

**ST. MARY’S COUNTY
AGRICULTURE, SEAFOOD & FORESTRY BOARD
2024 ANNUAL REPORT**

INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE OF THE GROUP

The St. Mary’s County Agricultural, Seafood and Forestry Board members shall be appointed by the Commissioners for St. Mary’s County, to meet statutory requirements, to include:

- at least three (3) members from the agricultural community (owner-operators of commercial farms who earn fifty (50) percent or more of their income from farming);
- at least one (1) member from the forestry community;
- at least one (1) member from the real estate community and
- at least one (1) member from the community not actively engaged in agriculture.

Each member of the Board shall be appointed for a term of office of five years with no member serving for more than two consecutive full terms. Members of the St. Mary's County Agricultural, Seafood and Forestry Board during 2023 are as follows:

<u>Member</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Term Expiration Date</u>
Scott Bacon	Forestry	12/31/2025
Bonnie Brown	Citizen Member	12/31/2024
Justin Cheseldine-Gass	Waterman	6/30/2027
Kaitlin Fraer	Citizen Member	6/30/2029
Allyson Gaug	Citizen Member	12/31/2024
Connie Gunn	Real Estate	12/31/2029
Phil Langley	Waterman	12/31/2025
James Moore	Farmer	6/30/2027
James “Bubby” Norris, Jr.	Farmer	6/30/2025
Alan Polk	Forestry	12/31/2024
Stephen Reeves	Vice Chair, Farmer	12/31/2025
Michael Sirk	Forestry	06/30/2026
Joseph Wood	Chair, Farmer	06/30/2026

The following shall be ex-officio members:

- one (1) member from the University of Maryland Extension – St. Mary’s County,
- one (1) member from the St. Mary’s Soil Conservation District, and
- one (1) member from the St. Mary’s County Department of Economic Development.

SIGNIFICANT ACTIVITIES FOR THE PAST YEAR

Agriculture, Seafood, and Forestry Board:

- The Board received updates on the status of the Regional Agriculture Center (RAC) project.

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- The Board continues to work with the Southern Maryland Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) and the Patuxent Tidewater Land Trust (PTLT) to ensure the success of the Rural Legacy Program in St. Mary's County.
- In February, the Board received a presentation from ACDS, LLC about the Agricultural and Aquaculture Analysis for Southern Maryland. This regional effort will support the agricultural and aquaculture value chain in the Southern Maryland region of Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's Counties by identifying potential gaps and needs assessment in the regional food supply chain. The study focuses on identifying the food supply chain from Southern Maryland farms to consumers and highlights processing, aggregation, and/or distribution challenges to achieve a fully functioning supply chain. The final report will provide actionable recommendations for development and investment to support the growth of agriculture and aquaculture in St. Mary's, Calvert, and Charles counties, with a specific focus on improving the regional supply chain.
- ACDS, LLC also updated the Board in February about a similar Blue Catfish Feasibility Study which is being conducted to determine if Blue Catfish harvest is a sustainable and competitive sector for small business and job creation in the Southern Maryland Counties of Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's. The study will determine through development market analysis and gap identification whether investment and expansion of this industry would contribute to meaningful job creation, economic development, sustainable livelihoods, and food security for the region; as well as to provide a comprehensive business plan template for those fisherman and processors who wish to enter the industry.
- The Board received a presentation explaining the purpose of the Chesapeake Bay Passenger Ferry Feasibility Study is to evaluate the potential for a new passenger ferry service that could stimulate economic growth within each host community, provide improved access to the Bay, provide new water transportation connectivity options, and promote enhanced tourism opportunities throughout the region.
- The Board was presented with information on the St. Mary's County Farm Bureau's initiative to have a Curriculum of Agricultural Science Education (CASE) program returned to the St. Mary's County Public School System at the high school level.
- The University of Maryland Extension Agriculture Agent updated the Board with information compiled by the 2022 Agriculture Census that was released in February of 2024. The Census provides the best picture of agricultural landscape with a uniform set of data for every county in the country. Overall, the news is very good for St. Mary's County. The number of farms increased substantially in the last five years, from 615 farms in 2017 to 656 farms in 2022. Land in farms acreage also increased from 61,803 acres in 2017 to 64,380 acres in 2022. USDA estimated the market value for agricultural land decreased in the last 5 years from \$9,949 per acre in 2017 to \$8,652 per acre in 2022. St. Mary's County has approximately 229,533 acres of land area, of which 28% is devoted to farms. The value of total sales from farms also increased substantially from \$25.95 million in 2017 to \$35.27 million in 2022. The majority of farm sales (\$29.2 million) came from crops, including nursery and greenhouse crops. Sales of vegetables, melons, potatoes and sweet potatoes increased substantially in St. Mary's County from \$2.89 million in 2017 to \$4.50 million in 2022. Subsequently, the number of vegetable farms decreased during the same period from 101 in 2017 to 77 in 2022. Nursery,

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greenhouse floriculture and sod continue to play a major role in St. Mary’s County agriculture with 50 farms producing \$2.69 million in sales in 2022, which was very similar to 2017 with 51 farms producing \$2.40 million in sales. Livestock and poultry statistics also remained stable, with 271 farms producing sales of \$5.49 million in 2017 to 286 farms producing sales of \$6.10 million in 2022. The census indicates there are 1,194 agricultural producers in St. Mary’s County with 172 of those being defined as young producers (under the age of 34.) The average age of farmers in St. Mary’s County is 55.5 years old.

