

Upper Marlboro, Md.- U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, Congressman Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.) and Maryland Agriculture Secretary Buddy Hance joined 50 farmers, agriculture preservationists, and soil conservationists from the Fifth Congressional District this morning to discuss issues confronting the farm community and strategies to improve the productivity and sustainability of agriculture in Southern Maryland. The meeting was held at the Prince George's County Soil Conservation District Center in Upper Marlboro.

"We are pleased to have Secretary Vilsack, who has been a true advocate and leader on behalf of our nation's farmers, join us for a conversation on the issues specific to Maryland farmers," **stated Rep. Hoyer.** "Farming has been a way of life here for generations, but the challenges each generation faces are unique, requiring our farmers to constantly innovate and adapt. It is important that we listen and understand the challenges facing our farm community - which not only helps meet the demand for our food supply and adds to the local economy, but preserves our rural heritage and way of life."

"In order to better serve farmers and ranchers in this 21st century economy, we must make every opportunity to hear the varied voices and opinions of our nation's producers," **said Agriculture Secretary Vilsack.**

"The dialogue in Maryland today has not only identified a diverse range of concerns which will help USDA more successfully provide its services, it has also offered a reminder of the culture of optimism which defines rural America."

Agriculture is the single largest land use in Maryland with over 2 million acres, or roughly 33 percent of total land area, used for farms and forests. There are currently 12,834 farms in Maryland - and 1,939 in the 5th District -with an average size of 160 acres. Over the past 20 years, due to a variety of factors, the number of Southern Maryland farms has decreased by a third and agriculture acreage has decreased by more than a quarter. Following the state-sponsored tobacco buyout, many who participated and chose to remain in farming have significantly diversified their operations. Maryland's top three agricultural sectors are poultry, greenhouse/nursery, and milk/dairy products; the top three sectors in Southern Maryland are greenhouse/nursery, grain, and vegetables.

"We greatly appreciate Congressman Hoyer for reaching out to our farmers and supporting Maryland's agricultural community and vibrant agriculture industry. We also thank Secretary Vilsack for spending so much time in Maryland to better understand the issues of interest and importance to Southern Maryland farmers," **said Maryland Agriculture**

Secretary Buddy Hance.

“This roundtable is discussion a tremendous opportunity and we are grateful to our producers for sharing their ideas, concerns and experience here today.”

Later in the morning, Secretary Vilsack and Rep. Hoyer will head to the Beltsville Agriculture Research Center (BARC) to tour some of the facilities housing the nation's leading agriculture research initiatives and learn about projects that are helping to understand and improve human nutrition, the impacts of farming on the environment, and how shifts in the climate are impacting agricultural harvests.

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