

# NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## 193-ACRE FARM PROTECTED TO ENSURE LOCAL FOOD SECURITY WHEN WE NEED IT MOST

A PARTNERSHIP PROJECT BY FOOD BANK, KESTREL LAND TRUST, MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES, AND TOWN OF HADLEY AND AMHERST

April 2, 2020 — A 193-acre farm in North Hadley and North Amherst has been completely conserved for the benefit of the community—the culmination of a multi-year project led by Kestrel Land Trust with the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, Town of Hadley, Town of Amherst, and The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts to permanently protect land from sprawling development, protect and create a community farm, support private farmland conservation, and expand public conservation area and trails.

“At a time when our nation is going through this difficult pandemic crisis, the supply of fresh local food and access to local trails is ever more vital to the agricultural sustainability and quality of life in the Valley,” said **Kristin DeBoer, Executive Director of Kestrel Land Trust**. “This farm protection project secured 142-acres of farmland for the Food Bank to feed the most vulnerable people in our community, gave the opportunity for a local farm family in North Hadley to expand and strengthen their agricultural operation by acquiring 26 acres with agricultural fields, a house and barns, and added 25 acres of the farm in Amherst to expand a complex of public conservation land that includes fields, forest, wetlands, and trails.”

### A second Food Bank Farm

“This new 142-acre farm will build on the success of the first Food Bank Farm in Hadley, said Andrew Morehouse, **Executive Director of The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts**. “It represents a big departure from the usual food bank model of relying exclusively on donated food from food retailers and commodities from state and federal governments. Instead, it’s an investment in local farmland for organic farmers to strengthen our local food economy while also providing a reliable source of healthy organic food for those who need it most—especially during these difficult times.”

The 142 acres off Shattuck Road were purchased by Kestrel Land Trust in October 2019, with a bridge loan from The Conservation Fund, and held until March 20 when The Food Bank purchased the farm. Simultaneously, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and Town of Hadley purchased an Agricultural Preservation Restriction—with state and town Community Preservation Act funds respectively.

"The Baker-Polito Administration is proud to partner with Kestrel Land Trust and the Town of Hadley to protect and preserve this land for future generations, and congratulates the Food Bank on their commitment and vision for the future with this important project," said **Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources Commissioner John Lebeaux**. "The COVID-19 public health emergency has made even more clear the critical role both Massachusetts farms and food banks play in ensuring Commonwealth residents have access to fresh, nutritious food. By taking this important step to conserve this valuable farmland, we are helping to ensure a stable and secure food supply for the residents across Massachusetts that are most vulnerable and in need."

“The Kestrel Land Trust is an innovator in the field of conservation. This project will serve as national model for how a local land trust can conserve farmland and woodlands in a way that directly contributes to the health and wellness of their community. It was a privilege to help them and the Food Bank buy

and protect this farm to feed local people, and I hope this model will be shared and germinate in other communities across America,” said **Reggie Hall, Director, Conservation Loans, The Conservation Fund.**

The Food Bank Farm will contract local farmers who will grow organic vegetables for households at risk of hunger and to sell to schools in high-poverty school districts.

One supporter to The Food Bank that helped secure the purchase was the H. P. Kendall Foundation in Boston. The Kendall Foundation’s sole focus is to strengthen the food system of western Massachusetts and New England by helping local farmers gain market access to schools.

Kendall Foundation executive director Andy Kendall says, “this purchase demonstrates the power of collaboration of local groups committed to food security, open space, and creating opportunities for young and expanding farmers. An especially exciting aspect of this collaboration is between The Food Bank and Springfield Public Schools.”

A small portion of this farm is envisioned to become a model farm where volunteers and school groups work together to grow and harvest crops while learning about sustainable agriculture, environmental stewardship, and food access for all. Kestrel will retain a trail easement over the farm for walking on designated farm roads that link to the conservation lands and wetlands on the Amherst side.

“Kudos to Kestrel Land Trust, the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, the Town of Hadley and MDAR on this partnership which will result in a new community farm,” states **Senator Jo Comerford (D-Northampton)**. “I join the entire Hampshire, Franklin, Worcester district when I say that I look forward to enjoying the fruits (and vegetables) of this great partnership while celebrating the positive impact the farm will have on the food security of our region.”

“What we know in western Massachusetts is that our little corner of the world has some of the best farmland in the world and it is so important that we preserve it, protect it, and support it,” notes **State Representative Daniel Carey (D-Easthampton)**. “I’m thrilled to be part of this successful partnership of so many individuals and organizations as well as local and state government. During this time of life and death crisis, the importance of local food sources and local food banks has never been clearer. To the best of my knowledge, the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts is now the only food bank in the country which owns two farms. This resource will benefit our communities in countless ways for many years to come.”

“I celebrate this good news, where a collaboration of several amazing community organizations, with the support of state and local governments, has resulted in a project that achieves both conservation and enhanced food security for our region, states **State Representative Mindy Domb (D-Amherst)**. This partnership, representing creativity, resilience, shared goals and focus on mission, while also benefitting so many, represents the kind of successful collaborations we need – in normal and challenging times.

### **Expanding a Town Conservation Area with Forest, Wetlands, and Fields**

Another 25 acres off Route 116 were acquired by the Town of Amherst, funded by Community Preservation Act Funds. This new *Szala Family Conservation Area* will connect the *Cole and Podick Conservation Areas* — Kestrel’s first partnership project with the Town back in the early 1970s. Kestrel Land Trust will hold a Conservation Restriction over this town land, and will work with the Town to create a welcoming entrance with improved parking and trail access to connect these trails to ones on the adjacent Food Bank Farm.

“I have been in conversations with the Szala family over the course of two decades to discuss conservation options for their land. In the meantime, the Town has protected several other adjacent family farms in the vicinity. This project is the capstone to secure the agricultural heritage of this area of North Amherst and North Hadley. We are thrilled to add part of the farm to Amherst’s conservation land in honor of the Szala Family.” Said David Ziomek, Assistant Town Manager & Director of Conservation & Planning, Town of Amherst.

### **Private Farmland Conservation**

In the third part of the project, 26 acres off Comins Rd in Hadley were sold to a local farming family, who are part of Mapleline Farm. This portion of the land includes a house and several barns and outbuildings. The 15 acres of active agricultural fields out back were protected by a Conservation Restriction held by the Town of Hadley Conservation Commission.

“Our family is thrilled to see the Szala Farm protected after so many years of conversations about how to secure its future. As long-time farmers in this agricultural area of Hadley, we have been really worried that the increasing number of housing developments in this part of town would soon overtake the land. We are grateful to the Town, the State, and Kestrel for putting this farm protection project together in a way that helped our family expand our farm on Comins Road. As the proud new owners of the Szala’s old farm house, two barns, and outbuildings, and 15-acres protected for agriculture, our operation will be stronger for it,” said Jessica Dizek of Mapleline Farm.

The story of this farm protection project began 25 years ago when the Valley Land Fund started a conversation with the Szala Family about protecting this family farm. Kestrel Land Trust kept that conversation going since 2011, when it merged with VLF. Some seeds take a long time to germinate, and this one finally came into light in 2018, when Kestrel created a workable purchase plan for the family and was concluded with the sale to The Food Bank, the Dizeks, and the Town of Amherst.

“Hadley leads the Commonwealth in the number of farms permanently protected, thanks to the willingness of local landowners and our partnership with the State and the land trust community.” Said Christian Stanley, chair of the Hadley Selectboard. “With the Szala farm now protected—we are proud to have 4,000 acres of permanently conserved farm soils in town.”

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