

# Soil Health Advisory Committee

June 7, 2021

Maryland Department of Agriculture



# Today's agenda

- ▶ Public Comments (10 mins)
- ▶ *Soil Health Programs: Five Case Studies of State Programs to Improve Soil Health*: Harry Huntley, Harry Hughes Center for AgroEcology (25 mins)
- ▶ *Review of Incentive Concepts for Maryland Healthy Soils Program*: Alisha Mulkey, MDA (30 mins)
- ▶ Roundtable (45 mins)
- ▶ Committee Announcements (5 mins)



# Public Comment



# Harry Huntley, Policy Research Specialist

Harry Hughes Center for  
Agro-Ecology



# Current Progress

- ▶ Hard and thoughtful work of deciding **WHAT** practices to incentivize as first priority
- ▶ Initial considerations included under *Committee Options* are both practice and programmatic in nature
  - ▶ Updated based on January-March discussions and debriefs
  - ▶ Circulated to all
- ▶ Now, discuss **HOW** to incentivize
- ▶ Take a step back to consider pieces as whole
- ▶ Agroforestry practices included today too



# Important Reminders

- ▶ Farm sustainability, environmentally and economically, is positive for all
- ▶ Evolving program will be key contribution of ag sector towards state's climate change goals (GGRA)
- ▶ Inclusive process design
- ▶ Mindful of:
  - ▶ Department's capacity (staff and authority) to administer program
  - ▶ Funding
  - ▶ Producer interest and access
- ▶ Today's goal is initial discussion among members, not final decisions



# Options to discuss today

1. Traditional cost-share
2. Bundled practice cost-share
3. Conservation Buffer Initiative
4. Cover Crops
5. Equipment financing
6. State certification program
7. Technical Assistance support
8. Competitive grants
9. Small farm conservation



# 1. Traditional Cost-Share

- ▶ Use the expanded authority of the MACS Capital program to cost-share for practice adoption
- ▶ Advantages:
  - ▶ Well-defined program authority, capacity, and funding
  - ▶ Widely recognized program
  - ▶ Most priority practices already eligible for funding (excl. conservation tillage, NM, IPM, crop rotation)
- ▶ Disadvantages:
  - ▶ A la carte menu
  - ▶ Funding is better suited for structural practices rather than annual practices
  - ▶ Eligibility can limit small farm participation

Evaluation Metrics*		
MDA capacity	Funding	Producer Experience
●	●	●





## 2. Bundled Practice Cost-Share

- ▶ Establish 2-3 practice suite implemented over contract duration
- ▶ Advantages:
  - ▶ Custom bundles could better address soil health principles and be designed for operation size and type
  - ▶ Similar to federal programs (e.g. CSP)
- ▶ Disadvantages:
  - ▶ Could compete with federal programs and limit field eligibility
  - ▶ No current MDA program authority
  - ▶ No funding available, but competitive grant proposal - recent Million Acre Challenge award

Evaluation Metrics*		
MDA capacity	Funding	Producer Experience
●	●	●



# 3. Conservation Buffer Initiative

- ▶ Expand FY21 pilot program to address additional marginal lands with focus on saltwater impacted lands
- ▶ Advantages:
  - ▶ Broad applicability of NRCS' Conservation Cover standard
  - ▶ Successful FY21 pilot for riparian buffers
  - ▶ Strong carbon sequestration potential and technical resources
- ▶ Disadvantages:
  - ▶ Limited geographic focus
  - ▶ May not address other marginal lands targeted through CREP
  - ▶ No current program authority for easements beyond agland preservation

Evaluation Metrics*		
MDA capacity	Funding	Producer Experience
●	●	●



# 4. Cover Crops

Evaluation Metrics*		
MDA capacity	Funding	Producer Experience
●	●	●

- ▶ Expand traditional program based on SHAC recommendations (mixes, planting season, etc.)
- ▶ Advantages:
  - ▶ Well-defined program authority, capacity, and funding
  - ▶ Widely recognized program
  - ▶ Annual program evaluation
- ▶ Disadvantages:
  - ▶ Set budget would require trade-offs among existing program incentives
  - ▶ Program funding support closely tied to water quality (i.e. fall planting focus)
  - ▶ Does not address smaller producers (< 5 acres) or non-fall planted covers

