

Maryland Department of Natural Resources Sector Advisory Committee

Virtual Meeting – February 12, 2026

Public Summary for the Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan

Maryland's horse ecosystem and shared messages

Participants described Maryland's horse ecosystem under-recognized network that spans performance and pleasure riding, outdoor recreation, racing, events, education, and youth development, with Fair Hill frequently cited as a flagship example of this integration. They emphasized that horses should be framed consistently as part of Maryland's outdoor recreation economy, conservation ethic, and cultural heritage, not just as a niche sport or racing interest.

Committee members agreed that a core shared message should highlight horses as a four-part asset: cultural, historical, recreational, and economic, aligning with Maryland Park Service's core mission areas. They noted that this framing allows all disciplines—racing, trail riding, foxhunting, shows, lesson barns, youth programs etc – to see themselves in a common story without singling out any one sector.

Racing was described as one prominent component of a much broader ecosystem that includes training and rehabilitation facilities, eventing and show venues, lesson barns, pony clubs, foxhunting, trail riding, and aftercare and community programs. Participants saw opportunities to tell a more unified story that links high-profile activities like the Maryland Five-Star and the Fair Hill Training Center with local youth programs, school partnerships, and everyday trail use on state lands.

DNR participants emphasized that the horse industry aligns directly with DNR's core mission areas:

- Recreation
- Cultural heritage
- Historic preservation
- Natural resource stewardship

Horses were repeatedly framed as a legitimate and longstanding recreational user group on public lands, not an add-on or special interest.

Fair Hill was cited as a prime example of how equine use preserved land that would otherwise have become suburban development.

Participants noted that the horse industry often under-communicates its role in open-space preservation and public access.

Why the horse industry matters to Maryland

It was stressed that horses are a significant economic driver, especially at hubs like Fair Hill where a world-class Thoroughbred training center, extensive events, and equestrian trail use generate jobs, visitor spending, and tax revenue. One example cited was historic estimates that the Fair Hill Training Center alone employs several hundred to roughly a thousand workers over the course of a year and has generated economic impacts for Cecil County.

They also underscored the role of horses in preserving open space and rural landscapes, noting that without past equine investments Fair Hill and similar properties might have been lost to suburban development. Members highlighted that horses contribute to tourism (e.g., the Five-Star and other events), community identity, and Maryland's historical traditions such as steeplechasing, foxhunting, and jousting, and that trail riders and "backyard" horse owners represent a large but often invisible share of this value.

DNR leadership described horses as:

- A major recreational user group on state lands.
- A driver of land conservation, cultural continuity, and rural preservation.

Concrete examples cited:

- Fair Hill Training Center employs 750–1,000 people annually, depending on the season.
- The Training Center was previously cited as an economic driver for Cecil County.
- Over 90 miles of equestrian-accessible trails at Fair Hill alone.

Connection and fragmentation within the industry

Participants observed that the horse industry often operates by discipline, geography, or function with limited coordination across racing, show disciplines, trail riders, youth programs, public land managers, and etc. They noted that the horse community tends to “talk to itself,” while agencies like DNR, school systems, and the broader public may not fully understand the industry’s scope or needs.

The group identified several contributing factors to this fragmentation:

- Limited statewide messaging about horses as a unified sector.
- Separate networks and funding streams across disciplines and agencies.
- Uneven awareness of existing programs, such as school-based outdoor classrooms, apprenticeships, and community equestrian events.

Suggestions for working more as one system included:

- Developing shared branding and messaging that emphasize horses as outdoor recreation, cultural heritage, and economic infrastructure.
- Leveraging existing DNR platforms and social media channels to highlight equestrian uses of public lands, events, and career opportunities.
- Coordinating cross-discipline events at places like Fair Hill that intentionally bring in non-horse audiences, underrepresented communities, and local schools.
- Building partnerships between DNR, school systems, community colleges, nonprofits, and horse organizations to create repeatable models for education and outreach.

Acknowledged disconnects between:

- Horse community - DNR staff and programs.
- Horse industry - public school systems.
- Horse users - non-horse recreational users (hikers, cyclists, e-bikes).

DNR noted that many Maryland residents use equestrian venues without understanding their origin, value, or cost.

Fragmentation was also cited between:

Coordination and statewide leadership

Members supported the idea that some entities should play a clearer coordination role for the horse industry, but also recognized current capacity constraints, particularly

within certain established organizations with highly limited special-fund resources, making it difficult to take on major new responsibilities under its current structure.

Participants envisioned a realistic coordinating role that would:

- Convene stakeholders across agencies (DNR, Labor, Education, Commerce), equine sectors and regions.
- Collect, synthesize, and update data on jobs, economic impact, trail and facility use, and participation across disciplines.
- Lead or support marketing and messaging that present a single statewide narrative about the value of horses.
- Help align workforce development efforts, apprenticeships, and school partnerships into coherent pipelines.
- Support policy advocacy by equipping industry leaders with actionable data and stories for legislators and other decision-makers.

Several members suggested that, if not housed within the current Horse Industry Board, such functions might be advanced through a strengthened partnership among agencies and nonprofit or foundation partners that can provide staffing, fundraising, and program delivery capacity.