- The Lexington Park Rotary presented the Board with information about the 58th Annual US Oyster Festival which is the largest fundraising effort hosted by the Lexington Park Rotary Club. The US Oyster Festival is held the 3rd weekend in October at the St. Mary’s County Fairgrounds. The Lexington Park Rotary has a charitable budget of \$60,000 annually, and \$30,000 of that is dedicated to scholarships for students. Currently there are 60 members of the Lexington Park Rotary Club, with about half of those able to help with organizing the festival. The Lexington Park Rotary Club partners with other community members to help make the event successful.
- Maryland Agricultural Education Foundation (MAEF) gave the Board a general update on Agriculture Education Programs current and upcoming.
- The Board assisted in demonstrations at two local public schools during Farm to School Week. The program aims to bring locally-produced foods into schools, provide hands-on experiential learning to students, and integrate food-related education while promoting the benefits of local, nutritious foods.
- The Board assisted with two Farmers Feeding St. Mary’s events, which are held annually to help get fresh, locally grown produce and meats from St. Mary’s County farmers into under served communities.

Subcommittees

Agriculture Land Preservation Advisory Board

The duties of the Agricultural Land Preservation Advisory Board are:

- (1) To advise the county governing body with respect to the establishment of agricultural districts and the approval of purchases of easements by MALPF within the county;
- (2) To assist the county governing body in reviewing the status of agricultural districts and land under easement;
- (3) To advise MALPF concerning county priorities for agricultural preservation;
- (4) To approve or disapprove an application by the county for certification;
- (5) To promote preservation of agriculture within the county by offering information and assistance to farmers with respect to establishment of districts and purchase of easements;
- (6) To meet at least annually with forest conservation district boards in order to work cooperatively to encourage the promotion and retention of farmland and woodland in their respective jurisdictions; and
- (7) To perform any other duties as assigned by the county governing body.

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- The Agriculture Land Preservation Advisory Board approved a transfer of land to cure a violation of an Easement Property, 1 Owners Lot Release Request, and 2 Family Lot Release Requests. All requests were forwarded to the State MALPF Board for consideration.
- The Agriculture Land Preservation Advisory Board approved 7 applications encompassing 765 acres to the Maryland Agriculture Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF) for consideration of easement purchase for the FY2025 funding cycle.

Program	Acres Preserved in 2024	Total Acres Preserved To Date
MALPF	183.45	15,433.48
Rural Legacy	584.13	8,519.95
MARBIDCO SANG	0	19.22
TDRs	1.03	4,795.27
Total	768.61	28,767.92

Farmers Market

The duty of the Farmers Market Subcommittee is to address issues facing farmers markets administered by DED throughout the County.

- The Home Grown Farm Market is located at 21078 Three Notch Road in Lexington Park. The Home Grown Farm Market was open Saturdays year round from 9 am until 1 pm. The Home Grown Farm Market had twenty-six (26) vendors in 2024.
- The California Farmers Market is located at the BAE Systems parking lot at the corner of Town Creek Drive and Route 235. The California Farmers Market was open Saturday from 9 am until 1 pm April 27 through November 23. The California Farmers Market had nineteen (19) vendors in 2024.
- The Barns at New Market is located at 29133 Thompson Corner Rd, Charlotte Hall, MD 20659. The Barns at New Market was closed for construction over the 2024 Winter Season to complete enhancements to the septic system, upgraded to a Best Availability Technology (BAT) system, and increased parking spaces were added. Both projects were completed on schedule and the market was able to open for the main Seasonal Market starting on March 30th. The Barns at New Market Seasonal Market was open Monday through Saturday through November. The Seasonal Market had twelve (12) anchor vendors in the Seasonal Building and seventy-five (75) rotational vendors in the Value-Added Building participate in 2024. The Holiday Market was held on Saturdays from 9 am until 3 pm November through December. The Holiday Market had sixty-two (62) rotational vendors participate in 2024.

Agriculture Reconciliation Committee

The Agricultural Reconciliation Committee arbitrates and mediates disputes involving agricultural operations conducted on agricultural lands. The Committee issues opinions

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on whether such operations conform with generally accepted agricultural management practices.

- The Agriculture Reconciliation Committee held one meeting in 2024 on August 8, 2024 where a draft copy of proposed Rules of Procedure of the St. Mary’s County Agriculture Reconciliation Committee were distributed to members; no rules of procedure were adopted at that time. Copies of eleven (11) Agriculture Reconciliation Resolution and Dispute of Nuisance Complaint Forms by (8) citizens were shared with the members. A motion was made to authorize staff to draft a letter to the complainants and respondent recommending they seek mediation through the Maryland Agriculture Conflict Resolution Service (ACRes) program.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

- Farmland Conservation Easements. Year after year there is interest from landowners to participate in the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF) program however there is always more applications than funding available for the program.

PLANS FOR THE CURRENT YEAR

- The Board will continue to meet the second Thursday of every other month.

*2025 Meeting Calendar

February 13, 2025	August 14, 2025
April 10, 2025	October 9, 2025
June 12, 2025	December 11, 2025

*Commissioner and citizen attendance is always welcomed.

ONGOING ACTIVITIES

- The Board will continue to promote and discuss initiatives, projects and programs as they relate to the implementation and update of the St. Mary’s County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.