

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, June 21st, 2023

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

Board Members in Attendance: Skip Vadnais, Lisa Colby, Dave Sheppard, Tina Bemis, Peter Mezitt, Al Rose, Dawn Gates-Allen.

Absent: Pat Spence, Elizabeth Keen, Megan Russell

Staff: Commissioner Randle, Alisha Bouchard, Joanna Shields, Margaret Callanan, Rebecca Davidson

Public: Winton Pitcoff

AGENDA

1. **Start / Call to Order:** At 10:02 Chair Vadnais called the board to order, a quorum was established. All votes must be taken by rollcall.
2. **5/24/23 Meeting Minutes:** Page 2, under item 2 as corrected. Mr. Vadnais asked for a motion to accept minutes as amended. Ms. Bemis moved to approve the minutes of May 24th, 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. NEASDA Regional Meeting
 - i. Commissioner Randle reported to the board on the NEASDA meeting and indicated all the Northeast states were present except for New Jersey. The May 18th frost was a major topic of conversations. The Commissioner mentioned the letter to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack from NEASDA for disaster declaration and request to compensate farmers for their crop losses. Letter sent last Friday. FSA also sending info to USDA for disaster declaration to trigger low interest loans to farmers for documented losses. Feb. 4th freeze was also discussed.
 - ii. Land protection and the balance with solar was also discussed at the conference.
 - iii. Q3 ballot initiative was discussed regarding animal confinement for pork, eggs, and veal. Implementation date is still pending final judgement, after 30-days the law goes into effect - estimated to be mid-July. Board discussion: The chair asked how enforcement will work with product coming into the state. Commissioner Randle explained how we regulate the egg portion of the law and how its compliant based with enforcement from the AGO. Continuing the Commissioner explained how a similar law is working in CA after

Prop 12. Chair mentioned we may anticipate then that MA farmers meets the humane requirements. The Commissioner confirmed in-state inspections would fall to MDAR on the farm-side.

- iv. NEASDA also discussed New England Feeding New England with their report with New England food production meet a 30% goal by 2030 – this aligns with our work at the department regarding USDA grants and the food policy council. MDAR is continuing to work on this.
- b. HR Updates (trainings, staff updates) Ms. Bouchard noted that board members have received emails about trainings including cybersecurity; EOTS pushing to have board members complete the trainings. Mr. Sheppard is the only board member to get trainings and reminder emails. Ms. Bouchard notes that if you submitted payroll paperwork then HR is targeting them. Mr. Sheppard notes you had to fill out the paperwork whether you got stipend or not. Secretariat asked Ms. Bouchard to be on a team to speak about HR issues.
- c. Mr. Pitcoff will be joining MDAR starting July 3rd, 2023. In addition, Mr. Phu Mai will be our new Communications Director to help with press, talking points, and events in the Commissioner's office. Ms. Rebecca Davidson has been working as our Strategic Initiatives Manager and is transitioning into the Director of Food and Equity, making the connection between food security, climate and equity. With the new budget we expect up to receive 12 new full-time staff including some positions for the APR program. The budget is expected out soon. Comm. Bills filed the tax credit bill includes increasing dairy tax credit from \$6m to \$8m, we are just waiting for a final bill.
- d. Upcoming farm tours, fair visits, and events. We will have several farm tours and fair visits starting in the next month with the first one being July 14th visit to Westport fair. MDAR will send the board a list of visits including farmers market visits and board members are always welcome to attend. Ms. Gates-Allen is interested in attending the Westport Fair. Chair Vadnais mentioned that if there are any board members in areas close to fairs it would be nice if they can attend. Ms. Gates-Allen happy to attend the Westport Fair.
- e. Commissioner Randle wanted to gauge the interest of the board to attend a board meeting at the Big E on Mass Day and talked about what goes on that day. The date is Thursday September 21st and we can work to get tickets and parking for board members. MDAR will work with the Big E. The Chair Vadnais for Board member interest, he mentioned he would like to, Ms. Colby stated that she is interested as long as it is not during sunflowers Mr. Sheppard and Ms. Gates-Allen confirmed they would attend, along with for Ms. Bemis and Mr. Mezitt as long as they have no previous commitment. Mr. Rose is unsure as it is during peak apple season – if he can get away, he will. Chair Vadnais mentioned that it would be great if the board can come together and would be good for the Governor and Lt. Governor to see board members there.
- f. We have three candidates to send up to the governor's office for Board appointments, need a 4th. Chair Vadnais wants to know if we are looking for someone with a specific area of expertise. Commissioner Randle would like to appoint a board member in the maple or apiary sector. Ms. Gates-Allen has a neighbor who is a homeschooler and raises bees and writes articles for apiary magazine. Commissioner Randle asks for her information. Ms. Gates-Allen will provide the requested information to the Commissioner.

