



Rural Legacy Program

Annual Report Fiscal Year 2025

(July 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025)

Natural Resources § 5-9A-07(g)

Prepared by the Department of Natural Resources

November 2025

RURAL LEGACY PROGRAM– FISCAL YEAR 2025 ANNUAL REPORT

Legislative Requirement for the Annual Report

This is the 27th Annual Report¹ on the progress of the Maryland Rural Legacy Program (Program) pursuant to Section 5-9A-07(g) of the Natural Resources Article of the Maryland Annotated Code. This report covers the time period from July 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025 (FY 2025), and includes the 27th cycle of grant applications that were submitted for FY 2025. The Rural Legacy Board (RLB) is required to report annually to the Governor of Maryland and the Maryland General Assembly on: (1) the financial status of the Program for the preceding fiscal year, including the amount of grants encumbered and disbursed; (2) the number of applications received; (3) the number and location of Rural Legacy Areas (RLAs) designated, and (4) the Program's progress in contributing to land preservation efforts. This report is intended to satisfy these requirements based on the Program statistics for FY 2025, and the grants applied for that fiscal year.

Background

The Program was established in 1997 to protect the state's natural resources, farms, forests, and other sensitive environmental areas, while maintaining the viability of resource-based economies, and the proper management of tillable and wooded areas. The Program provides grants to local governments and land trusts (RLA sponsors) to purchase conservation easements and property in fee simple in designated RLAs. The Program is focused on a community-up approach to land preservation, stressing partnerships among federal, state, and local governments, and nonprofit land trusts. Counties are encouraged to initiate other land conservation measures to build upon the land preservation accomplishments achieved through Program funds.

Rural Legacy Program Criteria

The Program is a strategic land conservation program based on private, local, state, and federal government partnerships. The statutory criteria, which are the basis for the designation of RLAs and funding awards, include analysis of a wide range of natural and cultural resources, availability of a variety of tools to implement conservation measures, strength of public and private partnerships, and support of land use mechanisms.

Program staff and sponsors continue to ensure adherence to the Program's statute. The Program has encouraged local land conservation and preservation initiatives by promoting partnerships between state and local governments with nonprofit land trust organizations.

RLAs represent a targeted strategy of land conservation through local and state partnerships. The creation of RLAs involves a combined effort by county governments, land trusts, and landowners to protect what is collectively regarded as the best of Maryland's concentrated natural, cultural, and agricultural resources. Communities and local governments desiring to protect working farms and forests, support the local resource-based economy, and conserve natural resources and open space are able to do so through Program grants.

¹ The 1998-99 fiscal years were combined into one grant cycle and one annual report.

Strategic Conservation

Conservation under the Program meets the standards set for land conservation policy, including:

- A focus on the most strategic lands to protect the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries as well as the most significant natural and agricultural resources.

The Program was established to enhance natural resource, agricultural, forestry, and environmental protection while maintaining the viability of resource-based land usage and proper management of tillable and wooded areas through accepted agricultural and silvicultural practices for farm production and timber harvests. The emphasis on resource protection in the Program's statutory criteria, combined with the Program sponsors' grassroots knowledge of regionally significant areas throughout the state, ensures that RLAs and acquisitions represent strategic conservation of resources. Easement requirements include soil conservation and water quality plans, forest management plans, and riparian buffers, which ensure water quality benefits and protect the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

- Application of the best scientific information and technology to identify resource lands that are important, the potential threats to these lands, and the areas in which preservation goals can be maximized.

Proposed RLAs and applications for grant funding are reviewed to evaluate the value of ecologically important lands, including data on rare species habitat, aquatic life hotspots, and water quality protection. In addition, applications are evaluated in relation to the prevalence of working farms and forests, as well as planning and land use categories including degree of fragmentation of rural resource lands, development capacity based on zoning, and degree of threat of development.

- Establish a process for collaboration and coordination among state and local land conservation programs to identify geographic and natural resource areas.

Proposed applications for designation and funding are reviewed by state agencies involved in land conservation and preservation, including the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) and Maryland Department of Planning (MDP). The Rural Legacy Advisory Committee (RLAC), an 11-member multi-disciplinary committee appointed by the Governor, and the RLB (Secretaries of DNR, MDA, and MDP), represent a coordinated and collaborative approach to review and propose RLAs for designation and grant recommendations.

- Establish an Easement Valuation System (EVS), which is a points-based method to determine the value of a perpetual conservation easement.

