

# 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**

**Tuesday, February 28, 2023**  
**10:00 AM Virtual Meeting (via MS Teams)**

**Board Members in Attendance:** Skip Vadnais, Al Rose, Pat Spence, Lisa Colby, Tina Bemis, Dave Sheppard, Dawn Gates-Allen

**Absent:** Peter Mezitt, Elizabeth Keen, Megan Russell

**Staff:** Comm. Lebeaux, Ashley Randle, Alisha Bouchard, Rebecca Davidson, Joanna Shields, Margaret Callanan

**Public:** Jeanne, Karen Schwalbe, Winton Pitcoff, Rena Sumner (MLNA)

- 1. Start/Call to Order:** At 10:10am Chair Vadnais called the board to order, a quorum was established. All votes must be taken by rollcall.
- 2. 12/20/22 Meeting Minutes:** Ms. Gates-Allen moved to approve the meeting minutes of December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022. The motion was seconded by Ms. Colby. The minutes were approved by the board via roll call vote with one abstention from Chair Vadnais.

### **New Business.**

#### **3. Department Updates:**

Commissioner Lebeaux introduced the department updates beginning with NASDA and background on when meetings take place throughout the year. The Commissioner asked Ms. Randle to give an update from the NASDA Winter Policy Conference.

Ms. Randle noted that it is a farm bill year, policy recommendations with a strong focus on nutrition and SNAP, conservation, climate change and building resiliency in the food system were prominent subjects. Four action items were approved – Animal disease cost rates/ Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) for a standard rate with USDA for reimbursement. Emergency preparedness unified biosecurity for poultry flocks. EPA settlement agreements. Tropilaelaps mites that impact honeybees discussed, have not been seen in MA or the country yet, but it is on their radar. Policy amendment passed – schools meals allowing whole milk and low-fat flavored milk. Regional NEASDA meeting for Northeast states have similar issues like spotted lanternfly MA four sites in the state, continued conversations around the farm bill.

The Commissioner mentioned how valuable the organization is both nationally and regionally to collaborate with and share information. He noted how helpful NASDA's advocacy is on a variety of topics and a very effective tool.

Next Ms. Bouchard spoke about fleet rightsizing; noting that state agencies are mandated through this program to reduce their gas-powered vehicle fleets in an effort to begin the transition to electric vehicles. MDAR is waiting for the target number of vehicles we will be asked to turn-in. The mosquito control districts were originally asked to turn in 20 vehicles, and we negotiated down to 14. This still causes concern that turning in that number will have an operational impact. Seven (7) have been identified, need to identify an additional 7 vehicles.

The primary problem is the infrastructure for electric vehicles is not in place. It is currently not possible to turn in a vehicle and replace it with an EV. This is ongoing issue for all agencies. We will provide additional updates at future meetings.

Ms. Gates-Allen asked about service maintenance and battery charging. Ms. Bouchard informed her that as of now we have nowhere to charge an EV vehicle and that we are working with the Division of Capital Asset Management to put in charging stations. MDAR vehicles travel all over the state; need to make the transition but the infrastructure is not in place.

Ms. Bouchard next touched on the Boston office re-location. MDAR is busy with final preparations for the office move from the Causeway Street to the new Cambridge Street location which is in the final stages of construction. The move is scheduled to take place the first week of May. The lease at Causeway Street expires on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023, without out the option to renew. At the new location, MDAR will co-locate with other EEA agencies using a hotel model similar to how we have setup the Southborough office. Staff can make a reservation to use a workspace or conference room. We will cohabitate with other agencies in the Boston office.

Update on Board of Ag Appointments/Vacancies - Ms. Crystal Card resigned leaving 3 vacancies on the board. The Commissioner noted that we always need 7 of the 13 members to have a quorum for meetings even if all 13 seats are not filled. Ms. Gates-Allen asked if there are any representatives from a young or beginning farmer on the board. Commissioner Lebeaux responded that last year we brought in two young farmers to be considered, one dropped out and the other did not get cleared on background check. Ms. Randle hopes to recruit new members and hopefully add more diversity. She plans to connect with the person with the outstanding background matter. Ms. Gates-Allen thinks that it is important to get members with these backgrounds. Chair Vadnais asked of the 9 we have how many are ag appointments or people in the industry? Commissioner Lebeaux consulted the contact sheet for board members and ran through how many members are considered farmers, which totals eight. Chair Vadnais thinks we need one more focused on food and fiber. Commissioner Lebeaux noted that we have a couple non-farmers on the board.

