

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS



Department of Agricultural Resources

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Ashley E. Randle
COMMISSIONER

March 14, 2025

Governor Maura Healey
Massachusetts State House, Room 280 Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Healey,

On behalf of the Massachusetts Food Policy Council ("Council"), I am pleased to provide this Annual Report pursuant to M.G.L. Chapter 20, Section 6C(e) on the Council's ongoing work related to the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan (Plan) <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/ma-local-food-action-plan>.

Please accept this letter as the Council's 2024 Annual Report. Throughout the year, Council members continued to work towards the priorities and goals from the Plan. The recommendations continue to be foundational and very relevant. Issues including recent climate-related weather disasters and continued reverberations from the pandemic mobilized the Council and partners to work to strengthen and build the resilience of the Massachusetts food system. Topics focused on racial equity, reducing hunger, food insecurity, agricultural sector support including land access, and programs to address the wide range of challenges within the food system.

Council meetings during 2024 had strong participation as continued allowance of public meetings conducted through remote means allowed real-time public access. Hybrid meetings with remote and in-person participation were also held. The synergistic relationship between the Council, the MA Legislature's Food System Caucus, the MA Food System Collaborative, local food policy councils, and other stakeholders continues to be an asset to develop and support policy and program recommendations. Council communications and trusted relationships have been an advantage for efficiency in developing, continuing and advancing food system initiatives.


2024 highlights for the Council and its partners include:

- The renewal by the legislature and administration of a \$250,000 state Local Food Policy Council Grant Program.
- A first-time Farmers Market Sustainability Grant Program with awards of over \$205,000 to help farmers markets grow and expand their outreach to consumers.
- MDAR's management of the Food Security Infrastructure Grant, launched in 2020. This year \$24.6 million in grants were awarded, helping to sustain Massachusetts' food production and distribution sectors, while working to ensure that fresh, healthy, local food is available to all residents.
- MDEP's Massachusetts Gap Energy Grant awardees included food system operations.
- The launch of second round of the USDA-funded Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program.
- The Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement, funded by USDA and coordinated by DESE.
- A new MDAR staff position dedicated to facilitating implementation of the Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan.
- A new MDAR staff position, director of the department's new Division of Food Security.

- National recognition for state's food waste ban, implemented by MassDEP in 2014, which has caused more than 380,000 tons of food waste to be diverted and repurposed.
- An ongoing partnership between Project Bread, the Council, and other partners, to develop a road map to end hunger in Massachusetts by 2030.
- Publication of a report highlighting ten years of successes of MDAR's Urban Agriculture Program.
- Passage of legislation enabling MDAR to buy and sell land.
- A disaster relief program bill passed, allowing direct payments to farmers suffering losses as climate change-related weather events continue to have unpredictable impacts on food production.
- Continued initiatives to promote and integrate environmental justice considerations across programs, policies, and activities to ensure the equal access and meaningful involvement of all people residing in the Commonwealth.
- The Council also considered and passed one resolution urging full funding of the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), following a cut in program funding which resulted in a reduction in benefit amounts for users in December. The program strengthens and amplifies the importance of policy that connects local food and communities that have historically been underserved by the food system HIP program benefits SNAP shoppers with additional funds for nutritious local produce, and Massachusetts farmers through increased sales.

The Council respectfully acknowledges the Healey-Driscoll Administration and the General Court for their continued support in 2024 of the Plan's goals and the programs that work toward those goals and illustrate the connections between the food system and other policy issues. In addition, the Council appreciates the Administration's and the General Court's ongoing support for a sustainable, equitable, and resilient food system. We ask that you give continued consideration for the Plan's recommendations and goals as relevant legislative and regulatory actions are developed. As always, members of the Council would be happy to meet with you or your staff to offer further detail on opportunities to strengthen the Massachusetts food system or on the work of the Council. Electronic versions of this Report and its attachments will also be provided to you.

Sincerely,



Ashley Randle, Commissioner
Chair, Massachusetts Food Policy Council

2024 Annual Report of the Massachusetts Food Policy Council

An Act Establishing the Massachusetts Food Policy Council was signed into law on November 7, 2010, which created the 17-member Council that was tasked with developing recommendations for food system goals for the Commonwealth. An 18th member was added, created by the MA Healthy Soils Bill which was signed into law in January 2021. Pursuant to Section 6C(e) of Chapter 277 of the Acts of 2010, the Council must submit an annual report outlining its findings, conclusions, proposals, recommendations, and progress towards reaching the goals that have been set forth.