In 1999, DNR, in conjunction with MDP, developed the Program's model EVS. In turn, each of the Program's sponsors used this model to develop their own EVS; as authorized in the Program's statute and regulations. *See Natural Resources Article Sec. 5-9A-05; and COMAR 08.05.01.07.* (All sponsor EVSs must be approved by DNR, MDP, and MDA staff (as designees of the RLB)).

Rural Legacy Program Advisory Committee and Board

The RLAC members and their area of representation when the RLAC met on the FY 2025 grant cycle on June 17, 2024 were:

Mary E. “Cricket” Goodall, Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (Chair)
Greg Bowen, Maryland Environmental Trust
Elizabeth Carter, Environmental Organization
Robert “Bob” Cissell, Agricultural Industry
The Honorable Steve Kline, Land Conservation Organization
Anthony H. DiPaolo, Forest Industry
Gregory Clinton Sterling, Jr., County Government Parks and Recreation
Vacant, Business Organization
Jane Griffith Evans, Private Land Owner
Arshad Sayad, Mineral Resource Industry
The Honorable David M. Jenkins, Municipal Corporation

The RLB members when the RLB met on the FY 2025 grant cycle on July 18, 2024 were:

Secretary Joshua E. Kurtz, DNR, Chair
Secretary Rebecca L. Flora, MDP
Secretary Kevin M. Atticks, MDA

Program Progress and Accomplishments in FY 2025

The Program supports the goals of strategic conservation through focused land preservation in designated RLAs where it will make the greatest difference in enhancing the state’s green infrastructure in order to improve the health of the Chesapeake Bay, and protect the state’s agricultural and natural resources. The Program’s conservation easements require the appropriate best management practices and management plans, as well as establishing and maintaining riparian buffers on the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. In order to derive even greater benefits to Maryland’s waterways, Program sponsors are encouraged, whenever possible, to negotiate a minimum of 100-foot riparian buffers into easement terms.

In FY 2025, the Program preserved 5,572.55 acres within RLAs throughout Maryland. Since inception, the Program has preserved 130,419.68 acres of the state’s most scenic landscapes and critical natural resources that support resource-based industries. Easements acquired through the Program contribute towards the goal to conserve 40% by 2040 as established by the Maryland the Beautiful Act of 2023. The goal to conserve 30% of the state by 2030 was met in calendar year 2024, six years ahead of schedule in part due to the success of the Program. Continued funding and efforts through the Program’s partnerships will be fundamental towards reaching the 40% goal by 2040.

Stewardship of easements is a priority of the Program. In order to protect the state’s fiscal investment, Program sponsors are required to monitor Program properties to ensure compliance with the terms and conditions of conservation easements. Site visits must be performed at a minimum of once every 3 years. Monitoring reports are submitted to the Program, and any violations are documented and corrective actions are taken. In FY 2025, 100% of the Program easements in the cycle due for monitoring were monitored by June 2025 to ensure that conservation practices are being followed and maintained.

The Financial Status of the Program

Since the Program's inception, a total of \$479.538 million has been appropriated to the Program. This includes the \$15,329,028 authorized in the FY 2025 budget for distribution by the Program in FY 2025. These funds were awarded by the RLB and approved by the Board of Public Works (BPW) as grants to Program sponsors.

FY 2025 Grant Applications Received

Applications are submitted on a yearly basis by Program sponsors. Applications include requests for grant funding, RLA boundary expansions, and proposed new RLA designations. In February 2024, there were 22 applications submitted, requesting \$104,180,009.20 for FY 2025 grants.

FY 2025 Grant Applications Reviewed

The RLAC's recommendations for funding distribution were based on a review of the applications, and the use of an objective scoring matrix, which ranked various criteria based on DNR, MDP and MDA information. The criteria included: natural and working resources, planning and land use, leveraging, ability to administer, and other factors such as stewardship, need for funding, and unique circumstances that would enhance or hinder an RLA's ability to spend grant funding. In addition, bonus points were given under the categories of enlarged stream buffers, public access, and social benefits. The RLAC gave additional consideration to RLAs with projects ready for implementation, and in need of immediate funding.

FY 2025 Recommendations and Approval

Based on the review of the grant applications submitted and informed by the objective scoring approach, the RLAC made recommendations to the RLB to designate one (1) new Rural Legacy Area, to approve three (3) RLA boundary changes, and recommended grant awards totaling \$15,329,028. The grant award amount represents the total FY 2025 Program budget appropriation. The RLB, chaired by DNR Secretary Kurtz, accepted these recommendations, and the BPW designated one (1) new Rural Legacy Area, approved the three (3) RLA boundary changes, along with the FY25 grant awards as outlined below on August 28, 2024, as Agenda Item 16A on the DNR Real Property Agenda.