Compare to Iowa's Cover Crop program



# 5. Equipment Financing

- ▶ Promote LILAC opportunity and/or expand Income Tax Subtraction of conservation equipment to include roller crimper, small operation equipment needs, etc.
- ▶ Advantages:
  - ▶ Administrative structure and authority are existing. Program eligibility can be modified
  - ▶ Addresses technical assistance
  - ▶ Complements existing equipment rental, equipment share programs
- ▶ Disadvantages:
  - ▶ None

Evaluation Metrics*		
MDA capacity	Funding	Producer Experience
●	●	●

Compare to Montana's Range Improvement Loan program



# 6. State certification program

- ▶ Create branded farmer certification program to advance greater market opportunity (e.g. supply premiums) or other appealing outcomes (e.g. NM audits, priority program access, etc.)
- ▶ Advantages:
  - ▶ Innovative, holistic approach
  - ▶ Flexible
  - ▶ Existing evaluation tool - Nutrient Tracking Tool - being updated for carbon component
- ▶ Disadvantages:
  - ▶ Program design and drivers in earliest stages
  - ▶ Lacks financial incentive

Evaluation Metrics*		
MDA capacity	Funding	Producer Experience
●	●	●



# 7. Technical Assistance support

- ▶ Build state's Soil Health Management Plan (SHMP) capacity via Technical Service Provider network. The SHMP is enabling document for holistic mindset, inclusive of soil health evaluations
- ▶ Advantages:
  - ▶ Can engage producers early to build soil health mindset (whole-farm decision making)
  - ▶ Increases technical assistance in the state
  - ▶ Flexible
  - ▶ Strong state coalition opportunity
- ▶ Disadvantages:
  - ▶ Technical Service Provider certification is reliant on NRCS process and timing

Evaluation Metrics*		
MDA capacity	Funding	Producer Experience
●	●	●



# 8. Competitive grants

- ▶ Create competitive grant program to fund practice adoption. Evaluation and ranking criteria could be developed with SHAC.
- ▶ Advantages:
  - ▶ Innovative, holistic opportunity
  - ▶ Selection criteria could include outcomes/ performance achieved by practice implementation
  - ▶ Flexible
  - ▶ Could also employ Nutrient Tracking Tool or other metrics
  - ▶ Continued (potential) role for SHAC
- ▶ Disadvantages:
  - ▶ No funding, but competitive grant proposal or other state sources

Evaluation Metrics*		
MDA capacity	Funding	Producer Experience
●	●	●

Compare to California's Healthy Soils program



# 9. Small Farm conservation

- ▶ Establish dedicated assistance and protocol for small farm operations to complement existing programs
- ▶ Advantages:
  - ▶ Creates committed program for growing producer group
  - ▶ Flexible
- ▶ Disadvantages:
  - ▶ Less MDA experience and funding, but competitive grant proposal and viable state partners

Evaluation Metrics*		
MDA capacity	Funding	Producer Experience
●	●	●





# Dawn Bradley, Cover Crop Program Administrator

Maryland Department of  
Agriculture



# Cover Crop Program FY22

Change and highlights



# Program Outline

- ▶ Incentives for early planting
  - ▶ \$10/ac incentive for planting aerially into standing corn by September 10
  - ▶ \$10/ac incentive for planting using incorporated method by October 10
- ▶ Continuing with Delayed Termination incentive
  - ▶ \$10/ac to delay kill down until after May 1
  - ▶ Maximum 500 acres per application

# New Program Changes FY22

- ▶ Base payment increased to \$45/ac for all planting methods
- ▶ Aerial and Aerial ground continue to receive an additional \$5 which will then bring them to \$50/ac
- ▶ 2 new incentives
  - ▶ \$10/ac incentive for planting rye or
  - ▶ \$10/ac incentive for planting a multispecies cover crop



# Roundtable Rules

- ▶ Today's goal is initial discussion among members, not final decisions
  - ▶ Ultimately, collect SHAC member evaluations for each incentive option
  - ▶ Return to memos for recommendations within context of favored incentive options
- ▶ Preferences
- ▶ MDA willing to do the hard work!
- ▶ Jack of all trades, masters of none - how to balance a robust set of programs with focused energy



# Roundtable

45 minutes



# Committee Announcements

5 minutes