In 2024, the MA Food Policy Council (FPC) focused on environmental justice and climate change, forming the meeting themes for the year. Throughout the year, Council members returned to review the priorities and goals from the Plan. With the Plan's recommendations continuing to be very relevant, the persistent reverberations from the 2020 coronavirus outbreak and the ongoing climate events affecting agriculture challenged the Council and partners to support the Massachusetts food system. Topics focused on reducing hunger, food insecurity, racial equity, agricultural sector support, and programs to address the wide range of challenges within the food system. Detailed minutes of all meetings throughout the year are available at: <https://www.mass.gov/massachusetts-food-policycouncil>.

Meetings continued to be held remotely in accordance with An Act Relative to Extending Certain State of Emergency Accommodations ("Act"), which was signed by Governor Baker on July 16, 2022. This Act extends the expiration of certain provisions pertaining to the Open Meeting Law to March 31, 2025, allowing a public body to continue holding meetings remotely without a quorum physically present at a meeting location as long as it provides "adequate, alternative" access to remote meeting. Hybrid meetings were also held, with in-person and remote participation.

The MA Local Food Action Plan (Plan) accepted by the FPC on December 10, 2015, continues to be pertinent. The Plan was designed to increase the production and consumption of MA-grown food; create jobs and improve wages in food and farming; protect the land and water needed to produce food; ensure food safety; reduce food waste; and reduce food insecurity while making fresh and healthy food more accessible for the residents of the Commonwealth. The Plan offers recommendations for the public and private sectors to see these goals through to fruition and continues to be an important platform for this work.

State Agency Members: Ashley Randle, Commissioner, MDAR; Yvonne Hao, Secretary, MEOHED, Designee: Anne Gobi (Director of Rural Affairs); Robert Goldstein, Commissioner MDPH, Designee: Jessica del Rosario; Bonnie Heiple, Commissioner, MDEP, Designee: Danah Tench; Acting Commissioner Russell Johnston,* MDESE, Designee: Robert Leshin; Commissioner Jeffrey McCue, MDTA, Designee: Shelly Varny.

*Acting Commissioner Johnson replaced Commissioner Riley's service from January – March.

Legislative Members: Senator Joanne Comerford, Senator Ryan Fattman, Representative Daniel Donahue, Representative Hannah Kane.

Industry Members (appointed by the Governor): Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, Distribution; Farmer, Dave Dumaresq; Amanda Kinchla, M.S., Food Safety Extension Specialist, UMASS Amherst; Mackenzie May, (January), Margaret Moulton (December) Direct to consumer; Phoebe Walker, Local boards of health; John Waite, Food processor and handler; Ayn Yeagle, Public health. EEA Secretary appointed member: Caro Roszell, Soil Health. Contact: Bonita Oehlke, MDAR, Bonita.Oehlke@mass.gov

Attachment A

Six meetings were held in 2024. Each meeting included updates from the Massachusetts Legislature's Food System Caucus (Caucus) and the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative's (Collaborative) Executive Director Kristina Pechulis and Policy Director Becca Miller. Meetings were typically held from 9:30 – 11:30 AM. Attendance ranged from 35 – 64. The Advisory Committee met six times. The Nominating Committee met twice.

The January, March, and September meetings were held remotely. Hybrid meetings were also held, with in-person and remote participation, in May, July, and December. The December hybrid annual meeting was held in Room 428 at the Massachusetts State House, thanks to Senator Comerford and staff Rachel Klein.

Meeting Summaries

Friday, January 12, 2024 The meeting was called to order by vice chair Mackenzie May. The Collaborative's legislative director reported on priority bills, important for resiliency, food security, climate change, workforce development, and supporting a robust local food system. The annual Food System Forum had 250 attendees, with up to half attending for the first time. DTA thanked food system advocates for HIP support. The administration is committed to full HIP funding in 2024. Senator Bruce Tarr was welcomed as a co-chair for the Caucus. The Caucus has been inspired by DESE's Tasty Tray program, universal school meals and the increasing focus on nutrition and its impact in our schools. The MA Farmland Action Plan is focused on implementation of key policy and program provisions. A motion passed to fill positions on the Nominating Committee. Potential bylaw changes were discussed. Local Food Policy Council grant awardee reports were from Mill City Grows, which developed policy recommendations and strengthened their capacity, and the Somerville Food Security Coalition, which updated their mission, values, and structure. MassDEP shared an update on food waste diversion, progress and trends, with impressive results. They offer compost site technical assistance, and grants to cities, towns and businesses managing food waste. The State Commission for Soil, Water and Related Resources will have ARPA funding for the Commonwealth's Healthy Soils Program.