- 1. Agricultural Security Corridor - Eastern Shore Heartland Rural Legacy Area:** *Caroline, Dorchester, and Talbot Counties*

Grant: of \$1,205,070.00 to acquire conservation easements to protect a range of resources that includes forests, farmlands, wetlands, historic sites, and endangered species habitat in the Agricultural Security Corridor in three counties on the Eastern Shore. Conservation of property in this Area will support the local resource-based economy, including agricultural production of grains, hay, dairy, beef and poultry operations. The Board approved the designation of the Agricultural Security Corridor Rural Legacy Area encompassing five counties in 1998 and split it into three separate and distinct RLAs in January of 2020.

- 2. Agricultural Security Corridor - Harvest Crescent Rural Legacy Area:** *Cecil and Kent Counties*

Grant: of \$1,295,502.00 to acquire conservation easements to protect a range of resources that includes forests, farmlands, wetlands, historic sites, and endangered species habitat in

the Agricultural Security Corridor in two counties on the Eastern Shore. Conservation of property in this Area will support the local resource-based economy, including agricultural production of grains, hay, dairy, beef and poultry operations. The Board approved the designation of the Agricultural Security Corridor Rural Legacy Area encompassing five counties in 1998 and split it into three separate and distinct RLAs in January of 2020.

3. Anne Arundel South: *Anne Arundel County*

Grant: of \$891,655.00 to acquire conservation easements to protect agricultural, woodland, natural and cultural resource values and tributaries to the Chesapeake Bay and Patuxent River. The Board approved the designation of the Anne Arundel South Rural Legacy Area in 2000.

4. Bishopville-Showell Rural Legacy Area: *Worcester County*

Designation of the **11,743-acre** Bishopville-Showell Rural Legacy Area in Worcester County. This new Rural Legacy Area includes a portion of the northern most coastal bays watersheds in Maryland and the last remaining contiguous area of farmland in the northern coastal bays watershed, an area that continues to be under the most intense development pressure in Worcester County. It includes portions of Birch Branch, Middle Branch, Carey Branch, Slab Bridge Prong and Bishopville Prong, tributaries of the St. Martin River. The Bishop-Showell Rural Legacy Area is highly productive, with over one-third of the area determined to be prime farmland. Local agricultural and forestry industries rely on this expanse of land for productivity and viability. Additionally, protecting the area provides access to local farm products, beautiful vistas, and preservation of a rich farming history. Twenty-two historic sites, including houses, churches, and stores, dot the landscape. The Bishopville and Showell villages are also a part of the rural fabric, and their integrity will be enhanced by preserving land in their surrounds. Protecting the land will also help keep impervious surface low, thereby protecting water quality in the Isle of Wight and Assawoman Bays.

Grant: of \$800,000.00 to acquire conservation easements to preserve prime farmland, forests, and vistas of an historic landscape surrounding the unincorporated rural villages of Bishopville and Showell, which are part of the rural fabric of this region of the County. The Area contains the last remaining contiguous area of farms and forests in the northern coastal bays' watershed. Conservation of land in this Area will protect water quality in the Isle of Wight and Assawoman Bays.

5. Deer Creek Rural Legacy Area: *Harford County*

Grant: of \$1,060,500.00 to acquire conservation easements within the watershed of Deer Creek River, a State-designated Scenic River, and adjacent to Rocks and Susquehanna State Park to protect historic farmland, forests, natural and cultural areas. This Area is located within the Lower Susquehanna Heritage Greenway, a certified Maryland Heritage Area. The Board approved the designation of the Lower Deer Creek Rural Legacy Area in 1999.

- **Expansion:** of 31,323.73 acres that will expand the boundary north of the current Rural Legacy Area to Pennsylvania and follow the historic Mason-Dixon Line east to the shores of the Susequehanna River. The expansion includes additional land within the

Deer Creek & Conowingo Dam Susquehanna River Watersheds, as well as the entire Harford County portion of the Broad Creek Watershed. Within the expansion area are highly valuable agricultural, ecological, historical, and cultural resources that are at risk due to increasing development pressure.

6. Dividing Creek Rural Legacy Area: *Somerset and Worcester Counties*

Grant: of \$585,000.00 to acquire conservation easements to protect significant woodland, farmland and wetlands. The Area includes one of the most pristine and ecologically significant watershed basins on the mid-Atlantic. It includes exemplary plant and wildlife habitat, prime farmland, large blocks of working forests, and over 10 miles of shoreline of Dividing Creek. The Board approved the designation of the Dividing Creek Rural Legacy Area in 2008.

