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SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 134

Offered January 21, 2000

Establishing a farmland protection task force.

Patrons—Hanger, Bolling, Marye and Norment; Delegates: Deeds, Moss and Plum

Referred to Committee on Rules

WHEREAS, it is the stated policy of the Commonwealth to conserve and protect agricultural lands as valued economic and natural resources, which provide food and other agricultural and forest products, essential open spaces for clean air sheds, watershed protection, and wildlife habitat, as well as for aesthetic purposes; and

WHEREAS, agriculture comprises a significant segment of the Commonwealth's economy and plays a critical role in defining the character of the Commonwealth and the quality of life of its citizens; and

WHEREAS, farmland generates more revenue for localities in property taxes than it costs in terms of public services; and

WHEREAS, the General Assembly has created a number of laws, programs and entities through which agricultural uses of land can be preserved, including the Agricultural and Forestal Districts Act, the Conservation Easement Act, the Open-Space Land Act, the Right to Farm Act, the important farmlands law, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation, and tax relief measures such as land use taxation; and

WHEREAS, Virginia has nevertheless lost an average of 45,000 acres of prime farmland each year during the past decade, according to the American Farmland Trust; and

WHEREAS, there are a number of factors that contribute to farmland loss, including suburban growth patterns and market conditions and government policies that detract from the profitability of agricultural enterprises; and

WHEREAS, states surrounding Virginia are utilizing farmland protection tools not currently available in the Commonwealth, including transferable development rights, circuit breaker tax credits, and farmland preservation programs that are funded and administered separately from other land conservation programs; and

WHEREAS, a comprehensive examination of existing and potential measures that Virginia can employ to encourage rural landowners to maintain the agricultural uses of their land is needed; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That a farmland protection task force be established. The task force shall be composed of twelve members, which shall include eight legislative members and four nonlegislative citizen members as follows: three members of the Senate, to be appointed by the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections; five members of the House of Delegates, to be appointed by the Speaker; two citizens, to be appointed by the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections; and two citizens, to be appointed by the Speaker.

In conducting its study, the task force shall develop a comprehensive farmland protection policy for the Commonwealth. The policy shall set farmland protection goals, specify strategies for meeting the goals and designate a state government agency or official who is responsible for ensuring that the policy is observed and the goals achieved. The policy shall identify the Commonwealth's existing farmland protection efforts, additional incentives that may be needed to encourage landowners to keep their land in agricultural uses, government actions that directly or indirectly tend to lead to or cause farmland conversion, and ways that such government actions can be modified so that farmland protection goals are met.

The direct costs of this study shall not exceed \$8,000.

The Division of Legislative Services shall provide staff support for the study. Technical assistance shall be provided by the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. All agencies of the Commonwealth shall provide assistance to the task force, upon request.

The task force shall complete its work in time to submit its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the 2001 Session of the General Assembly as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative Automated Systems for the processing of legislative documents.

Implementation of this resolution is subject to subsequent approval and certification by the Joint Rules Committee. The Committee may withhold expenditures or delay the period for the conduct of the study.

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