

Minutes: MA Food Policy Council 7.30.21, 9:30 – 11:30

In attendance:

Representative Daniel Donahue
Senator Jo Comerford
Amy Kershaw, Commissioner DTA
Representative Hannah Kane
Amanda Kinchla, UMASS Food Safety
Jason King, Office of Senator Fattman
John Lebeaux, Commissioner MDAR
John Lee, Farmer
Rob Leshin, ESE
Danah Tench, MassDEP

The remote hosting of this meeting is thanks to MassDEP.

The meeting was called to order at 9:35 AM. A motion to accept the minutes was made by John Lee, seconded by Commissioner Kershaw, and passed: Representative Donahue, Senator Jo Comerford, Commissioner Kershaw, Representative Hannah Kane, Amanda Kinchla, Jason King, Commissioner Lebeaux, John Lee, Rob Leshin, and Danah Tench.

Officers Reports Commissioner Lebeaux Lebeaux: Commissioner Lebeaux thanked Danah Tench and MassDEP for the remote hosting of today's meeting. Virtual meetings will continue through April 1, 2022. The Council will meet virtually for the September meeting, which is scheduled for Friday, September 10, with the hope of meeting live at the statehouse for the annual meeting in November. Recommendations for the open Council seats including the soils position appointed by EEA have been advanced to the Boards and Commissions.

MA Legislature's Food Caucus update: Senator Jo Comerford and Representatives Hannah Kane and Daniel Donahue attended this meeting. Representative Kane shared that with the fiscal year 22 budget was completed and that many Food Caucus items were included. A survey on priorities for ARPA funding for all Caucus members just closed. The survey included choices and blank space to add comments. The survey showed support for several critical areas based on what's being heard in the districts. The agriculture issues are strong including support for UMASS Extension and agriculture housing/training/workers for increased food system resiliency. Also, a focus on food insecurity and increasing access in nutritious food options. The survey outcome will be shared with the Council. Food Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) support is also strong. Senator Comerford shared that a FSIG meeting with the EEA secretary was an opportunity to provide feedback from constituents. She noted appreciation for the mindfulness of EEA to connect farmers and consumers as a stated goal of the FSIG. There will be a fall farm tour to show the FSIG program in action. There is receptivity to using American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. UMASS continues to be important in conversations. Representative Donahue noted that \$300,000 was secured for the MA Food Trust Program.

Commissioner Lebeaux introduced the Bylaws and Council Structure Committee update: and noted that the committee includes John Waite, Danah Tench, Emily Broad Leib from Harvard, Jeff Cole, Winton Pitcoff, MacKenzie May and Bonita Oehlke.

Bylaws and Council Structure Committee: Secretary Danah Tench

The committee met on June 16 to discuss several topics including the Council's advisory committee. Through public comment it was clear that the committee could add more diversity and voices to the Council. Additional administrative support would be required, which could be provided by MDAR. The committee could be used to assist the Council on specific tasks for example, identifying how priorities could be addressed such as racial equity. Members of the Council and public comment could help to form the committee, as well as develop its function. The advisory committee provides a path for members of the public to be more involved or even a launching pad for non-agency members to be part of the Council in the future. The final recommendation is to keep the committee. To connect the Council to the committee, some Council members would participate in committee meetings.

The committee discussion led to a Council priorities discussion. Proposed Council priorities include racial equity, climate change and UMASS extension support with HIP and FSIG as food insecurity and infrastructure strategies were discussed. Priorities can be raised organically or through the advisory committee. Priorities are always tied into statutory requirements.

Since other legislation has language to add members to the Council, the bylaws don't need to address the topic at this time.

Representative Kane commented that having actual advocacy from this Council would be important and tangible for this group. A letter or direct advocacy including phone calls and emails would be effective. There are 6,000 bills supported every year and what moves forward is often based on support and advocacy. Letters would make a huge difference. The Collaborative has this as a priority. This is a policy issue rather than a structural issue. In this case, not having a voice at the table from the Council when we're talking about Massachusetts food policy is a missing voice. We can all in our own ways advocate for this.

The Bylaws and Council Structure committee will have a further discussion about how the committee would move forward, as well as specific tasks.

Commissioner Lebeaux suggested that the Council should officially vote on priorities at the next meeting and revisit these points and move towards voting on this year's priorities. There have been very good conversations about how this body can be more impactful.

Representative Kane would encourage the Council to be specific with priorities. Climate change and equity are broad goals and hard to measure progress. In order to evaluate progress, to weigh progress against, there needs to be tangible strategic priorities. Process wise, it would be helpful for the committee or Council members to be suggesting how the priorities can be tangible.

Commissioner Lebeaux agreed that distinct subgoals for tactics are important.

