

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**

Thursday, September 19th, 2024
12:00 PM In-Person

Board Members in Attendance: Skip Vadnais, Dale Leavitt, Tina Bemis, Kat Chang, Dave Shepard, Pat Spence, Kim Trust, Al Rose, and Peter Mezitt.

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

Staff: Ashley Randle, Winton Pitcoff, Alisha Bouchard, and Joanna Shields.

Public: Darren Mendez, Derek Costa, and Arthur Garreau.

- 1) **Start/Call to Order:** Chair Vadnais called the meeting to order at 12:24pm, a quorum was established and did introductions.

Peter Mezitt joined the meeting at 12:32pm

- 2) **6/12/24 Meeting Minutes**, vote required. Mr. Leavitt moved to approve the meeting minutes of June 12th, 2024. The motion was seconded by Ms. Chang. The minutes were approved by the board unanimously.
- 3) **New Business: Department Updates:**
 - a) **Staffing updates:**
 - 1) The hiring freeze still in effect till October 31st. MDAR was fortunate to get waivers approved to proceed with hiring a new dairy inspector, an animal feed inspector, and two of our first FTEs for the new Division of Food Security including the Director of Food Security and the FSIG Grants Management Specialist. Offers have been extended for both of these positions and the new hires will start on October 21st. We also transferred from EEA a part-time contract employee from EEA to support the FSIG grant program and Kasia Gorecki started with us about 6-weeks ago.

We have not received waiver approvals to proceed with hiring an APR Stewardship Supervisor and an Accountant V. Hopefully, the freeze is lifted on October 31st, and we can kick start the process to get these two positions on. These positions are carryovers from last year's budget and new for this fiscal year we'll be hiring 7 employees – one is a backfill nursery inspector, a farmland access & beginning farmer coordinator, a hemp licensing coordinator, 2 administrative assistants - one for animal health and one for our pesticide divisions, an assistant operations coordinator for food safety, and an attorney to support the legal division.

b) Program Updates:

- i) **Mosquito update** – Ms. Bouchard noted that 11 human West Nile and 4 EEE cases have been confirmed and that we have not had as many since 2019. Aerial spray was conducted in Plymouth County and in Worcester County. Massachusetts has longest history of EEE than any other state.

Discussion: Mr. Leavitt asks about horses and vaccine – Ms. Bouchard said its optional for horses and there is no vaccine for humans. Mr. Rose asks what type of terrain is sprayed – Ms. Bouchard said they map the area for aerial spraying, truck spray goes about 300 feet. Ms. Bemis said she saw on Facebook that someone asked about the mosquito spraying and she was able to find all the info on the MDAR site to answer the person's questions. Residents can not opt out of spraying in a public health emergency situation. Ms. Chang asked about the pesticide and how it effects birds. Ms. Bouchard explains about the departments involved in reviewing the pesticide and how it is applied.

c) Legislative/budget updates:

- i) Deputy Pitcoff provided an update on HPAI regarding impacted dairy herds across the country. Milk from infected animals once pasteurized is safe to consume. MA stepped up a program to ask for voluntary testing of herds, there was a lot of communication with the dairy industry. Hopefully everyone saw in the press that MA is the only state in the country to do mandatory testing and came back 100% virus free. USDA recommends testing every 3-weeks but hopefully we can keep up testing every 3-months. This will boost consumer trust in the pasteurized milk supply. Biosecurity is being closely monitored

Discussion: Ms. Chang asks what happens if the farm tests positive. Quarantine required for approx. 30 days. Some human cases have been reported but nothing life threatening. It is important to be safe and careful about it. Some other states in the area are looking at our model now. Mr. Rose asks if the milk gets quarantined does the milk still go out, Mr. Leavitt inquires if raw milk is a factor? So far it is unclear but milk is tested from the bulk tank on the farm.

- ii) Grant season – Deputy Pitcoff updated the Board on the budget delays that impacted grant programs. Starting to announce grant awards now including FSIG; that will be announced soon as the recommendations were just approved by the Gov's office. It is also the season for APR closing with 9 new properties being restricted and will be released in an upcoming press release.
- iii) Budget was a little late this year but passed and MDAR had to absorb a 1% cut. We are pleased with maintaining existing staff and increase staff as Ms. Bouchard reported. Mr. Pitcoff updated the Board on the legislative sessions and how that works between formal and informal sessions. Most agricultural bills stalled and some legislative priorities were attached to the economic development bill; including ability to sell land, hoisting for ag schools, etc. We are have some hope these and other items will pass this session. Also coming up is the environment bond bill and we are working on that now to include our priorities for EEA's review and approval to proceed including MDAR being able to hold land, invasive species, etc. It is kind of a quite time in terms of legislative actions but a busy time for the department as we prepare these proposals. Commissioner noted a wish list for ag and what we would like to see including land protection, urban ag and aquaculture and to better support both urban ag and aquaculture thru infrastructure.

d) Upcoming events:

- i) Commissioner Randle noted that have MA farmers market week last month and talked about the site visits. Following we went right into urban ag week with 8-9 site visits during the week with Pat Spence hosting conservation districts at the Urban Ag (UA) Institute with great conversations and how UA Released 10-year report of the impacts of UA.
- ii) Team has been making fair visits across the state, we support the Big E and the MA building. October is cranberry month. At the same time, working on building the climate service core and youth as part of workforce development goals.