7. Fair Hill Rural Legacy Area: *Cecil County*

Grant: of \$1,009,720.00 to acquire conservation easements to protect farmland, forests, natural areas and historic sites in the northeast corner of Cecil County contiguous to Fair Hill Natural Resources Management Area. Conservation of property in this Area will support the local resource-based economy, including equestrian activities. The Board approved the designation of the Fair Hill Rural Legacy Area in 1999.

8. Gunpowder Rural Legacy Area: *Baltimore County*

- **Expansion:** of 7,560 acres that largely follows watershed boundaries, encompassing Bee Tree Run and 4th Mine Run in Northern Baltimore County. The Area was chosen to provide connectivity of key resources that includes headwater streams that impact the water quality of the Gunpowder River and the Loch Raven Reservoir, and the Torrey C. Brown Rail Trail that provides recreational opportunities for large portions of the Mid-Atlantic region. The expansion places virtually the entire length of the trail (18 of the 21 miles of the trail) within the Gunpowder Rural Legacy Area.

9. Huntersville Rural Legacy Area: *St. Mary's County*

Grant: of \$1,080,000.00 for partnership with the U.S. Navy's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) funds to acquire conservation easements to protect forests, natural and archeological areas, farmland, and historic sites. Portions of the Area are designated by the Smithsonian Center for Natural Areas as critical wildlife habitat in need of protection. The Board approved the designation of the Huntersville Rural Legacy Area in 1998.

10. Harriet Tubman Rural Legacy Area: *Dorchester County*

Grant: of \$1,200,000.00 to acquire conservation easements to protect farmland, woodland, natural and historic landscapes associated with the legacy of Harriet Tubman and the history of the Underground Railroad. The Board approved the designation of the Harriet Tubman Rural Legacy Area in 2018.

11. Lands End Rural Legacy Area: *Queen Anne's County*

Grant: of \$1,062,189.00 to acquire conservation easements to protect environmentally significant tributaries of the Chester River, the Corsica River, and Southeast Creek, including farmland, forested lands, wetlands, and wildlife habitat. The Board approved the designation of the Lands End Rural Legacy Area in 1998.

12. Little Pipe Creek /Upper Patapsco Rural Legacy Areas: *Carroll County*

Grant: of \$877,500.00 to acquire conservation easements to protect farmland, woodland, natural and cultural land within the Little Pipe Creek and upper Monocacy River Watersheds. Conservation within the Area will provide water quality benefits not only for the two watersheds, but also for the underground aquifers that supply many residents with drinking water. The Board approved the designation of the Little Pipe Creek Rural Legacy Area in 1998 and Upper Patapsco Rural Legacy Area in 2004.

13. Mid-Maryland Frederick/Carrollton Manor Rural Legacy Areas: *Frederick County*

Grant: of \$1,299,892.00 to acquire conservation easements to protect farmland, forestland, Civil War historic sites and a greenbelt around the historic Town of Burkittsville. Conservation of property in the Area will protect the view surrounding the Appalachian Trail and South Mountain Battlefield State Park, which are nationally significant natural and cultural resources. The Board approved the designation of the Mid-Maryland Frederick Rural Legacy Area in 1998 and the Carrollton Manor Rural Legacy Area in 2004.

14. Mid-Maryland Washington Rural Legacy Area: *Washington County*

Grant: of \$1,544,000.00 to acquire conservation easements to protect farmland, forests and Civil War sites within view of Washington Monument State Park, South Mountain Battlefield State Park, Antietam National Battlefield and its approaches. Conservation within the Area will provide water quality benefits to the Potomac River, a Maryland designated Scenic River. The Board approved the designation of the Mid-Maryland Washington Rural Legacy Area in 1998.

15. Piney Run Rural Legacy Area: *Baltimore County*

Grant: of \$1,418,000.00 to acquire conservation easements to protect farmland, forests, natural areas and historic properties within and near National Register Historic Districts. Conservation within the Area will provide water quality benefits to the Prettyboy and Loch Raven Reservoirs, two of the drinking supply reservoirs for the Baltimore Metropolitan Area. The Board approved the designation of the Piney Run Rural Legacy Area in 1998.

- Expansion: of 16,210 acres in two new areas. The first is north of Shawan Road and West of Cuba Road, which is an area under significant development pressure due to proximity to Hunt Valley Town Center. The second area is north of the current Rural Legacy Area boundary and extends to the Prettyboy Reservoir. Preservation in this area will protect the Reservoir, which is a significant water source for a large portion of the Baltimore Metropolitan Area.

