Minutes: MA Food Policy Council virtual meeting

Friday, July 21, 2023, 9:30 – 11 AM

In attendance:

Bill Fredericks, Office of Senator Fattman

Senator Comerford and staff Rachel Klein

Commissioner Ashley Randle, MDAR

Denise Courtney on behalf of Rob Leshin, ESE

Mackenzie May, Direct to Consumer

Jessica del Rosario, MA DPH

Caro Roszell, Healthy Soils

Kerry Shea, Office of Representative Kane

Danah Tench, MassDEP

Ayn Yeagle, Community Health

Brittany Mangini, MA DTA Associate Commissioner of Food Security and Nutrition Program

John Waite, Food Processing

Phoebe Walker, Public Health

Absent: Torry Stamm Katsiroubas, Amanda Kinchla, Representative Donahue, Bobby Malinn

 At 9:35 AM, Chair and Commissioner Ashley Randle called the meeting to order.

A motion to accept the minutes was made by MacKenzie May, seconded by Senator Comerford, and passed by voice vote: Bill Fredericks, Senator Comerford, Kerry Shea, Commissioner Randle, Denise Courtney, Mackenzie May, Jessica del Rosario, Caro Roszell, Danah Tench, Ayn Yeagle, Brittany Mangini, John Waite, and Phoebe Walker.

Officer Reports

Chair and Commissioner Randle welcomed New Deputy Commissioner Winton Pitcoff with great enthusiasm. She reported time spent with Director Gobi, Senator Comerford, and Representative Blais, visiting and assessing farms with flood damage. MDAR’s Produce Safety Team has been on the ground to provide technical assistance. At least 75 farms have been impacted with crop loss valued at over $15M. Additional losses are expected especially with cucurbit crops that are vulnerable to disease. On the livestock side, there are concerns re: hay and corn. It is unlikely that there will be a second or third harvest of hay. From a livestock perspective, the biggest concern is mycotoxins which are dangerous for animals. Yesterday was a day of celebration with the launch of the Massachusetts Farm Resiliency fund, pulled together with community partners across the state to provide relief including CISA and the Big E, organized in less than a week. The United Way of central MA is the fiscal agent. In the near term, aspects such as payroll are a top concern for many farms. Relief at the state level is also being explored. USDA may offer a disaster declaration which triggers low interest loans, but when there is no income, loans are not ideal. This new program will set up grants. At the state level, there’s hope to do the same. She commented that it’s been a humbling experience to have this crisis in the ag community and at the same time, to see how everyone has stepped up including Congressman McGovern and Senator Warren. The goal with the private philanthropy group is to start distributing funds next week. Commissioner Randle shared her deep gratitude to all partners.

Q: Are there crops that are safe to plant after the flooding? What’s the scale of the soil degradation versus ruining the crop? A: It varies depending on the crop. Much of the devastation was to potato and sweet corn fields. Potatoes were going to be harvested in the next week. Fields are used strictly for potato farms. With sweet corn, MDAR is working with UVM and USDA for technical support. If a cob hasn’t been formed, the quality will be acceptable, however it’s not clear how the cob will develop and what the quality will be. Some farmers are allowing their crops to move forward. It’s a case-by-case basis.

Q: What are the equity implications for access to flood resources? A: Equitable distribution of the funds is the biggest concern. Community gardens would be eligible, and World Farmers for example.

On the review panel, we’re mindful of who is reviewing the applicants. We have folks with EJ training on the team. We want to ensure that everyone that has been impacted has access. Our EJ newsletter will be a tool to get the word out. On the food security front, it’s a concern since many growers provide product to the food bank system. We’re fortunate to have DTA colleagues and HIP vendors to continue these discussions to identify where support needs to be leveraged. Looking across the food system, there will be long term impacts. Community foundations who many have not had knowledge about the food systems are now allies.

There was a strong candidate pool for the farmer open seat on the Council. Resumes and cover letters have been shared with EEA and the Governor’s office. It’s not clear what the timeline will be for an appointment to be made.

Dates for meetings in 2024 will be held the second Friday of the month, every other month. A date for the 2024 annual meeting will be determined.

