

# THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS



## Department of Agricultural Resources

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## MEETING MINUTES MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF AGRICULTURE

Wednesday, December 13, 2023  
10:00 AM Hybrid Meeting (in-person & via MS Teams)

**Board Members in Attendance:** Skip Vadnais, David Shepard, Lisa Colby, Tina Bemis, Elizabeth Keen,

**Virtual:** Peter Mezitt, Dawn Gates-Allen

**Absent:** Al Rose, Pat Spence

**Staff:** Ashley Randle, Winton Pitcoff, Alisha Bouchard, Joanna Shields, Margaret Callanan, Rebecca Davidson

**Public:** Derek Costa, Karen Schwalbe, Ryan MacKay

1. **Start / Call to Order:** Chair called the meeting to order at 10:33am, a quorum was established. All votes must be taken by rollcall.
2. **10/18/23 Meeting Minutes:** Ms. Bemis moved to approve the minutes of October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023. The motion was seconded by Ms. Colby. The minutes were approved by the board via roll call vote.

### New Business:

#### 3. Department Updates:

- a. **Natural Disaster Response Updates:** Commissioner Randle reported first payments started going out last week to farmers. MDAR came up with a formula to distribute as much of the funds possible to all the farmers who reported \$65m in crop losses with \$42m in requests for reimbursement. MDAR was able to fund half that amount at \$20m. Prior payments received by other entities to farmers were deducted and part of the calculation that MDAR used to determine farmers funding. To-date, 100 contracts have been signed and over 30 payments issued to farms. At the state level they are looking to establish an emergency disaster funds.
- b. **Legislative Updates:** Deputy Commissioner Pitcoff provided a legislative update starting with an update on the upcoming budget exercise for next fiscal year. We are mid-way through the legislative session. A couple priorities include updating MDAR's authority on pesticide and produce safety regulations. The Farmland Plan was released, and it is a priority for the department to be able to hold land, as we do not have the authority. The goal for the department to be able to buy, protect, and sell a farmland so it's protected for production.
- c. **Language Access Initiatives:** Rebecca Davidson, Director of Food & Climate Equity provided an update on MDAR's language access initiatives. Ms. Davidson provided background on environmental justice (EJ) and what it means and shared a map of environmental justice communities and criteria that establishes these communities. Ms.

Davidson continued by providing background on socially disadvantaged farmers. MDAR has an EJ Strategic Plan to be released soon with the departments approach to address and track progress on action items identified the EJ Plan which includes priorities important to farmers. MDAR's main focus in the EJ Plan is language services, stakeholder engagement, access to information, and grants and metrics.

Ms. Davidson briefed the board on more specifics of these four areas. Language access services include translation/interpretation; MDAR has a language pool established for small requests. MDAR is exploring a Spanish Language Course tailored to farmers markets. MDAR is also translating key documents into 10 languages for our materials and resources at the department. The agency has online form to request translation services. MDAR has a 16-page booklet about all our program with QR codes and it has been translated to 10 different languages. Ms. Davidson noted the new Executive Order to increase language access across state government, our language access plan has been drafted and will be out- for public comment.

- d. **Climate Task Force:** Ms. Davidson stated that over the past year we have seen a lot of work across state government to address climate. MDAR's internal climate task force will enhance cross-agency collaboration on climate initiatives, climate goals, including reporting tracking existing work and existing work. MDAR will be creating an inventory of existing climate programs, offices, policies, and plans. Public facing campaigning to raise awareness of importance of supporting farmers/food system resiliency. Climate service corps is another new initiative as part of this work. The task force helps support MDAR's resilient Mass goals.

Discussion: Question about definition of EJ and the EJ map where Ms. Davidson explained further about both these areas. Question about when Ms. Davidson's position was created.

Commissioner provided more background about the EJ staff and their work.

- e. **Farmland Action Plan:** Commissioner Randle highlighted some of the key goals and recommendations identified in the Farmland Action Plan which includes a roadmap to overcome challenges and farmland protection, farmland access, food security, and the long-term economic and environmental viability of farms across all regions of the state.
  - The plan includes identifying a multi-year strategy until 2050.
  - Set measurable goals related to farmland protection, farmland viability, and social justice for all populations including historically underserved or disenfranchised populations in the agricultural sector.
  - Recommend strategies and state spending and resources needed to meet these goals.
  - Create measurement tools by which progress will be monitored according to project goals.
- f. **Massachusetts Grown Magazine:** Commissioner Randle provided a brief overview of the new magazine for the board and explained how the magazine highlights MA agriculture and is intended to engage more consumers.

The Commissioner concluded this portion of her remarks by mentioning that there is a lot coming up in the year ahead, much of this year was in response to the natural disaster and she hopes that in the new year the department can focus on some new, great initiatives to come.

4. **Upcoming Board of Agriculture Speaker Updates:** Chair Vadnais talked about doing something with ag schools and talked about aging farmers and cultivating youth through working with the ag schools. Perhaps bring in all the schools to a meeting and see how we can help. The Commissioner

talked about MDAR's interactions with the ag schools and perhaps bring in the schools to present for 10 minutes each at a future meeting (April). The Commissioner and Chair agreed.

Other speakers of interest include, the Chair mentioned aquaculture as its fast growing and would be helpful to know more and open a dialog with the industry. The Commissioner noted the upcoming appointment of Dale Levitt and once he is sworn in, we can plan to have him speak to this.