March 15, 2024, Chair Randle called the meeting to order. The Caucus reported that the budget cycle is challenging due to decreases in tax revenue and increased costs. The Special Commission on Agriculture in the Commonwealth in the 21st Century worked with UMASS Extension to understand technical resources and support needed for farmers. Extension has been underfunded for their work in agriculture, important with increased climate disasters. This season's legislative maple tour was well attended. In the Housing Bond Bill, funding is included for climate technology which supports rural communities and aligns with food policy and farming. The Collaborative reported their support of funding for programs including HIP, FSIG and MA Farm to School, as well as a third round of grant funding for the Local Food Policy Council Grant program. The Collaborative's advocacy aligns with the Food System Caucus. Many items are included in Omnibus legislation filed previously including HIP enabling legislation, food waste, ag equity, APR, and a next generation farmer fund. The latest Ag Census show a continuing trend of losing farmland. Massachusetts had increases in ag value, direct sales, and young farmers. It also showed increases in ag tourism. MDAR is adding a Division of Food Security. The FSIG grant is moving to MDAR. EEA's Environmental Justice strategy was recently released. A consultant will identify workforce needs and launch a food systems and climate change program in 2025. MDAR launched an Agricultural Youth Council to explore their perception of barriers and opportunities to pursue an agricultural career. MDAR organized a first annual Agricultural Resource Fair. All Advisory Committee (AC) positions have been filled. The AC met with the Collaborative to discuss leveraging resources efficiently to build on existing work. Local Food Policy Council reports were shared by the City of Holyoke and the Town of Hudson who shared outcomes and lessons learned.

May 10, 2024 The meeting was called to order by Commissioner Randle. The Caucus discussed priority and endorsed bills. There was a 21st Century Ag Commission hearing. The Collaborative reported on the House Budget. Local Food Policy Council Grant budgets were not included or language for year-round operation for HIP. The

Farmer Peer Support Network for mental health challenges has trainers across the state, including a BIPOC focus. June is dairy month, and tours will be held across the state. MDAR is working with the MA Office of Travel and Tourism and the MA Dairy Promotion Board to develop an Ice Cream Trail. Work continues on the “Make Hunger History” project, led by Project Bread, a continuation of Congressman McGovern’s priority to end hunger in the Commonwealth. The Advisory Committee is fully populated. They met with the Collaborative’s local food policy council community of practice. Local Food Policy Council reports were from Mystic Valley YMCA, and the Boston Food Access Council. The grant funding has been critical to reach strategic goals. DESE reported on several successful programs. “MA Fresh” awards for schools zeroed in on food literacy, farm field trips, inviting a farmer to the classroom, and investing in their food service. Massachusetts is ranked #1 in the nation for healthiest school meals. The Senate plans to continue to fund free and universal meals, an investment in our students. Regarding hemp-derived THC, there are many products that are illegal but remain commercially available. Regulatory guidance is being discussed. American Farmland Trust is working closely with partners to strengthen healthy soils work.

July 12, 2024 The meeting was called to order by Chair Randle. Caucus members reported on legislative food systems priorities, including food donation. The Caucus held a briefing with the Greater Boston Food Bank and others to support the “Make Hunger History” campaign. The Senate passed several provisions in the Economic Development Bill. The Collaborative thanked legislators for their work and encouraged continued advocacy. The Council was reminded of the one-year anniversary of the floods here, and the creation of the Massachusetts Natural Disaster Recovery program. Resiliency in the food system is critical. The Cannabis Control Commission, DPH, and MDAR developed joint guidance, important for local boards of health. Farmers Market Week, and for the first time, Urban Agriculture Week, focused on site visits across the state. The Bylaws Committee discussed issues requiring legislative support, and those that do not. The Advisory Committee met with the Collaborative to discuss complementary work. The Local Food Policy Grant report included the City of Chelsea, who used funding to support strategic food system planning. Cape Cod Cooperative Extension also presented. Their funding helped to assess food system needs for five towns of the Cape. A process for the Council to create legislative letters of support was discussed. DESE shared a two-year review of school funded meals which reflects increased student participation, a strong ROI on state funds with universal meals, and an explosion of farm to school activities. DTA worked with DESE for a new EBT program to support food purchases through the summer. DTA shared their concern about less money for HIP, putting the state in a precarious position moving forward. MDAR’s Farmers Market Spanish language program had strong participation and positive feedback. The Massachusetts Ice Cream Trail was launched!