Ms. Spence asked about her work with interest is urban ag, is she still she listed as a non-farmer? Commissioner Lebeaux noted that she is an educator/President/CEO at the Urban Farming Institute, but she does not make her living through food and fiber. All are members of the Board of Agriculture, who is a farmer and not is just to track meeting the statutory requirement in Chapter 20. Commissioner Lebeaux, read the statue to the board. Ms. Bemis asked about the food and fiber part in horticulture – does that count? Commissioner Lebeaux noted that we do not want to open up the statue but stated that Ms. Bemis does sell food producing plants. Chair Vadnais wanted to keep doing things as we have unless we find a need to make changes.

Commissioner Lebeaux introduces Rebecca Davidson who will be speaking about Environmental Justice Strategy. EEA revised EJ policy issued in 2021, that requires EEA agencies develop strategies to EJ. The EEA EJ task force, including MDAR, will inform how we fulfill our mission with equity, how we conduct outreach, prioritize activities, and monitor progress. The public had listening sessions to provide feedback on the EJ draft strategy. Next step is to consider all the comments provided during the public comment period and a redrafting of the strategic plan to ensure the feedback is incorporated.

The strategic plan is a living document to implement EJ objects in the department. MDAR has established its own EJ task force to assist with translation or interpretation services. A MDAR language pool was

established to help with small/immediate needs. Rebecca's intern has helped prepare a comprehensive booklet with all MDAR program translated in 8 different languages. The taskforce is establishing an EJ newsletter to ensure all resources available are distributed widely. Access to grant opportunities and land access are key areas we are working on as major priorities. They are establishing more frequent communications and face to face time and are thrilled to have a few more full-time staff to work on this topic in the future.

Ms. Gates-Allen noted that in the cranberry industry work on EJ issues such as being done such as where bogs may fall, changes with conservation practices were starting to work on this.

Commissioner Lebeaux mentioned some issues around this topic at the USDA around lending. Happy that MDAR is working on this, but we are not coming from the same place that the USDA is, we need to do better and will continue to do better.

#### **4. Old Business**

Chair Vadnais noted that in the last meeting he indicated that any topics or issues members want to raise and make the board and MDAR staff aware of in members industries he was opening the floor for members to share.

Chair Vadnais kicked off the discussion and mentioned he is concerned about air traffic disturbing livestock in his area of Rehoboth. Ms. Gates-Allen has drones going on their property and wants to know of regulations. Chair Vadnais also had problems with drones and is working on laws in Rehoboth related to the drones. Illegal to land a helicopter within 500 feet of a dwelling/animal enclosure. Commissioner Lebeaux added that we are dealing with drones for agriculture with the Secretariat. Ms. Bouchard would like Chair Vadnais to share his issues with MDAR. We want our policies/procedures to reflect what issues the Chair is having. Ms. Gates-Allen does not want to restrict agriculture rights, she wants to be able to use the technology and noted that it is important to agriculture.

Mr. Mezitt emailed Ms. Bouchard and asked her to mention two items in relation to native plants. First is that we need to develop consensus on common language for what comprises a local, native sourced seed that is acceptable for all specifying authorities (state DOT, state owned facilities, state funded projects, etc.) so that growers and supply chain for native plants can develop their business appropriately to meet the increased demand for indigenous plants that serve to support our local ecosystems. The second topic is related to water. Seeking more consistency among MWRA and non MWRA communities on the language already adopted by DEP that allows for new planting projects to be watered by handheld hose or drip irrigation. The state should support projects that increase plant material (especially natives) and the. Benefits they provide to our environment.

#### **5. Other Business**

Commissioner Lebeaux gave some parting remarks to the board about this being his last week on the job after 8-years. Ms. Gates-Allen noted the last 8 years working with MDAR has been the best. Chair Vadnais thanked Commissioner Lebeaux for his leadership and friendship. Mr. Rose thanked the Commissioner for all his help and told him he's always part of the family. Ms. Spence gave a shout out as well; appreciated the support for urban ag from MDAR and support of the urban farming conferences. Mr. Sheppard thanked the Commissioner everything he has done, especially for the dairy farmers. Ms. Colby thanked Commissioner Lebeaux as well.

#### **6. Next Meeting:**

The Chair and Ms. Randle will meet to discuss a future meetings and topics of discussion. Ms. Bemis concerned we have not set meetings in advance for the year. Chair Vadnais noted that we must meet 6 times a year and try to avoid the summer. Plan to discuss it out at our next meeting as part of an agenda item.

- 7. Adjournment.** Chair Vadnais asked for a motion to adjourn. Ms. Bemis made a motion to adjourn. Ms. Colby seconded the motion. A roll call vote to adjourn passed unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 11:23am.