

Department of Legislative Services  
Maryland General Assembly  
2017 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE  
Third Reader - Revised

House Bill 1063

(Delegate Stein, *et al.*)

Environment and Transportation

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

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Agriculture - Maryland Healthy Soils Program

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This bill establishes a Maryland Healthy Soils Program in the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) to (1) improve the health, yield, and profitability of the soils of the State; (2) increase biological activity and carbon sequestration in the soils of the State by promoting practices based on emerging soil science, including planting mixed cover crops, adopting no-till or low-till farming practices, and rotation grazing; and (3) promote widespread use of healthy soils practices among farmers in the State. To carry out the purposes of the program, MDA must (1) provide incentives, including research, education, technical assistance, and, subject to available funding, financial assistance to farmers to implement farm management practices that contribute to healthy soils and (2) determine whether the program may be implemented in a manner to enhance other State and federal programs that provide financial assistance to farmers.

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Fiscal Summary

**State Effect:** The bill can be implemented with existing resources, continuing and building upon existing MDA activities.

**Local Effect:** None.

**Small Business Effect:** Minimal.

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Analysis

**Current Law/Background:** The Maryland Soil Conservation Districts Law includes a declaration that it is the policy of the General Assembly to provide for the conservation of the soil, water, and related resources of the State and for the control and prevention of soil

erosion (for various specified purposes). The law establishes a structure of 24 soil conservation districts across the State – assisted and coordinated by a State Soil Conservation Committee – which promote and deliver local soil conservation and water quality programs. MDA’s Office of Resource Conservation provides financial and technical assistance, as well as staffing support, to the soil conservation districts. MDA indicates that soil conservation field staff work with farmers individually to identify and address resource concerns, and that assistance includes conversations about, and recommendations for, improving soil health.

While a significant focus of State law addressing soil conservation, and the activities of MDA’s Office of Resource Conservation, is the prevention of soil erosion and the protection of surrounding natural resources affected by agricultural land and activities, many of the best management practices promoted to address those concerns also contribute to improved soil health. The planting of winter cover crops, for example, for which the State provides financial assistance to farmers, not only helps to prevent erosion and absorb residual nutrients remaining after summer row crops, but also increases organic matter in the soil, an important soil health property.

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### **Additional Information**

**Prior Introductions:** None.

**Cross File:** None.

**Information Source(s):** Maryland Department of Agriculture; Department of Legislative Services

**Fiscal Note History:** First Reader - February 20, 2017  
mm/lgc Third Reader - March 14, 2017  
Revised - Amendment(s) - March 14, 2017

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