September 13, 2024 The meeting was called to order by Chair Randle. The Caucus shared a HIP update. DTA thanked HIP advocates, and shared disappointment that funding was reduced. Congressman McGovern hosted farm tours for legislators and the press. Council members and partners advocated for local food to be included in the mission statement of “Make Hunger History.” Though it wasn’t included, local food is considered a pillar of the program. The Special Commission on Agriculture in the Commonwealth in the 21st Century’s report is close to being complete. The Collaborative discussed priority bills, including those in the Economic Development Bill. MA Farm to School and DESE hosted twelve USDA officials to see the outcomes of the Local Food Promotion Program, who were impressed by the testimonials and impacts. A committee is exploring how the Council can write letters of support for legislative action. Danah Tench is leaving the Council after eight years and was recognized for her leadership and support of the Council. MDAR has a new Farmland Action Plan Coordinator. Farmers Market Week was successful with USDA visits to markets with SNAP and HIP benefits. MDAR released a Ten-Year Urban Agriculture [Report](#). A motion passed to add positions for the Division of Marine Fisheries and UMASS Extension, and to amend the statutory language to allow for compensation for the Advisory Committee. Changes to bylaw language which the Council can approve also passed. The Advisory Committee met with MassDEP to discuss food waste. A Local Food Policy Council report was from Mill City Grows, who also discussed Health and Flex Services programs and impacts for small farmers. The Massachusetts Food Trust was discussed by the Local Enterprise Assistance Fund and Franklin County CDC, who summarized the past six years including successes to create jobs,

and address food access and insecurity. DESE's partnership with DTA for summer EBT has shown significant benefits for Massachusetts youth.

December 4, 2024 Chair Randle presided over the hybrid meeting held at the Massachusetts State House. She welcomed legislators and their staff and thanked them for their support. The Caucus highlighted the progress of priority bills, as did the Collaborative. Special recognition was given to Legislative Joint Committee on Agriculture Co-Chair, Representative Paul Schmid. A slate for the open Advisory Committee positions, the Bylaw Committee, and Letters of Support Committee were accepted. New Council members Margaret Moulton, direct to consumer; and Dave Dumaresq, farmer, were welcomed. All Council seats are filled. The program featured state, federal, and partner grants showing impacts for the long-term viability and sustainability of the Massachusetts local food system, strengthening food security, and ensuring equitable access to healthy food including: (MDAR) [Farmers Market Sustainability Grant Program](#), Gardner Farmers Market; (USDA) [Local Food Purchase Assistance](#), Boston Area Gleaners; (MDAR) [Food Security Infrastructure Grant](#), Berkshire Grown/Off the Shelf Farm, Great Barrington and (DMF) Red's Best, Boston; (MDEP) [Massachusetts Gap Energy Grant Program](#): Elliott Farm, Lakeville; and (USDA) [Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program](#) Worcester Regional Food Hub. A motion was passed for full funding of the HIP program. The meeting was followed by a MA Grown & Fresher networking reception, taking advantage of in-person participation to re-connect over refreshments.

Addendums:

Massachusetts Legislative Food System Caucus
Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection
Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education



THE GENERAL COURT OF MASSACHUSETTS
STATE HOUSE, BOSTON 02133-1053

December 16, 2024

2024 Massachusetts Food Policy Council Annual Report

Food System Caucus – Massachusetts State Legislature. Four members of the legislature are voting members of the MA Food Policy Council. In 2024, Senator Jo Comerford, Senator Ryan Fattman, Representative Hannah Kane, and Representative Dan Donahue served on the Council. This report outlines the work done in 2024 in the Legislature’s Food System Caucus.

Overview:

The Food System Caucus (FSC) is a 157-member bipartisan, bicameral caucus chaired by Senator Comerford, Senator DiDomenico, Senator Tarr, Representative Kane, Representative Donahue, Representative Vargas, Representative Domb, and Representative Schmid. The FSC’s goal is to strengthen Massachusetts’ food system, focusing on food access and food insecurity, farmland, and economic development.

Food Security Accomplishments

The FSC secured funding for several priorities in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 budget. Universal school meals were fully funded at \$170 million. The FY25 budget also included \$10 million for the Food Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) program, \$42.3 million for the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance (MEFAP) program, \$15 million for the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), and \$200,000 for the Massachusetts Food Trust program. School wellness coaching and the FRESH grant program were funded at \$250,000 and \$750,000 respectively, and Massachusetts Farm to School received \$120,000. The FY25 budget also funded Buy Locals at \$700,000, Hunger-Free Campus grants at \$500,000, the Cliff Effect Pilot at \$100,000, UMass Extension at \$150,000, and Senior FarmShare at \$100,000.

