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Maryland Department of Agriculture Announces 2017-18 Cover Crop Signup

ANNAPOLIS, MD (June 7, 2017) – The Maryland Department of Agriculture’s 2017-18 Cover Crop signup will run from June 21 to July 17 at soil conservation district offices statewide. This popular program provides grants to help farmers offset seed, labor, and equipment costs to plant cover crops on their fields this fall. Cover crops help control soil erosion, reduce nutrient runoff, improve soil health, and protect water quality in streams, rivers and the Chesapeake Bay. Governor Larry Hogan has allocated approximately \$22.5 million for this year’s cover crop program.

“Maryland farmers are leaders when it comes to protecting water quality and caring for our precious soil resources,” said Maryland Agriculture Secretary Joseph Bartenfelder. “Adding cover crops into a cash crop rotation makes good sense for our farmland and our waterways. I urge all farmers to visit their soil conservation districts to sign up for cover crop grants during the enrollment window. This will be your only opportunity to apply for grants to plant cover crops on your fields this fall.”

Cover crops get top marks for protecting waterways from nutrient runoff, controlling soil erosion and improving soil health. As they grow, cover crops take up unused plant nutrients remaining in the soil from the preceding summer crop. Once established, they work all winter to protect fields against erosion caused by wind, rain, snow and ice. In addition to their water quality benefits, cover crops improve soil health and water retention, sequester carbon, increase organic matter in the soil, reduce weeds and pests and provide habitat for beneficial insects. Cover crops may even help farm fields recover more quickly from drought and extreme rainfall events. Studies have shown that planting cover crops in the fall can increase yields of cash crops like corn and soybeans after only a few years.

Maryland’s Cover Crop Program provides grants to farmers who plant small grains such as wheat, rye or barley, brassicas, and forage radish on their fields following the fall harvest. To help create diversity, eligible cover crop species may be mixed with radish and legumes including crimson clover, Austrian winter peas and hairy vetch.

There are several important changes to this year’s cover crop program. As a cost-saving measure, farmers who choose to harvest their cover crops will no longer receive payment through this program. Farmers may enroll all eligible acres and decide later which acres will be harvested. There also are several exciting new program changes for farmers—legume mixes now qualify for early planting incentives, cover crop mixes containing up to three species (small grains, legumes, forage radish) are now eligible for grants, and the aerial seed planting deadline has been extended to October 7.

Cover crops cost-shared through this program receive a base rate of \$45/acre and up to \$30/acre in add-on incentives for planting early and using other highly valued planting practices. Cover crops may not be harvested, but can be grazed or chopped for livestock forage for on-farm use after becoming well established. Maryland’s nutrient management regulations require farmers to plant cover crops to help protect water quality when organic nutrient sources are applied to fields in the fall.

Farmers should check their mailboxes for information on the 2017-2018 Cover Crop Program. Details are also available at www.mda.maryland.gov under “Hot Topics.”

Maryland’s Cover Crop Program is administered by the Maryland Department of Agriculture and the state’s 24 soil conservation districts through the Maryland Agricultural Water Quality Cost-Share (MACS) Program. Funding is provided by the Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund and the Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays Trust Fund. To participate, applicants must be in good standing with the cost-share program and in compliance with the Nutrient Management Program. Other restrictions and conditions apply.

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