Designated Rural Legacy Areas

RLAs are located in all of Maryland's 23 counties. The existing RLAs cover approximately 1.38 million acres of Maryland's most significant natural resource, agricultural, open, and scenic lands. To date, there are 36 designated RLAs in Maryland:

Rural Legacy Area	Counties	Sponsor
Agricultural Security Corridor (ASC) - Eastern Shore Heartland*	Caroline, Dorchester, and Talbot	Eastern Shore Land Conservancy
ASC - Harvest Crescent*	Cecil and Kent	Eastern Shore Land Conservancy
ASC – Tuckahoe*	Caroline and Talbot	Eastern Shore Land Conservancy
Anne Arundel South	Anne Arundel	Anne Arundel County
Baltimore Coastal	Baltimore	Baltimore County, Gunpowder Valley Conservancy
Bear Creek	Garrett	Garrett County
Bishopville-Showell	Worcester	Worcester County
Calvert Creeks	Calvert	Calvert County
Carrollton Manor	Frederick	Frederick County
Coastal Bays	Worcester	Worcester County
Deer Creek (formerly Lower Deer Creek)	Harford	Harford County
Dividing Creek	Somerset and Worcester	Somerset County, Worcester County, Lower Shore Land Trust
Fair Hill	Cecil	Cecil Land Trust
Foreman Branch (formerly Chino Farms)	Queen Anne's	Queen Anne's County
Gunpowder	Baltimore	Gunpowder Valley Conservancy
Harriet Tubman	Dorchester	The Conservation Fund
Huntersville	St. Mary's	Patuxent Tidewater Land Trust, St. Mary's County
Lands End	Queen Anne's	Queen Anne's County
Little Pipe Creek	Carroll	Carroll County
Long Green Valley	Baltimore	Long Green Valley Land Trust
Manor	Baltimore and Harford	The Manor Conservancy
Mattapany	St. Mary's	Southern Maryland Resources Conservation & Development Board, Inc., St. Mary's County
Mid-Maryland Frederick	Frederick	Frederick County
Mid-Maryland Montgomery	Montgomery	Montgomery County Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board
Mid-Maryland Washington	Washington	Washington County
Mountain Ridge	Allegany	Allegany County
Nanjemoy-Mattawoman Forest	Charles	Charles County
Nanticoke	Dorchester	The Nature Conservancy, The Conservation Fund
North Calvert	Calvert	Calvert County
Patuxent – Prince George's	Prince George's	Prince George's Soil Conservation District
Piney Run	Baltimore	The Land Preservation Trust, Inc.
Quantico Creek	Wicomico	Lower Shore Land Trust, Wicomico County
Upper Patapsco	Carroll	Carroll County
Upper Patuxent - Howard	Howard	Howard County
Upper Patuxent - Montgomery	Montgomery	Montgomery County Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board
Zekiah Watershed	Charles	Charles County

*Note that Agricultural Security Corridor RLA, which was previously one area with sub-focus areas, split into three separate RLAs.

Summary

Strong interest in the Program continues, as shown by the amount of funds requested for the FY 2025 grant cycle. Over the 27 application cycles (FY98/99 through FY 2025), requests for grant funds have totaled over \$2.589 billion for \$479.538 million in available funding. In the FY 2025 grant cycle, this trend continued; DNR received applications totaling over \$104.18 million for \$15,329.028 in FY 2025 funding. The FY 2025 budget provided full funding for land conservation, preservation, and recreation programs, including the Program, through the distribution of state transfer tax revenues.

While FY 2025 funding was not impacted, the Budget Reconciliation and Financing Act of 2025 was amended during the 2025 legislative session to divert \$25 million per year from FY 2026 through FY 2029 from the transfer tax revenue that would otherwise be distributed to Program Open Space State Land Acquisition, the Rural Legacy Program, and the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Program. The \$28.5 million diverted from the Rural Legacy Program in FY 2026 - FY 2029 could have conserved approximately 6,300 acres based on estimated average per acre costs.

At the end of FY 2025, the Program had permanently conserved 130,668.92 acres. Sustained funding will be needed to support local governments and land trusts to meet the goal of conserving the RLAs throughout the state. This partnership of local government, land trusts, landowners, and the state of Maryland continues to make a substantial commitment to supporting the conservation and preservation of the state's most valuable agricultural, natural, open space resources and scenic landscapes.

Acknowledgements:

Program staff of DNR would like to acknowledge the RLA sponsors, the members of the RLAC, the RLB, and the staff of MDP and MDA for their dedicated work on behalf of the Program. It is through the Program's targeted objectives that the state's open space land is conserved and preserved, the health of the Chesapeake Bay and water quality to our waterways is improved, our resource-based economies thrive, and our wildlife, cultural heritage and natural resources are protected; a legacy to be passed on to all Maryland citizens and future generations to come.

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