Winton Pitcoff suggested that the Council should be considered the voice of food policy for the state, incorporating food into the larger conversations such as climate change, equity, and housing (how affordable housing siting affects access to fresh affordable food). The food system should be at the table during these discussions.

Program: Oyster market challenges during the pandemic: helping growers and processors explore oyster value added potential while also providing opportunities to address food security, Presenter: Joshua Reitsma, Fisheries and Aquaculture Specialist, Barnstable Cooperative Extension

Commissioner Lebeaux introduced the topic and Josh, sharing that the recent Extension newsletter provided a perfect introduction for today's program. Shortly after the start of the COVID 19 pandemic more than a year ago, sales of oysters plummeted. With the closure of restaurants and little access to their traditional markets, shellfish growers and related businesses were hit hard. Last Fall, Woods Hole Sea Grant (WHSG) and its extension partners at Cape Cod Cooperative Extension (CCCE) received \$100,000 in "Rapid Response" funds from the National Sea Grant Office to respond to the dire needs of the shellfish grower's community and others impacted by COVID 19 closures. The results of this project have meant money in growers' pockets and shucked oysters on the tables of those in need of high-quality protein.

MA is the biggest supplier of oysters in our region, with the industry expanding 10% annually. There was always surplus product during the fall. During the pandemic, \$12.5 M was lost. Direct sales were not really an option for most farmers, since state regulations require a dealer license, a difficult process.

The oysters keep growing past 4.5 inches into jumbos. There are few customers that want product that large. It's not easy to open oysters. There is some technology to help process oysters, with a machine called a shell breaker that allows the shell to be chipped so it's easier to insert the knife, to be able to do 1,000 per day which is about 50% faster and 100% less arduous. Oysters had not been used by food banks previously. Pints of frozen meats worked very well. Simple recipes were developed for pantries that may not be fully stocked and using a microwave. Oven fried oysters was a healthy alternative to deep fried oysters. There was an open call to growers who responded with more than could be used. Growers appreciated selling oversize product, and they appreciated helping those in need. This project helped them with morale. A trial is also ongoing to explore the long-term potential of value-added product and tried at three retailers. Feedback so far seems positive to consider providing frozen shucked oysters in the long term.

Oyster stuffing with cranberries was explored as a value-added product. It's hard to remove shell fragments, so this trial was not successful. Some equipment would be helpful. There is lots of interest in smoked oysters. A trial with a north shore processing center is encouraging, with a smoked oyster spread, and oysters Rockefeller.

The pilot proved that shucked oysters were of interest to consumers. Food banks asked for more. With funding from the MA Aquaculture Association, funding for a second phase began. The project will last through the winter. Two of the four processors from the first pilot will continue to shuck oysters. A fifth processor received FSIG funds. The infrastructure support was critical.

The oyster market has largely rebounded, and prices are starting to creep up, but there is worry about what might happen this fall, but hopefully some infrastructure will be in place to move this secondary market.

Q: If the market returns to normal, will there be an adequate supply of jumbos? A: A survey showed that at least a million oysters go to waste and doesn't meet the half shelf market requirements, so even without the pandemic, there will be a need for value-added. A million oysters is about 33,000 pounds of oyster meat, so it's substantial.

Comment: This is a very encouraging report for the growers and their employees. Pre-pandemic, aquaculture was the fastest growing sector of Massachusetts. Sales are returning to normal.

Q: What about climate change? A: Climate change could pose a problem with hatchery and seed issues but those tend to be in controlled situations. For the grow out, there are potential problems, especially with diseases in the environment and fouling issues. In terms of growth, oysters grow faster in warmer water. There are challenges with algae blooms that effect sales and also juvenile oysters. It's an adaptable industry though and will be here for a while.

Q: (Amanda Kinchla): From a research angle, exploring non-thermal techniques and technology that control disease and improve product quality are topics of interest. (Those technologies also make it easier to extract the meat).

Comment: Everyone watched how COVID affected industries, this example shows a product that had very little value during the pandemic with restaurants shuttered, being transformed into a nutritious value-added product, and supporting food access and consumer trials.

MA Food System Collaborative, Winton Pitcoff, New England Feeding New England, and other topics

An update on the Collaboratives mirrors the legislative update earlier in this meeting. It was good news that \$15M is included in the governor's budget. Additional funds via the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) are available to municipalities. The capital budget included \$200,000 for a state farm action plan. Winton testified regarding climate change, the FSIG task force and next steps. The Collaborative is supporting ongoing work on food system literacy and projects that are happening locally with respect to food system education and after school activities that are examples for an advocacy campaign to mandate food literacy in classrooms around the state. They are also working with local food policy councils on structural or policy issues. They are exploring the development of a supply chain map, for a better sense of where resources are regarding food storage, distribution, processing and to understand where investments are needed. HIP is running very well thanks to DTA, the Governor's funding support and the legislature. There are no worries about interruptions due to funding. This year's numbers were up 65% over the past. Thanks to Commissioner Kershaw, Mia and Brittany, the program has turned into the program we all envisioned.