Strategic Planning Subcommittee:  Commissioner Randle. To provide a focused approach for the Council going forward, a first meeting of the subcommittee resulted in a recommendation for a cross sector approach including food security, the MA Local Food Action Plan, the White Hunger Plan, and on-going state efforts regarding hunger. Representative Kane reported on Maine’s roadmap plan to end hunger, which could be informative to this group. The Subcommittee plans to meet with the state of Maine to understand their approach, gather feedback from the state, and connect with Project Bread whose priority is anti-hunger. The group is mindful of developing an approach per the OML.

Vice Chair May thanked the Advisory Committee for their efforts to fill four open positions. Ayn Yeagle, Advisory Committee coordinator, encouraged Council members to reach out to their networks for candidates. Filling the positions adds members to bring diverse voices to this group, and to meet quorum more easily.

Updates:

MA Legislative Food System Caucus: Senator Comerford and Sophia Filonis, Office of Representative Kane

On July 22, the Caucus and the Greater Boston Food Bank will discuss their report re: food equity and access in Boston. The Caucus will host a virtual meeting re: priority legislation in September. Sponsors will provide background, content, and advocacy recommendations. The Caucus is organizing some food system tours and events for their members.

Senator Comerford join Caucus members, MDAR staff, and Director Gobi in their districts to meet with farmers affected by flooding, and local, state, and federal officials. She expressed gratitude for MDAR’s leadership and data/metrics to document the losses. The flood crisis has provoked discussions about state disaster relief and municipal funds.

She thanked Representative Blais for early support in the supplemental budget for food relief. It didn’t come to fruition in the House but is in the Senate budget with strong support. The Governor’s team has been full throttle in efforts to support growers with flood damage. There is also a role for public support. The flooding puts resilience and disaster relief in the spotlight.

MA Food System Collaborative, Brittany Peats: Work continues on the food literacy campaign. The Massachusetts Health Framework Report has been released, and is of interest because it includes nutrition education in a holistic sense including local food. It would be great to see additional components included such as school gardens, culinary skills, global food supply, food justice, and the connection between agricultural and climate change – a prominent issue. The Collaborative is following the state budget process include food literacy with expectations for a hearing in the fall. The Collaborative appreciates the support for the local food policy council grants. Several have focused on developing strategic plans. Part of the NEFNE work includes establishing a baseline of how much local products are being consumed, to measure against future work. The group appreciates that there are new HIP vendors coming on-line, and they’re waiting to see the level of HIP funding. There is interest to ensure that flood response support is distributed equitably.

Program:

New England Feeding New England:  A Regional Approach to Food System Resilience - new research:  What will it really take to grow, raise, produce, harvest, and catch 30% of the food consumed in New England by 2030. Ellen Kahler, Director, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund

There are detailed and deep resources from the new research. There are no hard recommendations in the report. There are strategic breadcrumbs for example: how can MA contribute to reaching the goal? There is an executive summary and five reports. Just released is a report on common food system challenges that impact every state and probably all states in the US.

Given climate change, how can ag and seafood resources be protected? Food insecurity in the six-state region is discussed – and how it has continued in spite of great strides. Race specific data is included and many examples of spatial analysis. The New England population is highly concentrated in the southern part of the region, while food production more in the northern states. Mapping of land at risk of being developed is included. Noted is how challenging it can be for new farmers to access to land. New England has a large number of very small farms. Lacking is mid and larger scale family farms to supply wholesale markets, who in turn would support wholesale markets including supermarkets. The smallest farms are not as profitable. Separately, one of the reports focused on economic impact. For example, in Massachusetts, 450,000 people are employed in food and seafood, resulting in $85B in sales. In New England, Massachusetts represents 46% of the total population. Massachusetts has seen crop sales decrease unfortunately.

Estimating eating patterns is discussed, included data based on current demographics and the “USDA My Plate” research with examples of how to eat in a more resilient way.

NEFE is conducting state food counts – what is being consumed that is local. NEFNE has looked closely at market channels, especially supermarkets and restaurants. For example, in Springfield, Massachusetts where food access is challenging, the Dollar stores are important, though they don’t tend to have local food. Could regionally owned supermarkets source more regional foods? Same with distributors. Massachusetts has a bigger lift, considering the high number of eaters, to shift more spending on local and regional food to get to 30%.

