

## **MA Food Policy Council meeting (remote)**

*January 17, 2025, 9:30 – 11:30 AM*

In attendance:

Liz Buxton, Food Processing

Keath Christensen, Senator Fattman's Office

Rob Leshin, DESE

Dave Dumaresq, Farmer

Bruce Hopper, MassDEP

Anne Gobi, Director of Rural Affairs, EOHEd

Amanda Kinchla, Food Safety

Doug Botelho, office of Representative Donahue

Commissioner McCue, DTA

Margaret Moulton, Direct to Consumer

Commissioner Randle, MDAR

Caro Roszell, Healthy Soils

Kerry Shea, office of Representative Kane

Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, Distribution

Phoebe Walker, Public Health

Ayn Yeagle, Community Health

Not in attendance: Senator Comerford, Jessica del Rosario

**Call to order:** Chair Commissioner Randle called the meeting to order at 9:37 AM.

**Acceptance of minutes:** A motion to accept the minutes was made by Commissioner McCue, seconded by Phoebe Walker, and passed by voice vote: Liz Buxton, Keath Christensen, Rob Leshin, Dave Dumaresq (abstain), Bruce Hopper (abstained), Director Anne Gobi, Amanda Kinchla, Commissioner McCue, Margaret Moulton, Commissioner Randle, Caro Roszell, Kerry Shea, Phoebe Walker, and Ayn Yeagle.

Commissioner Randle introduced Congressman Jim McGovern: The view from Washington - challenges and opportunities in the food system. He commented that we're in for some tough times including potential deep cuts in food and hunger programs. On the appropriations side, there will be efforts to shrink discretionary spending programs such as WIC, food boxes, and rural energy. SNAP restrictions may include additional work requirements and restrictions on what foods can be purchased. Micromanaging

what foods can be purchased is viewed as disrespectful. State and local efforts offer solutions that could be adopted into a national strategy, for example, passing state-supported universal free meals in schools as has been done in Massachusetts and efforts to purchase more local ingredients. He commended Boston's Mayor Wu for initiatives to purchase more local ingredients. The Medicaid 115 Waiver is still in place for a few more years, which allows states to "waive" certain provisions of the Medicaid law and receive additional flexibility to design and improve their programs. In addition to medically tailored meals and medically tailored grocery boxes being considered bipartisan, nutrition education might be another topic. Food Is Medicine is getting traction from Republicans since it offers cost savings, an important framework. There is worry about dismantling food inspection regulations that could affect public health. It's early in the administration, so how they are moving forward isn't clear. Our moral obligation to be sure hungry people have food doesn't resonate with this administration. Framing universal school meals as helping students to focus and learn and SNAP as a long-term savings to the budget. It doesn't make sense to cut this benefit while at the same time complain about the high cost of food. Many COVID-19 programs are being sunset, and hunger is rising. Many USDA programs and funding support farms in the west and Midwest, which are different from New England. Climate change has had a horrific impact in New England. Farm's profit margins barely keep their business afloat. One bad season can put a farm out of business.

Suggestion: Whenever asking for federal funds, focus on the economics of supporting the food system in Massachusetts. Specifically, how the funding will lead to an economically stronger outcome. Community Servings used this strategy in their study on the healthcare savings of medically tailored meals.

[https://www.servings.org/food-health-policy/health-insurance-claims-data-study/#:~:text=In%20dollar%20terms%2C%20the%20average,meals\)%20of%20%24220%20per%20month.](https://www.servings.org/food-health-policy/health-insurance-claims-data-study/#:~:text=In%20dollar%20terms%2C%20the%20average,meals)%20of%20%24220%20per%20month.)

Comment: The Eos Foundation is relaunching the Breakfast After the Bell grant program. Districts that want to create or improve upon their breakfast AFTER the bell programs can apply for \$5,000 or \$10,000 grants.

Commissioner Randle thanked Congressman McGovern for the USDA disaster relief funding, some good news. A survey with 300 responses to date includes comments from growers who have reported some \$60M in losses. MDAR is approaching the funding from a resiliency perspective, for example, infrastructure for barns so the roof doesn't collapse under snow and irrigation to mitigate future droughts. Separately, MDAR is expecting cuts in the FDA cooperative agreement which will impact the state's food safety program.

Comment: Recent calls from FSA and NRCA requested an urgency to finish contracts. They're aware of the new themes and the focus on farm programs in the middle of the country. What can we do to ensure that those programs assist local production? Congressman McGovern commented that we'll work to ensure that New England farms are represented in the Farm Bill and appropriations. The current administration's majority is small. There is concern that programs that promote good clean energy will be rolled back. If contracts are in place, it's harder for that to happen. The new administration will need time to understand all the programs.

Commissioner McCue thanked Congressman for his exceptional support of SNAP, inclusive of the advocacy for replacement benefits tied to skimming. This is a significant issue considering that Massachusetts does some \$3B in SNAP transactions per year.

Commissioner Randle and several Council members thanked Congressman McGovern and offered their assistance and advocacy. The Council can write letters of support. There are many innovation programs in Massachusetts that can be national models. Congressman McGovern commented that at the anniversary of the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health, there might be a gathering to share what has been accomplished including outstanding models. He expressed pride in being from Massachusetts. The strong partnership will continue.