Commissioner Kershaw thanked the Collaborative and MDAR.

NE Feeding NE is a six-state partnership planning process to build the resiliency and capacity of the region – how can we supply 30% of the region's food by 2030? Questions include what do we produce well, what are benchmarks, what are the demands, and what are our capacities. Massachusetts has a lot of the eaters, and a high production of seafood. This project is in a research stage, with more researchers needed.

A new project of the Collaborative is to build a network of BIPOC producers. Norris Guscott is the Collaborative's new Equity Policy Network Manager. He has worked for ten years in research on urban agriculture, policy, and spearheading equity. He led the city of Lynn's food security task force including city wide food deliveries, centralizing food distribution, and diverse produce offering. Lynn's has 1.5 acres of urban agriculture, in addition to community gardens. He shared that there are organizations or working groups organizing BIPOC farmers to advocate around equity, agriculture and policy. Not only is

this a public health issue and economic issues, but BIPOC farmers make up less than 1.5% of the farmers. This is a moral issue we should be addressing. Thanks to COVID, the food system has been exposed nationally especially for BIPOC residents. It's time to build a network to educate and advocate for BIPOC farmers and for their operations to be sustainable and equitable.

MA Food Policy Council member updates: Council members share priority projects, topics, and issues relevant to their work, the Council, and the MA Local Food Action Plan

Commissioner Kershaw and Rob Leshin helped distribute meals at the Malden School system, a FSIG recipient that used funds for a new food truck which brings summer meals to the recipients where they are. Kids line up and receive their lunch, and then the truck goes to multiple other locations, instead of having the families drive to the schools. The FSIG has been important to bring healthy meals to kids during the summer when school's not in session.

Commissioner Kershaw noted appreciation for the oyster program and how it is linked to food access and food security.

Rob Leshin thanked the Food Security Task Force for including schools as part of the FSIG. An important solution has been to get the food to meal sites in both rural and city schools. Malden will now apply for the USDA snack summer program, offering new meal options for the students of Malden. Visiting the Malden site shows a result of the FSIG purchases.

Rob shared that with universal meals available the past 1.5 years, USDA announced that they will continue the program for the rest of the year. A state bill has been sponsored that addresses important issues for school lunch including meal debt, lunch shaming and encouraging schools to early eligibility provisions (H 715 An Act to Promote Student Nutrition).

MassDEP will be announcing a stakeholder meeting in anticipation of draft solid waste regulations for public comment.

Announcements

Next week is farmers markets week <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/farmers-markets> in Massachusetts. HIP benefits can be used at farmers markets by HIP clients. Commissioner Lebeaux will be visiting several across the state and is pleased that he will be joined by several USDA regional leaders in one of the market visits, Truro. It's a good opportunity to recognize this sector that supports the MA Local Food Action Plan.

August 6, New England Honey Bee Update, *Lunch and Learn Series* [Details here.](#)

September 10, Food Policy Council meeting, 9:30 – 11:30 (virtual)

September 17 – October 3, 2021, Eastern States Exposition (The Big E)
<https://www.easternstatesexposition.com/>

October 1, New England Honey Bee Update, *Lunch and Learn Series* [Details here.](#)

December 8, SAVE THE DATE: 2021 Massachusetts Food System Forum:

Reconnecting and Rebuilding, Sturbridge, MA

Public Comment

Betsy Johnson promoted the NESWAG conference, Providence RI, November 8 -13, 2021 <https://nesawg.org/conference> that will be both virtual and live including aquaculture and urban agriculture tours. The Wellspring Go Fresh mobile market has upgraded their truck with a cooler, that has been significant in feeding seniors.

Christina Solazzo, SBN Local Food Coordinator, encouraged everyone to download the Eat Local App <http://bostonlocalfood.com/eat-local-month/app>, promoted August as Eat Local Month, and the Boston Local Food Festival <https://www.bostonlocalfoodfestival.com/September> 19.

A motion to adjourn was made at 11:07 by Commissioner Kershaw and seconded by Danah Tench, and approved unanimously: Representative Donahue, Commissioner Kershaw, Amanda Kinchla, Jason King, Commissioner Lebeaux, Rob Leshin, and Danah Tench.

On March 10, 2020, Governor Baker, acting pursuant to the power provided by Chapter 639 of the Acts of 1950 and Section 2A of Chapter 17 of the Massachusetts General Laws, declared a State of Emergency due to the outbreak of the 2019 coronavirus ("COVID-19"). In accordance with the State of Emergency, the Massachusetts Food Policy Council ("MFPC") meetings are being conducted through virtual means to allow real-time public access.