4. Board member updates

- a. The Chair asked the board for industry updates starting with Ms. Colby. She expressed the need for more sunshine.
- b. Mr. Sheppard informs the Board that the summer dairy farmer picnic is on August 4th. Last night he attended a fund raiser with Sen. Spilka about the dairy tax credit increase and had a good conversation with her. Said the increase would be a big help for the dairy farmers.
- c. Ms. Bemis said that after the frost there were some issues, but all is doing better now. She also said that it is too early to say but some of the woody plants seem to be rebounding. Also said that another flower grower is going out of the business because they can't get enough help.

- d. Mr. Mezitt has been working with John Fernandez who has been a great help; he was at the fundraiser last night as well. John is very focused on PFAS right now because of what is happening in Maine. He noted that deer are harmful to a number of commodity groups. Wanted to know what we can do with Commissioner of the Department of Fish and Game. Wondered if it makes sense to look at how many deer by county and anything we can do.
Commissioner mentioned a briefing with Rep Hogan, chair of PFAS commission and to talk about the Maine model and not getting ahead of selves and follow EPA. Maine is backtracking now because some companies are not registering products in the state until they change their model. MDAR is following the walk before we run approach and waiting to hear from EPA on biosolids.
 - e. Ms. Gates-Allen states that cranberry industry growers are concerned about climate change and things like frost creating excess water as well as the development stage of the crops. Karen - Farm Bill hearing priorities that we may need. John Fernandez has been working really well with the cranberry industry. Labor is a huge issue, industry for workforce development to help set some priorities for ag at some of the schools.
Regarding PFAS, at cranberry meeting Brad Mitchell was a guest speaker and he talked about Maine as well and discussed waiting for EPA as well. We also have a deer problem on the bogs. Former Sec. Beaton tried to extend the hunting season. Nematodes are also an issue.
 - f. Mr. Rose reaffirmed that deer is four-letter word, they go after apple trees. This year May 18th frost was the big issue, it is an evolving situation with some coming out of it okay and others are not. It is site specific as to how farmers fared in regard to crop and orchard damage. The positive side is that the apples they have are growing very well and big, but some varieties aren't doing as well. Need a little more sun and seasonal weather to keep things going.
 - g. Chair Vadnais said that it is worth mentioning that Senator Gobi has been appointed as Director of Rural Affairs and the Chair thinks this will help rural applicants on grants. In the last meeting we talked about having guest speakers, Mr. Vadnais spoke to Warren Shaw and he and Karen Schwalbe would be interested. It'd be good to have them come and focus on certain topics. Commissioner Randle said that the Sept meeting may be good to have them there with us at the Big E.
5. Chair Vadnais asked for any additional items and rolled into the board's meeting schedule. The Sept meeting may be able to cancel one of the other meetings. The Chair asked board members their preference to cancel October or November meeting. After a brief discussion, the Chair would like to cancel the November meeting.
6. **Adjournment.**
Ms. Gates-Allen made a motion to adjourn. Mr. Sheppard seconded the motion. A rollcall vote to adjourn passed unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 10:50am.