

# Meeting Summary: Maryland Land Conservation Overview & Equine Health and Welfare Meeting

Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan

Steering Committee Meeting #3 – Meeting Notes

March 31, 2026, 10:00 a.m - 2:00 p.m.

Annapolis, Maryland

The following individuals were in attendance, representing stakeholder organizations or horse industry interests: Billy Boniface – *Breeding, Farm, Agriculture, and Land Use*, Trish Brown – *Maryland Department of Natural Resources*, Amy Burk, PhD – *Academic Representative*, Sheila Curry – *Economic Development Representative*, Michelle Jennings – *At Large*, Bill Knauf – *Thoroughbred*, Alexandria Liu – *Office of the Secretary of State*, Connie Sawyer – *Sport, Competition, and Recreation Representative*, Judy Smith – *Office of the Secretary of Commerce*, Jennifer Trout, DVM – *Department of Agriculture*, Laura Lane-Unsworth – *Therapeutic, Aftercare, and Equine-Assisted Services Representative*, Lisa Watts – *Standardbred*

Also in attendance were Anne Litz, Executive Director, Maryland Horse Industry Board, Chris Merz, Executive Director, Maryland Racing Commission, Preston Bryant, McGuireWoods Consulting LLC and Michelle Cable, Executive Director of Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF)

## Purpose of the Meeting

The first part of the meeting focused on providing a comprehensive overview of Maryland's land conservation framework, including how easement programs function, funding structures, and their role in sustaining agricultural industries. A key objective was to explore how conservation tools—particularly easements—support long-term agricultural viability, including the horse industry, while balancing development pressures and environmental priorities. The second part of the meeting aimed to assess and document how equine health and welfare are managed across Maryland's horse industry, spanning racing, sport, breeding, veterinary care, and academia. A key objective was to inform the Strategic Plan with a clear, public-facing understanding of existing oversight, identify gaps, and strengthen messaging around the industry's commitment to horse welfare and social license.

## Sustainability and Land Use

Maryland's land conservation strategy is nationally recognized, built on early investments such as the 1969 Program Open Space and the creation of the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF). These programs aim to:

- Protect large, contiguous blocks of agricultural land
- Sustain working landscapes for long-term agricultural use

- Balance growth by directing development away from priority rural areas
- Support environmental outcomes through complementary programs like Rural Legacy

The system operates as a coordinated “patchwork quilt” of state, county, federal, and private programs working together to preserve land and maintain rural character. Importantly, equine operations are now fully recognized as agricultural uses, strengthening alignment with the horse industry.

## **Key Themes and Insights**

- Land is foundational to the agricultural economy: Without preserved land, the broader agricultural and equine ecosystem cannot function.
- Maryland is a national leader in conservation funding and program diversity, offering more tools than most states.
- Flexibility vs. permanence tension: Easements are perpetual, but agriculture is evolving—creating ongoing challenges in adapting rules to modern uses like agritourism.
- Economic value of agriculture vs. development: Agricultural land often provides a better fiscal return to local governments than residential development.
- Multiple motivations for conservation:
  - Preserve land for future generations
  - Protect land from subdivision or sale by future heirs

## **Pain Points and Challenges**

- Funding instability:
  - Record high funding (~\$95M in FY24) contrasted with significant cuts in FY26
  - \$100M diversion of conservation funds over four years, with no repayment requirement
  - Estimated loss of ~20,000 acres of preserved land due to funding reductions
- Development pressure:
  - Particularly strong in suburbanizing counties where landowners may delay conservation for higher development value
- Perception and trust issues:
  - Some landowners resist easements due to concerns about government control and permanent restrictions
- Program rigidity vs. evolving industry:
  - Easements must remain relevant as agricultural practices change (e.g., equestrian use, agritourism, on-farm businesses)
- Operational constraints:
  - Size (minimum acreage), soil quality requirements, and location criteria can limit participation—particularly for smaller or specialized operations like some horse farms

## **Pathways Forward and Strategic Planning**

- Restore and stabilize funding for land conservation programs
- Reinstate repayment requirements for diverted conservation funds

- Enhance flexibility within easements to better accommodate evolving agricultural uses
- Strengthen alignment with industry needs, particularly equine operations, by:
  - Recognizing diverse farm models (breeding, boarding, training, recreation)
  - Ensuring conservation tools support economic viability, not just land preservation
- Promote coordinated state-county strategies to create contiguous protected land blocks
- Increase education and outreach to landowners on financial and legacy benefits of conservation