### **Officer and Committee Reports**

Chair Randle: Council agenda topics and priorities for 2025. This is Year III of the Healy Administration and a new federal administration. We appreciate the letters of support committee that was passed at the annual meeting. What topics should the Council consider? Potential topics for 2025 shared by Council members included a check in regarding the status of New England Feeding New England, coordination of an overlay of environmental justice maps to analyze impacts on farmers and food stuffs, a healthy soils regular progress report, a status report on the fisheries sector, a speaker to discuss how best to share successful outcomes from an economic framework and how a program could be replicated in another state, an update to the MA Local Food Action Plan since 2025 is the 10-year anniversary, a strategy to lift up Food is Medicine, and a speaker from Maine to discuss their work to alleviate hunger, and an analysis by an ag economist re: impacts of state and federal grant programs. Additional suggestions are welcome.

MDAR is working to track state and federal food system grant support. The impacts are significant. College food security ties into the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) and Local Food for Schools (LFS) has expanded to include childcare. How are we addressing those gaps? Commissioner Randle with present at the USDA Agriculture Outlook Forum and frame these programs as critical to enhance student learning. She will spotlight how these federal funds have had significant impacts.

Advisory Committee update, Ayn Yeagle. Katharine Otto attended the last meeting and described the Farmland Action Plan. MDAR's new Food Security Director will be invited to an upcoming meeting. The Committee will lift the HIP issue. They plan to closely with the Caucus and Collaborative to support legislative priorities along with local food policy councils. The Committee represents a variety of experiences and perspectives. Food Waste is a topic for a future meeting, more on climate impacts and supporting programs, and food security efforts being aligned on the state level and with infusion of federal funds. Comment: Margins for farmers are so tight that a single event can put them out of business. These challenges are very real for farmers. Specifically, what are the risks, innovations, opportunities and gaps? Caro Roszell volunteered to assist the Committee with planning and resiliency efforts.

**MA Legislative Food System Caucus:** Kerry Shea, Representative Kane's office. The Caucus continues to add new members. The Collaborative was acknowledged for a very successful Forum. Regarding

funding, hope is that the 2025 supplemental budget will include HIP. The Caucus will be identifying their priorities.

**MA Food System Collaborative**, Becca Miller, Legislative Director. The Forum had 300 attendees, a record, and a strong session by legislators about how to engage in public policy. All of the breakout sessions are recorded and a recap of the day is at: <https://mafoodsystem.org/news/2024-ma-food-system-forum-session-notes/> Survey results re: HIP included farmers reporting some 60% drop in sales with less HIP usage. One farmer shared his worry that his farm may not be in business without HIP benefits, which represent 75% of his sales. Farmers are seeking other sources of revenue or operating at a loss until the program returns. Priority bills have been refiled and include food literacy, ag equity commission, HIP enabling legislation, food donation tax credit, a food policy council coordinator, and working with partners in urban ag to support urban land being prioritized for urban farm and businesses. Ag Omnibus and PFAS bill is in progress. 2026 budget asks are being developed. The Collaborative is organizing some in-person events such as a local food policy council gathering on April 30. [Register for the Collaborative's Feb 12th legislative briefing here!](#)

Q: Can the Council be of assistance with the upcoming supplemental budget? A: It will be helpful to see what's in the budget, and then review options for support.

#### **Program:**

Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan, Steps towards implementation: Katharine Otto, Farmland Action Plan Coordinator. Katharine reviewed the background, plan, current status, next steps, and how to get involved. She was invited to share regular updates with the Council. on a regular basis to MA Food Policy Council Advisory Committee to share updates and next steps.

MDAR's new Division of Food Security, Introduction and Priorities: Juli Stelmaszyk, Director. Juli shared a foundation for the Division, an inclusive definition of food security, and activities grounded in equity and access with value-chains integrated into the shared priorities. Juli asked members to share input.

#### **Council member updates**

Commissioner McCue: Expectations are for a pitched discussion re: restrictions on SNAP purchases. At Boston City Council, some level of enhanced taxation is targeted towards sugary beverages. Some advocacy groups feel that any kind of restriction is a challenge to access. In the spirit of collegiality, it would be helpful to have a discussion on this topic. DTA's biggest project is a major migration of the EBT system. At the end of April, DTA is transitioning to a new EBT vendor, to sync with other NE states, and have more leverage re: functionality such as HIP thresholds, to be able to respond quicker. It will also provide a foundation for a higher level of security. Congressman McGovern has been a strong advocate for dealing with skimming since nefarious individuals' activity has increased. At this time, there is no platform to help clients who have had benefits stolen. This new system will move to chip card technology which is more secure. There is also hope that the new cards aren't stigmatizing.

Commissioner Randle: MDAR will host two Ag Resource fairs, February 18 - Western MA Agricultural Resource Fair, Smith Vocational & Agricultural High School, Northampton, and February 21-

Northeastern MA Agricultural Resource Fair, Essex North Shore Agricultural & Technical High School, Danvers. State agencies, partners, growers, and members of the food system at large are invited. Impacts that we're hearing about from the federal budget will be shared. The Governor will be releasing her budget next week. In the next month, we will know who is appointed to the different committees. We will keep pushing ahead, along with our sister agencies and partners. We're stronger together.

### **Announcements**

2025 MA Food Policy Council meetings: Fri, March 14, 9:30 – 11; Fri, May 9, 9:30-11:30; Fri, July 11, 9:30-11:30; Fri, Sept 12, 9:30-11:30; Wed, Dec 3rd: 11-1:30

### **Public Comment**

**Adjournment:** A motion to adjourn at 11:29 was made by Bruce Hopper, seconded by Ayn Yeagle and passed by voice vote: Keath Christensen, Rob Leshin, Dave Dumaresq, Bruce Hopper, Commissioner McCue, Margaret Moulton, Commissioner Randle, Caro Roszell, Kerry Shea, Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, Phoebe Walker, Ayn Yeagle.

70 participants