4) Board member updates

- a) Ms. Spence said that they had a wonderful season, happy growers, farm stands – started 4 years ago now 260 consumers at the farm stand. End result is making a healthier community, growing a lot of culturally appropriate food all for different cultures and able to grow them in the city, Haitian and Jamaican communities – bringing in guest chefs to demonstrate how to make healthy locally grown meals. The community is very exciting, the seniors now hang out at the farm and they keep coming back. Many public officials stop by and UFI partners with many different groups.
- b) Mr. Shepard – Provided an update on several events he's attended recently. Corn silage good, its dry, good hay crops.
- c) Mr. Leavitt – Oysters are good but lost some because of the heat. Overall been a good summer. Some move their operation into deeper water.
- d) Ms. Bemis – The report for Massachusetts Horticulture is that the season was unremarkable. There were no serious weather events or pests that affected the growing or sales of ornamental plants: it was business as usual. The last month of dry weather may have an effect on sales if we don't see significant rain soon.
- e) Mr. Mezitt spoke on drought and the effects the lack of rain is having on landscaping. People need to water their new plants and take time to examine their entire yard as plants that have been in the ground for years may need supplemental water depending on the soil conditions and sun exposure. It is important for the government agencies to set the tone and support watering plants as they are beneficial to the environment as opposed to lawns which are not as beneficial and have the ability to withstand prolonged droughts better than plants. The maple syrup industry in Quebec and seems to have a strong connection to Agri-tourism that perhaps Massachusetts producers could gain ideas from. I recently attended a tour of the country and it was evident that the industry is marketing itself aggressively and also has many destination venues for events and weddings. The state of the union with the Christmas Tree growers. There are fewer growers and less inventory year after year and the demand for Cut trees is flat or slightly down, as I suspect there is a trend toward purchasing "artificial" or "permanent" trees as the importers like to refer to them. The reason for shortages mostly has to do with fewer producers as the family farm operations are not being taken over by the next generation.
- f) Kim – Mass Maple producers picnic – good turnout. Getting ready for annual meeting in January and Mass Maple Producers Association is working on promoting maple for holidays.
- g) Al – Lot of optimism, cold nights have helped apples. Wonderful blueberry and sunflower crop. A lot of good weather, 4 big weekends that define apple season, last two of Sept and first 2 of October. People are ready for all things fall. Red Apple farm is at Gillette Stadium now. Peaches – planted new trees this year, over 100 – won't be ready for 3 years. White peaches did very well this year. Ashley - USA today named Al's farm as one of the top 10 places to pick apples in the country.
- h) Kat – new people getting into poultry. Ramping up to be USDA certified – need more hands, new roles and positions. Kat wants to do more workshops – more hands on training events.
- i) Skip - One of the biggest challenges is where to get cattle processed especially for resale. Meatworks has problems – Darren states that they are back open for about 90 days. New CEO – told they are sustainable but the prior debt is a problem - \$8 million. Biggest holdback to industry is being able to get things processed. Kat said they are working with Foodworks, they have been trying to help eliminate the bottleneck. Skip said it has to be USDA to sell commercially. You need to schedule a year in advance. The way the processor is doing business is creating the issues – trading kill slots. Availability of land is difficult – having enough is difficult of acquire to make a business sustainable.

The Chair turned to the public members from Bristol County Ag School, and mentioned their presentations from last meeting and asked what programs where they see students should be educated like anything in aquaculture.

Derek said there are 4 ag schools and like a Bristol county under workforce development how do we get kids into those industries where workforce is needed. Modernization of ag schools using technology like at their dairy program in Bristol and would be great to get more help/to hear more about what is needed in the industry and perhaps a tour of the school or some one-on-one conversations would be great.

Skip, all the schools thought it was a good idea to connect with board members on what they are hearing about workforce needs.

Derek 10/19 & 10/20 is the annual farm show, capstone program – encouraged the board if they ever want to hold a meeting at the school would be happy to host.

Chair asked any other business from members, Tina, her husband concerned about state's approach to sterile invasive plants. Where to send him? Commissioner suggested reaching out to Taryn and Jenn, they work with MAPRIG? And they have been working to find a pathway forward for certain plants like the calliary pear.

Pat at NE Ag institute? Would be interesting to connect with the schools and connect folks in the city and grow food. Senator Markey Dorchester food co-op, what to do on a state level to do about food insecurity working group, he was very open to listening.

Next meeting - October 16th, and December 11th

Chair closing comments thought this was a great meeting to be in-person, if you can. The board agreed.

5) Adjournment.

The Chair asks for a motion to adjourn the meeting. _Tina made a motion to adjourn. _Kim seconded the motion. The board unanimously voted to adjourn the meeting at 1:49pm.