

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, April 17, 2024

10:00 AM Hybrid Meeting (in-person & via MS Teams)

Board Members in Attendance: Skip Vadnais, David Shepard, Lisa Colby, Dale Leavitt, Tina Bemis, Al Rose, Kat Chang, Peter Mezitt.

Virtual: Kim Trust, Pat Spence.

Absent: Elizabeth Keen, Dawn Gates-Allen, Bill Crawford

Staff: Ashley Randle, Winton Pitcoff, Alisha Bouchard, Joanna Shields, Jessica Burgess, Rebecca Davidson

Public: Kevin Grant, Derek Costa (Bristol Aggie), Clint Richmond (Sierra Club)

1. **Start / Call to Order:** Chair Vadnais called the meeting to order at 10:20am, a quorum was established. All votes must be taken by rollcall. The Chair then asked recognized new members to the board and asked all members to introduce themselves.
2. **Boards & Commission:**
 - a) **New Board Members Swearing-in:** Prior to the start of the board meeting, new members were sworn in by the Governor's office.
 - b) **Board Member Appointment Updates:** Deputy Commissioner/Chief of Staff Bouchard reported that with the swearing of new board members Dale Levitt, Kat Chang, Kim Trust, and Bill Crawford the board now has a fully constituted board.
3. **12/13/23 Meeting Minutes:** Mr. Sheppard moved to approve the meeting minutes of December 13, 2023. The motion was seconded by Ms. Bemis. The minutes were approved by the board via roll call vote with Mr. Leavitt, Ms. Spence, Ms. Trust, and Ms. Chang abstaining. Ms. Bouchard advised that the board may disregard approval of the October 18, 2023, meeting minutes as those minutes were previously approved by the board at the December 13, 2023, meeting.
4. **New Business: Department Updates.**
 - a) **Temporary Hiring Controls:** Ms. Bouchard reported on Governor Healey's temporary hiring controls in effect until June 30, 2024, for any positions to be hired from state or capital accounts. Departments have the option to request waivers for positions to be hired and if approved will be allowed to continue with the hiring process. MDAR submitted waivers for 6 positions including for the new Director of Food Security, Food Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) Program Coordinator, Accountant V, Federal Funds Program Manager, Animal Health Dairy Inspector, and for the APR Stewardship Supervisor position. MDAR doesn't have a timeline yet when to expect a decision on waiver requests but hopeful it will be within the next few weeks.

- b) Farmland Action Plan Update:** Deputy Commissioner Pitcoff provided the board an update on the Farmland Action Plan (FAP) that was released late last year. A full-time program coordinator was brought on to spearhead the FAP. Katherine Otto is the new staff person who will manage and coordinate the work associated with the approximate 400 action items in the plan. Winton continued to explain ideas on how the plan will be implemented and that the FAP is available online. A link to the FAP was sent to board members.
- c) Legislative Updates:** Mr. Pitcoff continued by updating the board on the status of the legislative process and indicated that 6,000 bills have been filed this year. A new agricultural committee has taken on looking at agricultural bills in a different way, they have a lot of latitude what they can do with that bill and the Chair put together an ag Omnibus bill. Mr. Pitcoff went on to explain some of the agricultural related items in the bill. Highlights include giving MDAR the authority to own land which would be a valuable tool to help protect land. It would give some liability relief and tax credits around food security when farmers donate food. A definition for ag tourism is also part of the bill and brings clarity to municipal challenges and a law that municipalities must follow. The bill stands up an Ag Equity Commission to look at issues around agriculture and where we could be stronger. The bill is in front of the Ways and Means Committee. A lot of stakeholder groups are advocating for this work and if nothing else it helps to educate legislators.
- d) FY25 Budget Updates:** Mr. Pitcoff reported we are in the thick of budget season, Governor's budget level funded MDAR which includes the 13 new staff positions. Structural change, the FSIG Program previously run by EEA since being stood up in 2020, the Gov moved to MDAR with \$25m plus leftover ARPA funds for another \$20m that will go out via grant funds. House budget released last week with about a 1% cut. FSIG stays with MDAR, approximately 1,200 amendments to the House budget included increases for MDAR that Mr. Pitcoff touched upon. All those earmarks will be debated publicly next week then we'll see what gets through. Then the Senate will issue their budget, Mr. Pitcoff continued to explain how the budget process works. This completed the operating budget section of the report out.

Continuing with his report, Mr. Pitcoff advised the capital budget, comes from bond authorizations, and doesn't have to go through as long a process as the operating budget which is good because most of the department's grant programs come from the capital budget. Mr. Pitcoff touched upon those specific programs that are funded through capital. MDAR is trying to move the release of program RFRs earlier in the year hopefully to help farmers apply during the winter/early spring months before the growing season kicks in.

