On March 11 President Joe Biden signed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to aid public health and economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. ARPA’s State and Local Relief Fiscal Recovery Fund (SLFRF) recognizes the critical role that management of polluted runoff (among other things) plays in protecting public health from future pandemics, and so it includes funds for Maryland counties and cities to invest in polluted runoff management.

**Healthy soil is key to polluted runoff management.** Instead of flooding, healthy soils soak up and hold onto water. Amazingly, even a small improvement in soil health can lead to an additional 20,000 gallons of water held per acre. This is because healthy soil is full of pores that absorb water which not only guards against flooding, but underpins the delivery of clean drinking water.

**Regenerative agriculture is key to healthy soil.** Regenerative agriculture - including practices such as cover cropping, applying compost, reduced tillage, and rotational grazing - increases soil organic matter, biological activity, biodiversity, and carbon. It improves water quality, ecosystem health, and soil health, reducing farm risk from extreme weather events.

**Robust regional agricultural infrastructure is key to regenerative agriculture.** It is a missing link that can limit broad scale farmer adoption of the type of regenerative agriculture that leads to soil health and runoff control. Without regional infrastructure, farmers can’t bring many products to market, including regeneratively raised livestock, diverse grain crops, and more. This type of infrastructure, outlined below, requires significant upfront capital, meaning that banks are sometimes reluctant to invest.

**Regional agricultural infrastructure is also key to food supply chain resiliency.** The pandemic highlighted supply chain challenges that resulted in food shortages. It “led to massive disruption for growers, food workers, and consumers alike. It exposed a food system that was rigid, consolidated, and fragile,” said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. Food system resilience is needed to combat disruptions of all kinds, including future pandemics and the imminent challenge of climate change.

As the pandemic taught us, the keys to resilience are flexibility, redundancy, and the capacity to adapt. Maryland was precipitously vulnerable to food shortages during the pandemic, thanks in part to supply chains that originate far beyond its borders. Rebuilding regional infrastructure would enable resiliency. More processing facilities are essential to ensure the supply chain is resilient so when one shuts down, others are still available. More are needed so that a diversity of crops can be grown and processed, allowing for flexibility in crop choice as the climate changes. Lastly, more regional agricultural infrastructure is needed to increase the proportion of food consumed locally that is produced locally:
because Maryland only grows 10% of what it consumes, it is vulnerable to supply chain breaks. Regional infrastructure allows for more consumption of regional products.

The pandemic forced a reckoning. Maryland needs your help to address it to ensure a regenerative, resilient future. Please contact your county representatives to request ARPA’s State and Local Relief Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) be used to support new and expanded regional hubs and processing capacity.

The following are estimates of funding should be set aside. With any kind of buildout, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color) businesses and communities should be prioritized and environmental justice concerns addressed:

*Funding does not include real estate (ie: $1M for a 10 acre site)*

- **Regional Hubs in 5 counties across MD (list below)** that include aggregation, marketing, sales and distribution. Hubs would grow to include ancillary producer services like bulk buying, storage and processing, etc. (eg: soups, pickles, jams, dried herbs, cider and hide tanning). Food hubs not only purchase from farmers and deliver to clients, but can also provide access to processing facilities that substantially benefit the profitability of small and mid-sized farms and increase food system resiliency. For example, for the first six months of the pandemic when stores were short on supplies, a Philadelphia-based food hub, Common Market, delivered some 10,000 emergency food boxes per week which were sourced from regional producers.
  - $3 M buildout per aggregator
- **USDA inspected meat processing plants**
  - $1.5 M buildout, plus $1.5 M to operate a small 4000 s/f, 10 FTE small plant for 2 yrs
  - $5.25 M buildout, plus $10 M to operate a midsize 15,000 s/f, 60 FTW mid-sized plant for 2 yrs
- **Organic grain storage**
  - $100,000 buildout for grain bin plus dryer on farm (for human consumption)
  - $10 M buildout for large grain elevator hub
- **Conventional and organic grain and pulse mills**
  - $500,000 buildout for small mill on farm
  - $10 M buildout for large grain mill

Premiere locations for hubs and processing:

- **West**: Frederick County
- **North**: Baltimore County
- **Eastern Shore**: Talbot County, Caroline County, Dorchester County or Somerset County
- **South**: Howard County or Anne Arundel County
- **Central**: Montgomery County or Prince George’s County

For more information, please direct your questions to Humon Heidarian, Fair Farms Campaign Manager (humon@fairfarmsnow.org)