



New Study Explores Marylanders' Awareness & Engagement with Agriculture
Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology Conducts State's First Measurement of Behavior and Attitudes Toward Farming and Forestry

Queenstown, MD, Feb. 13, 2019 — A new first-ever statewide survey shows that Marylanders have many connections to agriculture and hold highly favorable views toward farming operators in the state. Residents, however, have less familiarity with the economic importance and environmental benefits of the state's forestry industry, which includes growers, loggers and mills.

Growing for Good: Farming and Forestry in Maryland is a new report that looks at the public's awareness and engagement with agriculture. This study represents the first step in quantifying agricultural and forestry literacy in Maryland's residents and increasing awareness of the industries fueling Maryland's economy.

Conducted in summer 2018, the study is sponsored by the Harry R. Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology, a nonprofit organization in Queenstown affiliated with the University of Maryland College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Annapolis-based research firm OpinionWorks conducted online interviews with 813 consumer household decision-makers throughout the state followed by a series of focus groups held in Central Maryland.

"This is the first study of its kind in Maryland to gain a baseline measurement of consumer behavior and attitudes toward agriculture," Hughes Center Assistant Director Nancy Nunn said.

"Understanding what Marylanders think and know about agriculture is key to successfully promoting economically viable and environmentally sound public policies and consumer behavior. Through research, outreach and collaboration, we can raise literacy levels to fully support and even stimulate vibrant farms and forests."

Marylanders Feel Connected to Agriculture

Although the majority of Marylanders live in metropolitan areas, most residents, according to the survey, have a connection to farms and farming. Almost half have visited a farm that produces food in the past year (45 percent). More than a quarter know a farmer personally.

Further demonstrating Marylanders' connection to agriculture, more than half shop at a farm stand or market (55 percent) and 12 percent said they frequently do that.

Consumers Have Positive Views of Farmers

State consumers have highly positive views about local agricultural producers in Maryland, which includes five types of farming: plants and grass, grain, livestock (meat, dairy), seasonal vegetable and fruit. On average, Marylanders had favorable views of farmers about 80 percent of the time.

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More than three-quarters of residents (78 percent) believe agriculture is vital to the state's economy. However, a similar number of residents (74 percent) were surprised to learn that agriculture is the state's largest private industry supporting 350,000 jobs.

A large majority of consumers believe that Maryland farmers are environmental stewards who take good care of the land (65 percent agreement) and work hard to protect the Chesapeake Bay (59 percent). Yet, one-third believe that Maryland farmers are overregulated.

"Maryland farmers are smart businesspeople who use best practices in land management to produce goods for consumption and export," Nunn said. "As a state, we can be proud that our farmers lead the nation in conservation farming with the highest percentage of no-till and cover crop use to prevent unwanted runoff."

Marylanders' feelings toward other aspects of farming, however, drew a different response. With regard to husbandry, only half (49 percent) believe animals are well cared for on Maryland farms.

Consumers Value Food That is Produced Responsibly

In looking at what influences Marylanders' choices in food purchasing, the survey found that consumers value healthy and responsible farming and food production practices.

On average, Marylanders thought it was important (3.6 on a 5-point scale) that the foods they eat are produced in an environmentally sustainable way and that the animals that produced the food were treated well (3.8).

Respondents were also asked if it was important to know that their food or beverages were produced relatively near where they lived versus being shipped long distances. On average Marylanders thought it was somewhat important (3.2).

Forestry is Less Familiar

Forestry does not elicit the same feelings of familiarity and warmth as farming among Marylanders, and there is a lack of understanding about the industry.

Maryland forestry scored a lower favorability than agriculture in the state (3.6 for forestry and 3.9 for farming). Forty-two percent of respondents were "neutral" or "not sure" about foresters.

Once informed that Maryland's forestry industry contributes \$4 billion to the state economy, employing 10,000 and adding \$26 million in taxes, 86 percent said they were surprised. Fifty-five percent felt more positive about forestry upon learning these facts.

Wood Product Purchasing Less Discriminate than Food

Compared to food shopping practices, Marylanders were far less discriminate in purchasing wood products.

When rating the importance of purchasing practices on a 1 to 5 scale (with 5 being very important), respondents averaged 2.9 when asked about buying wood products harvested or produced relatively close to where they live. The average for buying wood products harvested in an environmentally sustainable way was 3.3 and a little higher for those buying from suppliers who are committed to maintaining a healthy forest (3.4).

Maryland Consumers Support Responsible Harvesting but Not Clear-Cutting

Most respondents showed a lack of understanding about the role of forestry and responsible woodland management. Only 41 percent agreed that state forests would be healthier if they were actively thinned and managed for pests.

“In the same way farmers take good care of their acres, most foresters in Maryland are active stewards of their land,” Nunn said. “Managed forests help prevent disease and eradicate unwanted insects while providing habitats for wildlife and songbirds. Foresters grow trees as a renewable resource to produce wood for furniture, paper, mulch, biofuels and other common consumer products.”

When survey respondents were asked if they “prefer there be no logging” in Maryland, 38 percent agreed and only 12 percent disagreed. Half the public is neutral or not sure on this topic.

Although loggers only remove a fraction of their trees on a rotating basis, Nunn said the study’s focus group interviews produced strong and intuitive reactions that often associated forestry with clear-cutting and development.

“It’s apparent that as a state and industry, we need to do a better job of sharing the story of responsible forestry,” she said. “Similar to gardens, forests — grown on both public and private lands — are managed, planted to be harvested, and re-planted for future growth. Trees grow more quickly than most think, are the source for a lot of products we use, and are a natural way to remove CO₂ — a greenhouse gas — from our air.”

To view/download *Growing for Good: Farming and Forestry in Maryland*, visit the Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology website at agresearch.umd.edu/agroecol.

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About Harry R. Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology

Founded in 1999, the Center provides leadership to promote environmentally sound and economically viable agriculture and forestry as Maryland’s preferred land use through research, outreach and collaboration.

About OpinionWorks

OpinionWorks conducts frequent opinion studies at the state and local level across the country. Since 2007, it has been the polling organization for numerous media throughout the Mid-Atlantic region. The firm is engaged by state and local government agencies in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and New York to assess public needs and preferences. In addition to public surveys, it assesses donor and customer relationships for a variety of non-profit and for-profit entities nationally and internationally.