- e) Ag Day Highlights:** Commissioner Randle briefed the board on Ag Day and highlighted some of the attendees and events of the day including having attendance from FAA and 4H. The Ag Youth Council was launched, and the Commissioner spoke about where some of the youth on the council is from. The council will start having meetings in June and get out for farm tours and engagement with the ag board in the future.
- f) Ag Resource Fair:** Last Friday MDAR hosted the 1st Ag Resource Fair, the Commissioner explained that 30 organizations who offer farmers resources attended, and the plan is to host it again next year during the winter.
- g) Program Updates:** Commissioner Randle continued with her updates and talked about Earth Week starting next week and some of the visits the department will be doing. June is dairy month, MDAR will spotlight the cheese sector and tour some dairy farms. Farmland Action Plan (FAP) goals include land protection through the APR program, over the last 2-months the team hosted "Flapjacks and Farm Chats" in some of the towns across the state to educate landowners and potential landowners on the APR program.

The Commissioner mentioned MDAR is trying to do more press releases including this month to spotlight flower growers in conjunction with Mother's Day. Next month will focus on mental

health awareness month, a peer network of farmers has been trained to connect with other farmers and connect them with resources.

Staffing, Mackenize May started with MDAR last month and now our ag markets team and will have a coordinator/POC with the commodity groups. Mackenize will also help run the dairy tax credit program starting next year.

A Spanish course for farmers market managers is being offered to show customers respect and connections. We have over 40 farmers markets participating along with 10 MDAR staff. The course will start in the next few weeks.

Workforce Development, MDAR contracted with Gibbus Consulting to do in-depth interviews with commodity sectors and to better understand what workforce needs look like and what is needed. We're also looking at if there is demand to justify another Ag high school in Central MA and what those needs will be.

The Commissioner shared that in June the British Embassy's Chief Plant Officer, Dr. Spence is coming to Massachusetts, and we'll take her on a tour of orchards in with UMass Extension in attendance.

Discussion: Ms. Spence is very interested in the issues of mental health for our farmers and asked if MDAR can you share those documents. Commissioner Randle will share the information following the meeting. Ms. Spence, ask about any breakout for farmers of color or if the program is mental health in general. The Commissioner indicated that current it is farmers in general, but the contractor can look into this more. Ms. Spence indicated her strong interest to connect about the Spanish course if there are any additional openings as it would help at the farmstand including Haitian Creole. Ms. Davidson will see if there are any openings and will circle back with Ms. Spence.

Action Taken: None.

- 5. Upcoming Board of Agriculture Speaker Updates:** Chair Vadnais raised the topic of having guest speakers attend future board meetings and include the agricultural high schools. The suggested format is to give each speaker 5-10 minutes each for them to speak and for the board to consider other ideas for speakers in the future.

Commissioner Randle suggested for the June meeting we try to get the ag high schools to attend, and the Center for Eco-technology could be on back up. The Chair asked the board how they'd like to proceed. We talked about the ag schools, or technology is another topic to continue pursuing.

Discussion: The Chair asked the board if they are agreeable to having the ag schools attend the board's next meeting. After a brief discussion, board members agreed with having the ag schools attend the next meeting and to have the eco-technology group on backup. Derek Costa from the Bristol ag high school indicated he is happy to accommodate a June meeting. Commissioner Randle will help coordinate with the other schools.

- 6. Environmental Justice Update:** Rebecca Davidson, Director of Food and Climate Equity presented to the board MDAR's environmental justice (EJ) program, what EJ is, priority areas of the program including language services, strategic initiatives, resources, and program partners. A copy of the presentation will be provided to board members following the meeting.

Discussion: Ms. Bemis asked if there are plans to teach artificial intelligence (AI) for translation as she is using Chat GPT for editing her documents. Ms. Davidson indicated the department doesn't like to fully like to rely on AI for translation, as there isn't full confidence in the translation services provided through the platform. Vital documents need to be 100% correctly translated. A lot of

MDAR's documents have scientific information that our translators need to work on. Ms. Bouchard said the Commonwealth doesn't have a policy for using AI so we can't use it in the workplace yet.

Ms. Spence commented to Ms. Davidson's point about AI and translation, that last year her organization was doing a lot of translation, but it didn't exactly get there because there was some confusion with the messaging.

Ms. Davidson mentioned on language access, it sends a signal that our programs are inclusive and open to any farmer that wants to participate.

7. Board Member Updates: At this time, the Chair asked board members for updates for their sectors.

Mr. Mezitt for the nursery and landscape industry, reported on the problem of deer eating native plants and suggested that MDAR needs to take a leadership role in this area regarding the deer problem. He said it's important to start addressing this. The Chair asked how it can be addressed, both Commissioner Randle and Mr. Pitcoff mentioned pending bills in the legislature to address this issue including the creation of a Commission to discuss remedies and that MDAR is pressing where it can however, deer is under the purview of the department rather it's under the Department of Fish and Game (DFG). The Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program (FSIG) however, does support projects like deer fencing. There are a lot of people involved in this issue and DFG is starting to address biodiversity and this is one of the topics that is being considered as part of that work.