DNR emphasized the value of **public-private partnerships**, citing:

- Fair Hill International
- Youth Empowerment Source
- Nature Centers
- Cecil County Fair collaborations

Strong support for:

- A **connector role** between horse organizations, DNR, schools, and workforce agencies.
- Leveraging **existing DNR partnerships** rather than creating new bureaucracies.

DNR stressed that successful education and outreach efforts **require nonprofit or private partners**, as DNR lacks staff capacity for hands-on programming.

Information needs for decision-makers

Committee members agreed that decision-makers in the Governor's Office, General Assembly, local governments, and agencies need clear, concise information that shows the horse industry's economic and community value in tangible terms. They pointed to the impact of jobs, annual spending generated by major events, and the scale of trail use and horse ownership in Maryland.

Information and products viewed as especially useful included:

- Quantitative metrics: employment numbers by sector, payroll, economic output at key facilities, tourism and visitor counts, and revenue retained or lost to other states when riders travel elsewhere for competitions and camping.
- Land-use and access metrics: acreage of DNR lands with equestrian access, miles of designated horse trails, and usage levels at equestrian campgrounds and parking areas.
- Compelling stories and case studies: examples of Fair Hill International's youth empowerment programs, school service-learning partnerships, and community events that demonstrate broader social benefits.
- Simple, visually clear reports and maps that show where horses are active on the landscape, where industry clusters exist, and how they intersect with state priorities such as green jobs and outdoor learning.

Several participants emphasized that "hard numbers" are essential when approaching legislators, and that documenting both current economic contributions and lost opportunities (for example, Maryland riders traveling to other states for events) would strengthen arguments for investment.

Financial sustainability of operations

The committee discussed the difficulty many events, facilities, and small operations face in remaining financially sustainable. While DNR's land-use fees were generally described as reasonable and not the primary barrier at Fair Hill, the overall cost structure for large events such as a 5-star competition is not substantial - encompassing infrastructure, staffing, safety requirements, and marketing.

Members also noted broader pressures:

- Limited and uncertain funding for school-based outdoor experiences and field trips, which affects demand for equine education programs tied to parks.
- Rising costs of insurance and liability concerns, which make school partnerships and hands-on programs more complex.
- The need for capital to maintain and improve arenas, trails, and support facilities, including permanent seating and other amenities that could enhance revenue potential.
- Dependence on sponsorships and philanthropy to support outreach programs for at-risk youth and underserved communities, which are seen as high impact but expensive to operate.

Entry points and pathways into the industry

Participants highlighted school partnerships, youth programs, pony clubs, and nonprofit initiatives as critical entry points for young people and new riders. Examples included collaborations between high schools and organizations like City Ranch, youth empowerment programs at Fair Hill, and community college equine programs in Cecil County.

They observed that such entry points often face obstacles, including:

- School system concerns around risk and liability for on-site horse programs or field trips.
- Limited awareness among educators about equine career options and the breadth of “spiderweb” vocations connected to horses, from braiding and farriery to facility management and outdoor recreation careers.
- Transportation, cost, and access barriers for students—particularly those from urban or lower-income communities—who might otherwise benefit from exposure to horses and outdoor environments.

Committee members suggested that the industry could better support these entry points by:

- Proactively engaging school vocational and business departments, attending job fairs, and aligning equine opportunities with existing career and technical education (CTE) pathways.
- Building structured programs that connect early exposure (e.g., youth camps, service days, and introductory rides) to tangible next steps such as internships, apprenticeships, and community college courses.

- Leveraging DNR properties as platforms for repeated, curriculum-linked experiences rather than one-off field trips, with nonprofit or foundation partners providing hands-on programming.

Workforce and careers in the horse industry

Participants saw promise in expanding apprenticeships and work-based learning, noting that the state has aggressive targets for high school graduates completing apprenticeships and that some models already exist within DNR's forest and park services. They emphasized that success will require coordination with the Department of Labor, the Maryland State Department of Education, and local school systems, as well as funding to support apprentice stipends and employer participation.

Major takeaways and next steps

Across the discussion, several themes surfaced repeatedly:

- The need for a unified, statewide narrative that presents horses as an integral part of Maryland's cultural heritage, outdoor recreation system, and rural economy, rather than as isolated disciplines.
- The importance of quantifying and communicating the economic and community value of horses in clear, accessible terms for policymakers.
- The central role of public lands—particularly DNR properties like Fair Hill—in providing access, supporting events, and anchoring the industry's presence on the landscape.
- Persistent fragmentation across sectors and geographies, and the opportunity for a stronger coordinating function to align messaging, data, workforce pipelines, and partnerships.
- The urgency of investing in entry points, youth access, and career pathways, particularly through school and community partnerships and structured apprenticeships.

The committee suggested that the Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan should:

- Adopt the “cultural, historical, recreational, economic” framework as a unifying way to describe the industry's value.
- Prioritize development of a statewide data and storytelling platform that equips advocates with job, revenue, trail, and participation metrics, along with illustrative case studies.
- Recommend strengthening a coordinating entity or partnership structure to lead convenings, messaging, and cross-agency initiatives.

- Support expanded school-based and community-based equine programs that link directly to workforce pathways, with particular attention to equity and access.
 - Encourage continued and enhanced collaboration between DNR, horse organizations, and community partners to maximize the use of public lands for equine recreation, events, education, and stewardship.
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Questions, or interest in joining an Advisory Committee please contact:

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