

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, May 24th, 2023
10:00 AM Hybrid Meeting (in-person & via MS Teams)

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

Absent: Pat Spence, Elizabeth Keen, Megan Russell

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

Public: Karen Schwalbe, Kevin Grant, Thomas Phillips

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. **2/28/23 Meeting Minutes:** Ms. Gates-Allen moved to approve the meeting minutes of February 28th, 2023. 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. **Candidate for Deputy Commissioner / Legislative and Policy Director.** Commissioner Randle presented Mr. Winton Pitcoff for the position of Deputy Commissioner/Legislative and Policy Director to the board. Seven applicants were interviewed, and Mr. Pitcoff Winton was the top candidate. He has worked for the Massachusetts Food Systems Collaborative as Executive Director for the past 6 ½ years, has also worked for the North American Maple Syrup Council and Massachusetts Maple Producers Association. Prior to that he worked for the Massachusetts Food Policy Alliance and Farming Magazine as well as several locations within the housing and community development. He has built strong relationships with Legislators in his many roles. Mr. Pitcoff worked with MDAR in many capacities and has been part of various projects including the annual Ag Day at the Statehouse.

Ms. Colby notes that she has friend who is a farmer that gives Mr. Pitcoff rave reviews. Ms. Gates Allen adds that it is good to have someone with strong background in Agriculture on the team. Mr. Vadnais has spoken with leaders in the Ag community and Mr. Pitcoff was given high grades, something not easily done. Mr. Rose asked Mr. Pitcoff where he is from? Mr. Pitcoff states that he grew up in New York and went to Minnesota for school.

Motion: Ms. Colby made a motion to approve the appointment of Mr. Pitcoff. The motion was seconded by Mr. Rose. The board unanimously approved Mr. Pitcoff for the position of Deputy

4. Department Updates:

- a. Board member updates.
 - 1) Chair Vadnais asked the board for any industry updates. Mr. Sheppard states that the dairy farmers are scheduling their annual picnic for August 4th at Mapleline Farm in Hadley.
 - 2) Ms. Gates-Allen mentions a situation at her farm. During a large fuel diesel tank inspection by the fire dept; a new safety officer at Middleborough fire dept noticed they have “shops”, and the that a permit may be required.
 - 3) Ms. Bemis notified the board of a new tomato disease coming through in seed, related to a virus. Two weather events Feb 4th wiping out peach crop is rearing its ugly head, people asking why other flower blossoms are not blooming. Also, it was 25° on the farm one-night last week (May 18th). Some farms lost tomatoes; some even lost in a greenhouse from frost. The Bemis farm had 15% of damage to their crops that will delay being able to sell them.
 - 4) Mr. Mezitt brought up water regulations; trying to work with legislator on bills to make new plants exempt from water restrictions and making water regulations consistent. This could help make plants be sustainable if we are facing more drought. Working to keep an eye on the legislation. Plants take a lot less water, than lawn irrigation. Hoping the legislation will make it more mandatory for the Towns to adopt. Native plants, help with climate change but not enough supply of native seeds in the supply chain to keep it more local to the region.
 - 5) Beech leaf disease is killing mature Beech trees and saplings. [Nematodes are microscopic worms that feed on the buds and leaves.](#)
 - 6) Mr. Rose discusses the impact the February freeze had on peach trees; there will be no peaches this year in MA. Last week (May 18th) another frost - there was extensive damage from NY through MA; some people have a complete wipeout of apples. Hard to know exactly what impacts are; depends on the region of the state. Some farms are not sure what to do to help them recover. Similar issues with blueberries depending on what stage they are out. Not a lot of literature on what to do with such a late freeze. You only need 10% of your apples to have a crop but it will not be a banner year. Chair notes that we will have to see how widespread the damage will be and whether there will be assistance for the growers.
- b. Policy and program updates.
 - 1.) Commissioner Randle provided updates to the board starting with Ag Day at the state house and the great attendance and participation by all the groups and FFA.
 - 2.) Commissioner’s office reorganized, for the first time in at least 10-years. Phu Mai will become our Communications Director and will help respond to press inquiries and develop positive press releases. Rebecca Davidson is being elevated to be the first Food and Climate Equity Director and the Commissioner explained the focus of Rebecca’s duties.
 - 3.) Senator Anne Gobi was appointed by Gov. Healey as the first Director of Rural Affairs.
 - 4.) Budget season, Senate budget very positive for MDAR, the Commissioner provided a few details from the budget.
 - 5.) Policy priorities - focus be on workforce development, posting an RFR to see what the needs are and how we can assist, how we can recruit individuals to get into the sector along with a focus on youth. Exploring a “board of ag junior” to hear their interests and concerns. Climate change and EJ large focus areas
 - 6.) APR listening sessions, 6 sessions were held last month by MDAR staff. It was interesting to hear concerns and focus which varied depending on region of the state. Overall, it was very positive given the updates to the program in the last 3-years. In general, the feedback was very positive. The Chair attended the first session and found it educational. Commissioner added the contractor used in the APR sessions is working to help further improve the education and outreach of the program. The Chair added more education is needed before farmers come to us for an exemption regarding adding dwellings on APRs.