The FSC has advocated for full HIP funding and restoration of benefits following the Department of Transitional Assistance’s announced benefit cuts to the program, beginning December 1, 2024. Due to a \$10 million funding shortfall for FY25, HIP benefits were cut from \$40, \$60, or \$80 depending on household size to \$20 for all recipients. The Caucus has heard from farmers on how the benefit cut affects their ability to plan for the growing season and sell to their customers, as well as from individuals and families who depend on HIP afford healthy, local produce. The FSC has been in contact with House and Senate leadership, as well as the Governor and Administration, to share their concerns about the HIP cut’s impacts and express the importance of fully funding the program.

Legislation and Policy

The Food System Caucus prioritized 8 bills and endorsed 21 for the 2023-2024 legislative session. The Caucus's priority bills in the 2023-2024 session are:

- S13/H41, *Proposal for a legislative amendment to the Constitution relative to agricultural and horticultural lands* (Comerford/Schmid)
- H754, *An Act supporting farm diversification and sustainability* (Blais)
- S1855/H2852, *An Act to promote urban agriculture and horticulture* (E. Kennedy/Kane/Howard)
- S42/H88, *An Act strengthening local food systems* (Comerford/Blais)
- S261/H603, *An Act relative to universal school meals* (DiDomenico/Vargas)
- S920/S1016/H1594, *An Act encouraging the donation of food to persons in need* (Comerford/E. Kennedy/Kane)
- S835/H1293, *An Act establishing the Massachusetts Hunger-Free Campus Initiative* (Lovely/Vargas/Domb)
- S85/H150, *An Act relative to an agricultural healthy incentives program* (Gobi/Domb)

The full list of FSC priority and endorsed bills can be found on the Caucus's website at <https://www.mafoodsystemcaucus.com/>.

Three of these priorities passed into law, in whole or in part, during the 193rd legislative session. S261/H603, *An Act relative to universal school meals*, was passed through the FY24 state budget, making universal school meals permanent. In addition, the economic development bond bill, H5100, includes policy changes based on two FSC priority bills. The bill includes language from S42/H88, *An Act strengthening local food systems*, allowing the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) to buy and sell farmland, as well as specifying that land used to create products from horticultural crops should be assessed and taxed as horticultural land. H5100 also includes H754, *An Act supporting farm diversification and sustainability*, which strikes the five-year limit for special permits allowing nonagricultural activities on APR land, facilitating more agritourism. The economic development bill includes other provisions that were not related to FSC priority bills but that support agriculture in Massachusetts, authorizing \$21 million in grant funding for agriculture, commercial fishing, and cranberry growing, and allowing students in vocational technical education programs to operate hoisting equipment under a licensed instructor's supervision. The other 5 priority bills were reported favorably from their initial committees. Of the 21 endorsed bills, 16 were reported favorably, while five were sent to study.

The Joint Committee on Agriculture was established in 2023, with Senator Comerford serving as acting Senate chair and Representative Schmid serving as House chair. The Committee reported 42 bills favorably during the 193rd legislative session and held an informal hearing on hemp policy with local boards of public health, the Department of Public Health, the Cannabis Control Commission, and MDAR. The Special Commission on Agriculture in the Commonwealth in the 21st Century, chaired by Senator Comerford and Speaker Pro Tempore Kate Hogan, hosted 9 public hearings on the present and future needs of agriculture in Massachusetts from May 2023 through July 2024, and is preparing a report and

recommendations. Commission's website is available at the following link:
<https://malegislature.gov/Commissions/Detail/524/>

Make Hunger History, a coalition to end food insecurity in Massachusetts, was launched in 2024. Representative Kane, Representative Vargas, Senator Comerford, and Senator DiDomenico are members of the initiative's Steering Committee, which advises Make Hunger History's goals and strategy. The coalition includes additional elected officials, food banks, advocates, and other anti-hunger leaders. The FSC looks forward to continuing to work with these partners to advance Make Hunger History's goals in 2025.

The FSC is conducting outreach to newly elected legislators, explaining the Caucus' priorities and inviting them to join. The Caucus hopes to increase membership to build support in the House and Senate for legislature that increases access to healthy, local food and strengthens agriculture and fishing in Massachusetts. As the next legislative session approaches, the Caucus thanks the Food Policy Council for their partnership in building a strong and equitable food system in Massachusetts.



Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs

Department of Environmental Protection

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Maura T. Healey
Governor

Kimberley Driscoll
Lieutenant Governor

Rebecca L. Tepper
Secretary

Bonnie Heiple
Commissioner

2024 Massachusetts Food Policy Council Annual Report MA Department of Environmental Protection

The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) is pleased to provide this report to supplement the Massachusetts Food Policy Council's (Council) Annual Report pursuant to M.G.L. Chapter 20, Section 6C(e). MassDEP through its Commissioner, Bonnie Heiple, is one of six state agencies that sits on the Council pursuant to M.G.L., Chapter 6C(a). The agency actively works toward meeting its goals under the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan, one of which is to reduce food waste. (Inputs Goals 1.) In 2024, MassDEP also provided financial assistance to support efforts outlined in Goal 2 of the MA Local Food Action Plan, "funding infrastructure improvements "and Goal 3, "increasing energy efficiency and sustainable food practices."

Food Waste Ban

In 2024, MassDEP's solid waste program staff continued to provide educational programming support to the Mass Food Policy Council and its Advisory Committee on the state's waste ban regulatory program and its outcomes. MassDEP's program work in this area focused on continued implementation of the food waste disposal ban. Since implementation of the initial commercial food waste disposal ban, MassDEP has issued a total of 131 notices of non-compliance and 14 consent orders with penalties (for repeat violations) for disposal of food materials in the trash. MassDEP's RecyclingWorks a Massachusetts program has now completed more than 750 technical assistance deliveries to businesses and institutions focused on food waste reduction. MassDEP has also continued to invest in our food waste reduction infrastructure. The Department has awarded a total of \$1.7 million in grants and \$4.6 million in loans to advance this infrastructure in Massachusetts.

MassDEP is also continuing to work with cities and towns to help grow food scraps collection programs for residents. Through our Recycling Dividends Program, MassDEP awards funds to municipalities to advance their recycling, composting and waste reduction programs. From 2021 to 2023, municipalities reported investing \$625,000 of this program funding to grow residential food scraps collection programs. As of 2023, nearly 90 municipalities have reported having some form of food waste collection program in place and we continue to hear of more municipalities establishing these programs. The 2024 update of municipalities with food collection waste programs will be available in mid-2025.

This information is available in alternate format. Please contact Melixza Esenyie at 617-626-1282.

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Gap Energy Grant

MassDEP continued to implement its Gap Energy Grant Program (Gap Grant) by working with the food and agricultural nonprofits and small businesses it funded in 2023. This year the program saw the completion of five of its food and agricultural related projects. The Gap Energy Grant supported the completion of an energy efficiency installation at Dismas House, a nonprofit farm in Oakham, the installation of solar arrays on two barns at The Farm School in Athol, as well as the installation of a 13.2 kW DC solar on a new barn at the Natick Community Organic Farm. The Gap Energy Grant also funded the completion of a renewable energy project for Rosie's Bounty, a nonprofit food pantry located at the Stratford Street United Church in West Roxbury, which added a 27.8 kW DC rooftop solar array to its building to support its clean energy upgrades. The Gap Grant also assisted Elliot Farm, a family-owned farm in Rochester, which completed installation of a 68.4kW DC ground mounted solar array to help power its greenhouse operations and office building. The extension of this grant to this new sector provides funds to invest in infrastructure development, both to facilities and for equipment for these agricultural and food entities, supporting Goal 2 of the Local Food Action Plan. The third goal of the MA Local Food Action Plan, to increase energy efficiency and sustainable food production, will also be advanced with the completion of these projects. This effort accomplishes two objectives. The grants meet a need for additional financial assistance to these organizations and allows them to reduce their energy usage and save on energy costs. These cost savings can then be reinvested into their organizations' mission and businesses. In addition, the investment will result in grant recipients reducing their greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) which will contribute to the Commonwealth reaching its GHG emissions reduction goals.



January 15, 2025

Momentum Continues as Investments in Farm to School Programs Rise

Since the state legislature approved funding for universal free school meals in July 2023, over 300 million universally free, nutritious school breakfasts and lunches have been served at no cost to students across the Commonwealth. With the support of this stable program funding and federal investment through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), many of these meals have featured Massachusetts grown, raised, or caught foods, connecting students more directly to their local food system. The national USDA Farm to School Census released in October 2024, which collected programming and procurement data from school year 2022-2023, showed that 68.4 percent of Massachusetts schools and districts serve local foods in Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) (in comparison to 62.7 percent of CNP operators nationally). Moreover, through leveraging the USDA's Local Food for Schools (LFS) program, schools during school year 2023-2024 spent \$1.8 million in LFS funds with Massachusetts producers. Ultimately, 2024 has illustrated that by communicating widely to School Meal Program stakeholders, harnessing farm to school data, forging strong collaborations, and leveraging consistent funding, farm to school programs can expand and flourish in classrooms, cafeterias and communities. Moreover, with a [new round of LFS program funding announced in October 2024](#) – almost quadrupling the amount of funding available to schools – the return on investment CNPs bring to the local food system continues to be evident.

