



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

Environmental Protection and Restoration
Environmental Education

House Bill 860

State Planning – Preservation of Agricultural Land – Goal

Date: February 17, 2021

Position: Support

To: House Environment & Transportation Committee

Contact: Erik Fisher, AICP

Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) **SUPPORTS** HB 860, which would extend and codify Maryland's long-standing goal to preserve agricultural land.

Well-managed farmland sustains clean water

Chesapeake Bay science is clear that when best management practices are fully implemented on farmland, the Chesapeake and its rivers and streams can achieve and maintain water quality standards. Many agricultural practices, such as improving soil quality, raising pastured meat, and growing crops such as hay can drive down pollution loads while adding value to farm operations. In addition, maintaining land in agriculture sustains wildlife habitat and avoids a number of water quality impacts associated with land development, such as fragmentation of habitat, urban stormwater, and certain toxic pollutants.

Much of Maryland's most productive farmland is facing significant development pressure

According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, Maryland has lost about 90,000 acres of farmland over the past 15 years. If this trend continues to 2030, the state will have lost nearly 10% of its agricultural land since the state's agricultural preservation goal was first enacted by the General Assembly. Much of this land – especially land with the most fertile agricultural soils – has been lost to development. Soils that are good for farming are also attractive for septic systems, and sprawl development beyond the reach of public or community sewer continues to press upon and fragment agricultural land.

Maryland's agricultural preservation goal supports state and local efforts to keep farmland in farming

Faced with mounting losses of agricultural land, the General Assembly first established a goal to preserve about one million acres over 20 years, beginning in 2002. This goal focused the efforts of myriad preservation programs, including the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation, the Rural Legacy Program, the work of dozens of regional land trusts, and investments by local governments. Working with farmers and landowners across the state, these programs have collectively preserved 690,000 acres of agricultural land. While this represents exceptional progress, the work is not yet complete. HB 860 would extend the state's commitment to 2030 and, for the first time, enter the goal into statute. This approach is consistent with other codified goals for land use and preservation, and will help ensure that the economic and environmental benefits of well-managed farmland are available for decades to come.

CBF urges the Committee's FAVORABLE report on HB 860.

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The Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) is a non-profit environmental education and advocacy organization dedicated to the restoration and protection of the Chesapeake Bay. With over 300,000 members and e-subscribers, including over 109,000 in Maryland alone, CBF works to educate the public and to protect the interest of the Chesapeake and its resources.