markets/International Markets/Urban Markets)
- Urban Agriculture
- Nutrient Trading

Infrastructure Development

- Processing Capacity
- Support for new beginning or transitioning farmers on business plan developments
- Broadband
- Infrastructure for small and niche grains
- More resilient supply chains/diversified

Conservation

- Adapting to the Phosphorus Management Tool (PMT)
- Nutrient Trading
- Solar Siting Issues/Other renewables
- WIP/Technical Assistance
- Technical Service Providers
- Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP) Goal Implementation; Healthy Soils
- Conservation Branding for Agriculture Products
- Alternative or Innovative Funding Sources
- General Support needed for the following to ensure that the programs are available:
 - Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation and Rural Legacy
 - Next Generation (Next-Gen) Farmland Acquisition Program
 - Existing funding sources

Workforce Development

- Agriculture education
- Agriculture Marketing Professionals
- Promoting Careers that Support Agriculture
- Desire for Departments of Commerce and Labor to be Engaged in Agriculture

Partnerships for Technical Assistance

- University of Maryland Extension
- Soil Conservation Districts
- Future Harvest
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Technical Assistance inventory needed on MDA website

Embracing Technology

- Broadband
- [F3 Tech](#)
- Assistance for Maintenance of Tech and
- Building funding support
- Technical Assistance – Chesapeake Bay Program umbrella
- Educate public of farmers' tech use
- Continuing support for waste-to-energy programs

In September 2020, the same representatives met to discuss whether the list of priorities identified were appropriate. Progress was made on several goals identified from the January

meeting. Also, a significant portion of this meeting was dedicated to discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the industry.

Progress to Date

Broadband

During the 2020 session, Governor Larry Hogan signed into law a bill that further facilitates the expansion of rural broadband internet on the Eastern Shore by establishing processes for an electric cooperative to operate as a member-regulated cooperative.

Urban Agriculture

MDA supported efforts to expand urban agriculture. A bill was drafted that would have established the Urban Agriculture Grant Program within MDA and an Urban Agriculture Grant Fund to support the program. However, due to the shortened session, the bill did not pass. Urban agriculture remains an important issue; and MDA, MARBIDCO and RMC have already had conversations about how to best resume those efforts.

Increased Resources

Governor Hogan's FY21 budget provided continued support to agriculture and rural Maryland by:

- Providing funding and 53 new full-time positions to accelerate implementation of agricultural Best Management Practices that reduce nutrient flows to the Chesapeake Bay.
 - This significant investment of resources will help the agricultural sector meet Phase III WIP goals.
- Allocating additional funding and positions to support agricultural conservation practices to help Maryland farmers implement the PMT and meet Phase III WIP goals.
- Maintaining funding for the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund and MARBIDCO, which includes the Next-Gen Farmland Acquisition Program.
- Allocating record funding in the 2010 Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays Trust Fund for agricultural conservation practices and technical assistance.
 - The enhancement includes an increase targeted for manure transport to help Maryland farmers implement the PMT program.
- Allocating \$3.35 million in the Maryland's Animal Waste Technology Fund to invest in innovative technologies during FY21.

COVID-19 Relief for Agriculture

Pandemic Recovery Equipment and Working Capital Loan Fund

MARBIDCO established two loan relief programs as a result of COVID-19. The major aim of the Pandemic Recovery Equipment and Working Capital Loan Fund program is to help rural businesses innovate, diversify and exploit emerging market opportunities in response to the pandemic.

The program helps address the unique financing needs of Maryland's rural businesses that are not otherwise able to obtain commercial financing for working capital and equipment purchases from traditional commercial lenders such as banks or farm credit associations. The matching participation of a local or regional revolving loan program is required.

Maryland Farmer COVID-19 Relief Program

Governor Larry Hogan launched a \$10 million initiative to provide critical support to thousands of Maryland farmers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The **Maryland Farmer COVID-19 Relief Program** offers direct assistance to contract poultry growers and additional relief to any farm operation that received funding through the first round of the federal Coronavirus Food Assistance Program .

While no industry has been unscathed by the global COVID-19 pandemic, Maryland agriculture has been able to weather these challenges better than some. Maryland farmers and producers have worked throughout the pandemic to ensure that the food supply chain - and those who are responsible for managing it - remain healthy and intact with minimal interruptions.

From the onset of the pandemic response, worker safety has been a top priority for the agriculture and food production industries. MDA has been in constant contact with industry representatives to provide guidance and resources for agricultural businesses. This included working with the Maryland Department of Health to develop several guidance documents for different sectors of the ag industry. MDA also worked with a regional task force that provided access to testing and workplace inspections to ensure worker safety.

During the information gathering sessions for the strategic plan, many participants mentioned direct sales as a priority for the future of agriculture. With decreased demand from restaurants and traditional food service venues such as schools, many farmers were forced to pivot toward selling directly to consumers in the early weeks of the pandemic response. This is a trend that many hope will continue beyond the pandemic and has proven to be a viable alternative to wholesale for some operations.

Early in the pandemic, to help facilitate connections between consumers and farmers and producers, Maryland's Best created an interactive GIS map that is regularly updated with information on operations that offer direct sales. This includes farmers markets, farmer stands and seafood producers offering retail services.

Next Steps

In December 2020, MDA and the Hughes Center plan to reconvene the same group of representatives virtually to evaluate where we are with implementation of the strategic plan and identify ways for the industry to reach the vision described in our strategic plan in the midst of a global pandemic.