Ms. Chang started her report by expressing how excited she is to be here and is really excited about the focus on education. She said her farm is currently a licensed poultry and getting licensed as a processing facility through USDA in MA and will be the only one.

Mr. Rose from Red Apple Farm, shared Mr. Mezitt's concerns about deer and indicated the coyotes help manage this on his farm. In February, at the direct marketing conference, Mr. Rose said so many people were so happy about MDAR and the Commissioner's support for ag tourism and he expressed his thanks. Continuing Mr. Rose said weather is his biggest challenge on the farm with last year being very difficult and how his farm benefited from the NDR grant. This year things started budding a little early, but things seem to be doing okay with blossoms expected in early May.

Ms. Bemis represents the flowers growers and nursery industry and agreed with Mr. Rose about the challenges with weather. She said industry is slightly behind, with some stores not quite up and running yet when they typically open in March. Delays may be due to labor issues. Ms. Bemis said her husband Ed worked with the industry on the issue requiring sprinklers in greenhouses. She also said a bill to ban neonics is back in the legislature and concerning.

Mr. Levitt represents aquaculture, with two issues to raise. Recently certified as a net loss adjuster with oyster and clam farms there is a lot of dissatisfaction with the state office that is slow to react with the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) claims to inspect. He contacted the Farm Service Agency (FSA) regarding five farms directly impacted and they'll try to assist. Also, weather related, the wet spring rainfalls and sewers from New Bedford have impacted Mr. Levitt's farm multiple times along with other farms. Industry is trying to get to the city of New Bedford to address the issue, but they must work through DFG's, Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW). Mr. Levitt said he is not sure what they going to do, DFW transitioning shellfish categories classifications to conditional approvals to harvest. Very complicated, shellfish oversight with FDA and it's heavily regulated. The Chair and Mr. Levitt discussed non-point source pollution and how some of the discharging works including how there is stormwater run-off that dumps raw sewage into the bay that causes rainfall closures. A dry spell will help, and the product will clean itself, then after 7-days the state will test for sewage indicators. The Chair and Commissioner talked about how MDAR works with the Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) on this but a lot of this comes from the source of pollution. Chair asked how staff can help with this, and if they are plugged into Mr. Levitt's group

which they are. Chair asked that this issue continue to be updated in future meetings along with the deer problem.

Mr. Shepard introduced himself as the representative of the dairy industry and spoke about Ag Day at the statehouse and the turnout. He indicated legislative meetings went well. Mr. Shepard said is looking forward to the summer picnic that will be held on August 9th and mentioned the dairy farmers appreciate for the dairy tax credit program. Mr. Shepard flagged HB4481, the Orleans pesticide restriction bill and commented that it doesn't seem it's headed in the right direction. The Commissioner mentioned we've seen bills like this in the past and typically don't see them go anywhere given MDAR's pesticide authority.

Ms. Colby introduced herself as being in the hay business with about 300 acres at Colby Farm with a farmstand that operates year-round. She grows sunflowers on a 3-acre hill along with sweet corn and has challenges with deer and a pack of coyotes.

Chair Vadnais operates Homestead Farm, raises livestock, and sells at his farm store, beef, turkeys, etc. USDA processing is his biggest problem, the facility doesn't operate as it should, poor business plan didn't help the facility. As a result, there is a need but their ability to meet that need is not there. The Chair was glad to hear about Ms. Chang's poultry processing ability.

Ms. Spence reported deer issues in Boston as well and is very interested in this along with weather issues too. She said certain products grow well in the city but things like corn and apples don't so always looking to connect with other farms to partner with. The biggest challenge is having enough land to grow enough food to meet the multiculture demand in the Boston area so that her organization can grow and satisfy their customers at the farmstands.

Ms. Trust sits on the MA Maple Association and a survey is out to see how the season went. She reported that the season started early this year with boiling beginning in mid-January and most farms wrapped up early. The season is getting earlier and earlier, slight reduction in maple production this year but it was a good year. More information available after the survey results come in.

8. **Other Business:** The Chair asked Mr. Costa if had any questions or would like to address the board. Mr. Costa said he appreciates the work MDAR is doing and looks forward to further conversation.
9. **Next Meeting/Schedule:** The next board meeting is scheduled for June 12, 2024. MDAR will send out all the future dates, the EJ slides, FAP link and dates for other events.
10. **Adjournment:** The Chair asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Shepard made a motion to adjourn. Mr. Rose seconded the motion. A rollcall vote to adjourn passed unanimously and the meeting adjourned at 12:07pm.