NEFE will work with the American Farmland Trust’s 2020 report. There is a need to accelerate the rate that farmland is coming into production to meet NEFNE goals. State specific data reports are forthcoming. Ag land needs to be added to Vermont and Maine, but this is a clarion call to preserve good land in Massachusetts.

Registered dietitians from Harvard’s School of Public Health reviewed the methodology and weighed in on the resilient eating report. Regarding climate change, there needs to be more land in agriculture than was calculated, since every year some acres will be lost, as well as working with the land in a more holistic way so land holds more water for example.

Local Food Policy Council grant awardees

* Cambridge Food & Fitness: Dawn Olcott. Small projects can build support for the goals and aspirations discussed during the meeting so far, such as those funded with these awards. This project matched SNAP funding at farmers markets in Cambridge, to expand funding for more farmers market. Farmers that offer SNAP experienced greater SNAP sales – in some markets to 50% of sales. A real need is in food pantries, where patrons are seeking more choice, especially more fresh products. A series of meetings were held to determine how to make that happen. The Cambridge Community Foundation and Cambridge Food & Fitness developed a strategic plan and are seeking funds for implementation in addition to food security funding. An unexpected outcome! We did get funding for 2023 – this year. To ensure implementations – goals were added to the community health improvement plan. Options to support managers and how they can purchase more local including support from the city. A slight change in the contract led to food pantries having the option to purchase more local food. An educational session explained how it worked. This funding provided a wonderful opportunity to bring these groups together to make progress to grow the local food system.
* Hilltown CDC:  J. Hunt Chase, Director of Community Programs. A Hilltown Working Group was created to bring producers into food system conversations, including 16 farmers of the 30 the Hilltown CDC buys from. There was an emphasis on connecting new farmers with seasoned farmers. There are efforts to expand Hilltown Farmers Mobile Market to full time which led to setting up a retail market that’s open year-round. Farmers are all working together. Since it was planning time, initiatives were not as successful as hoped to connect growers to the local food policy council, but Hilltown CDC was the go between. Outreach helped inform consumers about climate change, serendipitous considering the recent disasters.
* City of Everett: Matt Lattanzi, Founder of Everett Food Policy Council. Facilitated meetings identified problems including better engagement and resident buy in and education. Stipends were given to Council members and funds were used to co-sponsored events such as with the local farm to school group to engage youth which support both organization missions. An urban ag project with Becca Miller from the Collaborative helped identify practices that were implemented in other municipalities and helped to figure out small goals with a large impact. Events were held in a senior center – with engagement for all walks of life. Funds were used to translate publications. A farmer questionnaire was also developed and distributed with stipends as an incentive to complete the info. Matt shared his appreciation for this grant which vastly move the City of Everett’s food systems mission forward.

MA Food Policy Council member updates:

Caro Roszell: EEA will be allocating funds for a Healthy Soils Program, a key strategy for climate resiliency. There is hope for legislative support.

Announcements:

Sept 22, 2023, 9:30 – 11 AM, MA Food Policy Council (hybrid: remote & in-person)

MDAR Southboro Office 3rd Floor conference room, 225 Turnpike Rd, Southborough, MA 01772

Nov 15, 2023, 10 AM – 12 Noon - annual meeting of the MA Food Policy Council, Massachusetts State House Room 428. Thanks to Senator Comerford and Jared Freedman for securing the space.

Public Comment: none

Adjournment*:* At 11:10 AM, a motion to adjourn was made by Phoebe Walker, seconded by John Waite and passed by voice vote: Sophia Filonis , Commissioner Randle, Denise Courtney, Mackenzie May, Caro Roszell, Danah Tench, Ayn Yeagle, Brittany Mangini, John Waite, Torry Katiroubas Stamm, and Phoebe Walker.

**(Future meeting dates – second Fri, every other month**)

Friday, Jan 12th, 2024 (1/12/24)
Friday, March 8th, 2024 (3/8/24)
Friday, May 10th, 2024 (5/10/24)
Friday, July 12th, 2024 (7/12/24
Friday, Sept 13th, 2024 (9/13/24)
Annual meeting date tbc