- 7.) Commissioner mentioned the upcoming NEASDA meeting in New Hampshire and the recent frost damage will be discussed with other states and any relevant issues such as the recent Animal Confinement supreme court decision that was upheld in CA.
- c. 100 Cambridge Street office relocation
 - 1.) On Saturday, April 29th, MDAR's Boston office moved from Causeway Street to 100 Cambridge Street. Department staff started touching down in the new location using the new online reservation system for access to workstations, offices, and conference rooms.
 - 2.) MDAR's new Boston space is a shared space with other EEA agencies separated by agency "neighborhoods" within in the office and so far, all the staff seem happy with the new space.
 - 3.) Staff contact numbers have been updated on the website at the [MDAR Staff Directory | Mass.gov](#) for all MDAR offices including Boston and regional locations.
- d. Guest speakers for future meetings guest speakers on relevant topics.
 - 1.) Commissioner Randle asked board members for ideas on speakers or topics for future meetings. The Chair wants an open relationship with Farm Bureau and to establish a dialog with leadership. The Commissioner said it is great to have Karen Schwalbe in Farm Bureau and that it is a good working relationship.
 - 2.) The Chair welcomed Karen to speak, and she mentioned one of the big concerns is the California Prop 12 SCOTUS decision and the impact to Massachusetts Question 3. Question 3, *prohibits the sale of eggs, veal and pork products when the seller knows or should know that the product came from an animal that was confined "in a cruel manner"*. Karen mentioned the APR listening sessions and it was good to see the farmers participating and giving feedback to the staff. Would love to see more progress on land licensing, how to get water to the site, protect from deer, and more support for new, diverse farmers who are trying to learn how to farm here. Good to get the feedback from last week's frost and how to help get a disaster declaration.
 - 3.) The Chair asked if there are concerns about animals with the new Question 3 confinement issue and how the department is going to take all the calls/complaints, perhaps bringing them to the table and take the lead on this is an option. Commissioner Randle noted the pork provision in Question 3, and with this SCOTUS decision parties have until June 11th or 12th to appeal before it will take effect in MA. Currently, MDAR is working with the Attorney General's Office (AGO) for enforcement that falls under their jurisdiction. We are trying to work on FAQs and other educational preparedness. MDAR is working with the AGO now to try and sort things out ASAP given the AGO's role early in the process.

5. Propose meeting dates for remainder of the year.

- a. Ms. Shields introduced the four proposed dates below for members to consider for the board to meet the six (6) meeting per year requirement. All meetings would be hybrid from 10am-12pm.
 - 1.) Wednesday June 21st
 - 2.) Wednesday October 18th
 - 3.) Wednesday November 15th
 - 4.) Wednesday December 13th
- b. Ms. Bemis requested dates be proposed for 2024 which Ms. Shields agreed upon.
- c. The Commissioner mentioned the new Administration is still working on board appointments and if the board has any suggestions for the vacancies to let us know.

6. Adjournment.

Chair Vadnais asked for a motion to adjourn. Ms. Bemis made a motion to adjourn. Ms. Gates seconded the motion. A roll call vote to adjourn passed unanimously and the meeting adjourned at 10:59am.