In August 2024, the Healey-Driscoll Administration launched the “Your Presence Is Powerful” Campaign to raise awareness of the importance of chronic absenteeism and supporting students getting back into the classroom. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Office for Food and Nutrition Programs (FNP) has been strategically positioned to elevate the importance of and excitement for school attendance through the offering of nourishing, culturally relevant, no-cost meals that are packed with color, taste and are connected to the local food system. To elevate these school meal offerings, FNP kicked off the [Terrific Tray Initiative](#) in school year 2023-2024 in partnership with [Massachusetts Farm to School](#), spotlighting exceptional school meals serving up MA-grown produce and high-quality, nutrient-rich ingredients. Each month, FNP selects one terrific tray winner and as of December 2024, twelve school districts have been highlighted for their expectational lunch trays. Littleton Public Schools tray was recognized as the 2024 Massachusetts Terrific Tray of the Year, featuring heirloom tomatoes from Wards Berry Farm in Sharon, MA, cherry tomatoes from Stonefield Farm in Acton, MA, and an apple from Fairview Orchards in Groton, MA. In addition, the feasibility of tracking and serving local foods in schools has been discussed during the Healey-Driscoll Administration’s School Meals Nutrition Standards Commission, where challenges and solutions are continuously being considered.

In October 2024, the USDA released the results of the national 2023 Farm to School Census based on programming and procurement data from the school year 2022-2023. In addition to



highlighting School Meal Programs' investment in local foods, the Census outlined that 24.9 percent of schools and districts in Massachusetts have edible gardens (compared to 14.7 percent nationally). The Census has provided School Meal Programs with the data they need to celebrate their successes and evaluate areas for growth. While local foods had a strong presence in such CNPs as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) (62.5 percent of School Meal Programs integrated local foods) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) (46.2 percent), there was less reported integration of local foods by CNP operators in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (19 percent), the Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP) (0.7 percent), CACFP At-Risk (1.4 percent) and the Summer Food Service Program (14.4 percent). This is an area of growth for FNP as we consider the availability of local procurement technical assistance and training resources for all CNP providers. Moreover, the 2023 Census reflects local sourcing trends prior to the LFS program and the next round of LFS funding will allocate dedicated funding for CACFP operators at childcare institutions to purchase local foods. These LFS program investments will inevitably change the landscape of local sourcing for CNP operators that is reflected in the next Farm to School Census.

In January 2024, FNP, in collaboration with state agency partners, reinvigorated a joint state agency Taskforce on Local Food System Education, based on 2016 MA legislation ([Session Law Chapter 267 Section 2](#)). The Taskforce represents five state agencies, including the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR), the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), and the Department of Public Health (DPH) as well as participation from three statewide local food system resource providers. To date, the Taskforce has identified key barriers to local food system education, including the need for (a) identifying districts and early education centers with limited farm to school activity; (b) clear connections between DESE's curriculum frameworks and food literacy topics and (c) high quality food literacy instructional materials for educators. With over a year of convening and collaboration under its belt, the Taskforce is preparing to submit a collaborative proposal for the USDA's Patrick Leahy Farm to School State Agency grant program to secure funding to address these barriers to local food system education as well as lay the foundation for future regional farm to school coordinators in the Commonwealth. Examining state and federal funding opportunities to support regional farm to school coordinators in Massachusetts will be an upcoming area of exploration for the Taskforce to ensure the Commonwealth can close the gap between the number of institutions that want to offer farm to school programming and those that have the technical assistance, funding, and resources to do so. As highlighted in the 2023 USDA Farm to School Census, where Massachusetts fell behind the national average in providing food, nutrition and agricultural education to students (43.7 percent of School Meal Programs in Massachusetts as opposed to 48.3 percent nationally), local food system education is an important area for strategic growth.

In addition to cross-state agency collaborations, School Meal Programs have made significant gains in forging collaborations and procurement relationships with Massachusetts producers, specifically through leveraging Local Food for Schools (LFS) funding. 234 school districts (approximately 59 percent of all schools/districts) opted into the LFS program. At the end of



school year 2023-2024, School Meal Programs had spent \$2.4 million in LFS funds with over 110 local producers, 21 of which self-identified as underserved. Local food purchases were diverse, ranging from frozen local broccoli florets, fish, and mushrooms to apples, cheese sticks and hydroponic lettuce. Many purchases (54 percent) have continued to be brokered through food hubs, which, according to the USDA's Regional Food Hub Resource Guide, is a "business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand." These new procurement relationships between schools and food hubs represent a 231 percent increase in school sale revenue for food hubs.

