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**Maryland Department of Agriculture
Fiscal Year 2023 Operating Budget
Response to Department of Legislative Services Analysis**

**House Appropriations Committee
Transportation and the Environment Subcommittee**

Chairman Marc Korman

February 23, 2022

**Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
Public Safety, Transportation, and Environment Subcommittee**

Chairman Cory McCray

February 28, 2022

- 1. The Department of Legislative Services (DLS) recommends that MDA comment on whether there is any funding in the fiscal 2023 State budget for the agriculture climate vulnerability assessment. If funds are not included, MDA should be prepared to discuss how the assessment will be completed without the funding.*

The Harry R. Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology was asked by the Maryland State legislature in 2021 to work with the Maryland Department of Agriculture, Maryland Department of the Environment and Maryland Department of Natural Resources to write a plan for conducting a climate vulnerability assessment of agriculture in the state of Maryland. The report recommends the allocation of new funding (\$500,000) for the Assessment be spread over two (2) years.

- 2. DLS recommends that MDA comment on its plans for adopting a Cover Crop+ program, how the outcome-based approach would work given weather variability and agricultural market shifts, how aerial seeding of fields before they are harvested helps*

to resolve the challenge of fall weather variability delaying the planting of cover crops, and whether it sees the program transitioning fully to an outcome-based approach in the future.

We encourage the use of aerial seeding to ensure an early planted cover crop through a higher base payment rate (\$50/ac versus \$45/ac for non-aerial planted). Further, if the cover crop is aerial seeded into standing corn by 9/10, farmers may receive an additional \$10/ac. This not only increases the likelihood of cover crops being planted, but promotes additional growth and nutrient uptake during the fall. Seeding cover crops into standing soybeans too early can become problematic for harvesters to operate due to excessive growth in the soybeans. As a result, some farmers choose not to aerial seed cover crops into standing soybeans.

Weather ultimately is the number one factor that may restrict the planting of cover crop acres. Ag pilots are often impacted by both rain and wind conditions. In addition, in some areas of the state, air restrictions exist for ag planes to operate and on the Western shore, access to ag planes is limited. We do have a couple of applicators experimenting with using drones to aerial seed cover crops.

Fields planted into small grains with the intent for harvest are excluded from the Cover Crop Program.

While MDA is still considering options associated with a multi-year cover crop approach, the primary focus of any such program would be annual adoption of cover crops as part of an overall crop rotation/production strategy to maximize ground cover and reduce/eliminate tillage, thus promoting soil health and improving organic matter.

DLS BUDGET RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

1) Concur with Governor's allowance

The Maryland Department of Agriculture concurs with the recommendations put forth by the Department of Legislative Services and Andrew Gray.