5. **MA Farm Bureau Guests:** Chair Vadnais introduced Ryan McKay. Ryan talked about his farm and his role and work at MA Farm Bureau as Vice President and brought in Karen Schwalbe, Executive Director of MA Farm Bureau. Ms. Schwalbe talked about her background and work. She went on to provide some history about Farm Bureau's work as a grass roots, membership organization. Ms. Schwalbe also talked about Farm Bureau's mission and vision and support for family farms. Ms. Schwalbe reported on Farm Bureau's long history working with partnership organizations and how they work with the counties, and members to bring matters to the state farm bureau who also works with the national farm bureau on national priorities.

Ms. Schwalbe talked about the county farm bureau structure in MA. There are 50 state farm bureaus as well as Puerto Rico. States work together on national issues. Ms. Schwalbe provided an overview of Farm Bureau's staffing, board members and structure of the organization and high-level the type of things the organization works on. The work is varied and most focused on member calls and their questions/needs. Services are geared to members due to lack of bandwidths for non-members. Legislative efforts come through the whole county process. Farm Bureau's Annual Meeting addresses resolutions brought forward by the counties that is voted on at the annual meeting and added to Farm Bureau's priorities and resolutions for their policy book for the coming year and that is the work they focus on. After the annual meeting, legislative breakfasts in the different counties there is the opportunity to talk to legislators about priorities. Ag Day date this year is pending.

Ryan McKay mentioned the Farmers on the Common event, which is for more consumer engagement, being out on the Boston Common where people can see livestock and engage with the public. A date hasn't been set for this for next year.

Ms. Schwalbe hopes to provide more workshop opportunities for farmers. Doing a lot more networking with Bristol Aggie and with students and student memberships. Through Farm Bureau's Young Farmer Rancher National Committee for ages 18-35. Mr. McKay mentioned his experience on the Committee and how much he learned, the seats he has held and currently holds. In addition, Mr. McKay highlighted the differences in his role versus Farm Bureau's President Warren Shaw's and the matters they work on. Mr. McKay talked about Farm Bureau's agriculture preservation work that farmers can apply to that is focused on land preservation where Farm Bureau holds APRs or CRs.

Ms. Schwalbe discussed Farm Bureau's committees including equine and livestock committees and that a climate committee will be started. Farm Bureau is monitoring topics such as PFAS, labor, climate change/extreme weather and other important areas.

Chair Vadnais addressed the board stating Farm Bureau's work is grass roots and asked how can MDAR be more proactive and incorporate this into the board? He asked if appointing a Farm Bureau liaison for regular attendance at Ag Board Meetings and reporting out to the board of what's happening is feasible. The Chair asked the Board their thoughts.

Discussion: Ms. Bemis asked how it would be different from what appointed board members already do to represent our industries. Chair expressed this would be a standing invitation to Farm Bureau for them to bring information and county resolutions to this board. Chair asked again how the board would like to move ahead with this for Farm Bureau to have a non-voting liaison.

Ms. Keen commented that maybe we have other organizations attend as well and have Farm Bureau attend once a year but also include from local organizations. We appreciate having different speakers. Chair agrees that certainly the more info and speakers the better.

Ms. Gates-Allen thanked Mr. McKay and Ms. Schwalbe for coming and noted as she represents Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association, it's helpful to collaborate with different organizations with so much going on in agriculture.

Mr. Shepard asked if this is trying to create a new position what governs this? The Chair said "no" that it is to source and bring new information in because Farm Bureau represents 3,000 voices of farmers. Frequency could be once a year or perhaps after Farm Bureau's resolutions come in, ag education goals, etc. Would like some direction from the board as we all agree about bringing in different speakers. But what about having a Farm Bureau liaison to hear what's happening at the counties.

Ms. Shields notes that you could have them come in when Farm Bureau has something to be shared. The board did not vote on this topic.

6. **Board Member Updates:** Deputy Commissioner Bouchard reported that Dale Levitt was appointed to the board pending swearing in. Another candidate is also pending appointment and another candidate's package is ready to be sent up to EEA for Governor's Boards and Commissions. Meghan Russell resigned from the board and MDAR is searching for another candidate. New members have 3-months from appointment to get sworn in.

Chair asked if any other items.

Ms. Bemis notes that Christmas tree sales are down or leveling off because of costs. Ms. Colby talked about her tree sales and the opportunity to meet Gov. Healy's parents.

Mr. Shepard reported being at the tree lighting at the State House in Boston and gave away cheese, eggnog, and treats. It was a good turnout.

Ms. Keene talked about Farmers Gather to get farmers together. They meet once a month at farms in Western Massachusetts in Berkshire County, very small-scale farming as a way to build comradery. Farms wanting to be more pollinator friendly.

Ms. Gates-Allen reported on cranberries with a lot of changes, collaborating on cranberry committee and reshape what the industry had and offer those services and have the data available. Pesticide tracking software will go live to send nutrient work orders to JBI for helicopter applications. Cranberry research meeting talked about the growing season and climate. Prices are always a challenge, growers trying to be sustainable.

Mr. Mezitt reported boxwood tree moth is a huge deal where MDAR is managing the issues in Barnstable County. Hoping states get together to understand the science for a compliance agreement regarding the boxwood virus, there is treatment, but it is not labeled for use yet. This is a big deal in the industry.

7. **Adjournment:** The Chair asked for a motion to adjourn. Ms. Keene made a motion to adjourn. Ms. Bemis seconded the motion. A rollcall vote to adjourn passed unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 12:06pm.