With a [new round of LFS program funding](#) posed to more than double the amount of funding available to School Meal Programs to purchase locally, the administrative component of the program, including processing and paying local purchasing claims and providing technical assistance to School Meal Programs and local producers, remains unfunded by federal LFS program funds. Moreover, with food hubs playing a vital role in local procurement for School Meal Programs, it is important to ensure they have the infrastructure and capacity to meet the increased demand of school customers and to invest in food hubs' ability to consistently service all regions of the Commonwealth, particularly more remote regions including the South Shore, Cape, and Islands. Additionally, it is important to consider how to support interested underserved producers in accessing markets where they can most readily reach school customers, particularly food hubs. Lastly, as School Meal Programs consider their approach to effectively leveraging an increased amount of LFS funding, many are considering how proteins such as fish, beef, poultry, and minimally processed dairy products can be significantly integrated into their procurement strategy. More infrastructure investment in Massachusetts may be needed to support school customers' growing interest and demand – from increased availability of processing facilities that meet USDA requirements to expanded capacity for local distributors to make school deliveries.

In conjunction with the ambitious strides School Meal Programs have made in local procurement, FNP continues to administer a statewide farm to school pilot grant program that ensures K-12 schools and early education programs have the resources necessary to amplify the importance of food literacy in the classroom, cafeteria, and community. In school year 2023-2024, FNP received a total of 87 grant submissions for the Massachusetts Farming Reinforces Education and Student Health (MA FRESH) grant program (a 47 percent increase in application submission compared to school year 2022-2023). Twenty-three projects, nine early education programs, and fourteen K-12 programs were awarded approximately \$600,000 total across two years, funding such activities as the installation of indoor and outdoor garden infrastructure, farm field trips, food literacy curriculum integration, and the training of school nutrition professionals in local procurement, preparation, and promotion.

During school year 2024-2025, FNP will be expanding the MA FRESH grant program to include a new, additional funding opportunity: Massachusetts Farming Reinforces Education and Student Health with Coordination and Optimization of Resources and Partnerships (MA FRESH CORP).



This request for proposals within the MA FRESH grant program series seeks to make significant investments in new staff salaries, stipends, or consultant fees to ensure local food system activities are strategically integrated into the classroom, cafeteria, and community. MA FRESH CORP has been made possible by the continued \$1 million earmark for food literacy in the FY25 MA State Budget. With the MA FRESH grant program's third funding cycle ending in winter 2024, 25 projects have received approximately \$500,000 in traditional MA FRESH grant funding, supporting seventeen K-12 programs and eight early education programs, while approximately \$575,000 awaits allocation through the MA FRESH CORP grant program. That said, all current state and federal MA FRESH funding will be expended at the close of this award cycle. Without legislation making the MA FRESH grant program permanent with dedicated funding, the future of this statewide farm to school grant program remains uncertain.

Complimentary to the execution of the MA FRESH program in school year 2023-2024, the \$1 million FY24 State Budget 7010-1192 Educational Improvement Project Earmarks also supported two additional food literacy efforts: the Massachusetts School Wellness Coaching Program (MSWCP) and food literacy professional development for educators. In school year 2023-2024, nineteen Tier One schools (focused on perfecting policy) and twelve Tier Two schools (focused on implementing initiatives) participated in the MSWCP. Food literacy professional development was made available to educators through a variety of offerings, including (a) eight four-week online food literacy courses offered by [The John C. Stalker Institute of Food and Nutrition](#) at Framingham State University (b) five food literacy professional development courses made available through DESE's Center for Instructional Support and facilitated by [RootED Educational Consultants](#) and (c) attendance at FNP's annual school nutrition and wellness summit, [Healthy Kids, Healthy Programs](#). In all, over 250 educators and school wellness champions were afforded food literacy professional development and resources at no cost due to state funding.

The progress of School Meal Programs in local sourcing and farm to school engagement throughout school year 2023-2024 and Fall 2024 underscores the power of analytical program data, strategic investments, and cross-sector partnerships. With stable funding, programs, and collaborations, these efforts are transforming classrooms, cafeterias, communities, and local economies alike. As the Commonwealth moves forward, our collective commitment to advancing food literacy, local procurement, and equitable access to farm to school programming will ensure lasting benefits for students, families, and producers statewide.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Rob Leshin".

Sincerely,
Robert M Leshin, Director,
Office of Food and Nutrition Programs
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education