## **Overall Recommendations**

- Full restoration of conservation funding to maintain program effectiveness and acreage preservation goals
- Position land conservation as economic infrastructure, not just environmental policy
- Leverage Maryland’s leadership model to further integrate agriculture, environment, and development planning
- Ensure conservation programs support the full agricultural ecosystem, including the horse industry as a key land-use driver
- Modernize program frameworks to reflect current and future agricultural realities while maintaining long-term land protection goals

## **Equine Health and Welfare Meeting**

This part of the meeting aimed to assess and document how equine health and welfare are managed across Maryland’s horse industry, spanning racing, sport, breeding, veterinary care, and academia. A key objective was to inform the Strategic Plan with a clear, public-facing understanding of existing oversight, identify gaps, and strengthen messaging around the industry’s commitment to horse welfare and social license.

### **Equine Health and Welfare Landscape**

Maryland’s equine health and welfare system operates through a multi-layered, decentralized framework, including:

- Federal oversight in racing through Horseracing Integrity and Safety Authority (HISA)
- State-level regulation such as the Maryland Racing Commission and Maryland veterinary board
- Industry organizations providing guidance but not governance
- Competition-level enforcement through discipline-specific bodies (e.g., USEF, FEI)
- Direct welfare oversight through the Maryland Horse Industry Board stable licensing and inspection program

Additional layers include:

- Mandatory veterinary monitoring and reporting (especially in racing)
- On-site inspections, drug testing, and welfare enforcement at competitions
- Institutional oversight in academic settings (IACUC protocols)

- Collaboration with animal control for enforcement in neglect or emergency cases

## Key Themes and Insights

- **High level of welfare activity already in place:**
  - Pre- and post-race veterinary exams, medication controls, and injury tracking
  - Monthly mortality reviews and safety protocols in racing
  - Competition-level inspections, drug testing, and secure stabling at elite events
  - Over 2,000+ facilities monitored through Maryland inspection systems
- **Maryland performs well nationally in the racing sector:**
  - Below-average equine fatality rates compared to national averages
  - Participation in national databases like the Equine Injury Database
- **“Social license” is central:**
  - Public perception and trust are as critical as actual welfare practices
  - Industry commitment exists, but messaging is inconsistent

## Pain Points and Challenges

- **Veterinary workforce shortage:**
  - Growing concern across all sectors
  - Threatens long-term sustainability of equine health systems
- **Oversight across sectors:**
  - Racing and elite competition are highly regulated
  - Smaller farms, breeding operations, and local competitions have less formal oversight
- **Limited data and tracking outside racing:**
  - Strong injury/fatality data in racing
  - Minimal or inconsistent tracking in sport horse and farm settings
- **Public perception gap (“telling the story”):**
  - Industry does not effectively communicate existing welfare protections
  - Media coverage often highlights incidents without showing preventative care
- **Aftercare awareness gap:**
  - Public misconceptions about what happens to horses after their careers
  - Need for stronger visibility of aftercare programs
- **Enforcement limitations:**
  - Stable licensing focuses on minimum standards and compliance improvement
  - Limited “teeth” without animal control partnership for severe cases

## Pathways Forward and Strategic Planning

- **Strengthen unified messaging on welfare:**
  - Proactively communicate safety protocols, veterinary care, and oversight systems
  - Highlight horses as high-performance athletes receiving advanced care
- **Expand data collection and transparency:**
  - Explore broader injury and welfare tracking beyond racing

- Leverage technology (biometrics, AI monitoring, research initiatives)
- **Address veterinary shortage:**
  - Align with MDA-led efforts and upcoming statewide summit
  - Explore workforce pipeline solutions and education partnerships
- **Enhance aftercare visibility and support:**
  - Promote lifecycle of the horse beyond competition/racing
  - Integrate aftercare into public-facing messaging
- **Support equine research investment:**
  - Explore dedicated funding streams (e.g., models from other states/universities)
  - Focus on injury prevention, performance health, and welfare science

## **Overall Recommendations**

- Position equine welfare as a strength of Maryland’s horse industry, supported by data and systems already in place
- Develop a coordinated, cross-sector “welfare narrative” to improve public trust and social license
- Invest in veterinary workforce development as a critical infrastructure issue
- Expand research, data tracking, and technology adoption to advance welfare outcomes
- Increase transparency and public education, about the entire horse ecosystem