

# Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan and Regional Planning Agencies

## Meeting notes from online discussion on 11/20/2025

### Context

On November 20, 2024 Katharine Otto hosted an online meeting to give an overview of the Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan, focusing on actions and tasks which are most likely to overlap with Regional Planning Agency (RPA) work. It included discussion with RPA staff to explore tasks together and understand opportunities to get involved with implementing the plan. The audience was Regional Planning Agency staff.

Facilitator – Katharine Otto, Farmland Action Plan Coordinator, MDAR. [Katharine.s.otto@mass.gov](mailto:Katharine.s.otto@mass.gov)

*The following is a brief summary of the conversation that occurred during the meeting. It includes links and resources shared with participants.*

Some notes regarding the comments and questions:

- Some have been edited or combined.
- Comments have been collated by topics, in no particular order
- These comments are from voluntary participants in open discussion. These comments may or may not align with positions of MDAR or the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

### Discussion notes

The topics are categorized to align with the slides which guided discussion

#### *General*

- How many farms have taken advantage of Farm Pass?
- Lots of talk about Chapter 61A and APR land. Are we talking about managed forest and timberland as well as farms? Greenhouses? Other working lands? Supporting industries? Need more on supporting the individuals and operations as much as the land itself.
- Does farm viability include economic sustainability as much as environmental?
- Additional funding is needed for RPAs to get involved more. This is important work, but already stretched with other priorities.
- It's been a while since we've directly addressed farm policies in our region, so absorbing all the great work done elsewhere in the state. We may have resources that can help address some of these tasks, re engagement, communications, solar, prioritization.

#### *Increase access to funding through planning*

- OSRP – a lot of the farmland acquired by Con Comm so no longer farmed, so this may not be the best mechanism.
- Grafton and Rutland prioritize which farmland to protect as follow on to their OSRP efforts. Includes prioritize for Right of First Refusal for using CPA funds if opportunity arises. Matrix and scale system to prioritize. <https://grafton-ma.gov/1036/Open-Space-Parcel-Prioritization-Project>
- Task 1017 related to guidance in the OSRP workbook – is anything available now for planners to use?
- What's needed for NRCS to make it eligible for ACEP-ALE?
- OSRP Workbook being revised by Melissa Cryan

- Add agriculture in Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) plans. Tie into other plans – eg food security, soils, master plans, etc
- RPA will be supporting through the Open Space funding, unless there are funds that will be available?

#### *Zoning reform and smart growth policies*

- Open Space Residential Development often don't consider "open space" as agriculture – could it be considered in these tasks.
- Any resources to explore TDR? Few good examples in Massachusetts. Would love to know of more!
- Kestrel Easthampton example of farmland with housing example. Hadley as a lead example of TDR being used to protect farmland.

#### *Ecosystem services*

- What ecosystem services can farms provide? Farms often have reputation for pollution, but they also provide services. Ecosystem services compared to development.
- Vermont doing some work on valuing ecosystem services, particularly as relates to soils.  
[https://agriculture.vermont.gov/sites/agriculture/files/documents/Water\\_Quality/PES/Valuation%20of%20soil%20health%20ecosystem%20services\\_VTPESTask5\\_V1.pdf](https://agriculture.vermont.gov/sites/agriculture/files/documents/Water_Quality/PES/Valuation%20of%20soil%20health%20ecosystem%20services_VTPESTask5_V1.pdf)
- Language of whole farms reminds of Red Fire Farm in Montague, which Mt Grace Land Trust worked with – included value of the housing <https://www.mountgrace.org/about/news/post/red-fire-farm-whole-farm-forever>
- Mass Audubon has quite a bit on Ecosystems services
- Plimpton MVP Action Plan includes a lot of ecosystem system services with involvement of many partners, etc. Included info from Healthy Soils Plan. This action plan is now feeding into their OSRP.

#### *Food production and licensing municipal land*

- Working on Chelmsford OSRP – can I put in that MDAR can help with licensing and some technical assistance?
- Food hubs and emerging food hub could help here – done a lot of research on this topic – add them as partners
- Could non-profits manage parcels?
- Food hubs have diverse functions depending on the region. Aggregate local produce to then distribute to end users. Non-profits using lands and food forests particularly in more urban areas, rather than individual people.

#### *Urban Agriculture*

- Are there examples of zoning bylaw language that supports this? Or is there a handbook?
- Article 89 in Boston is a great reference
- We're working with the Regional Environmental Council (Worcester urban ag nonprofit) to develop a prioritization analysis of parcels in the city for food forests
- Cambridge beekeeping ordinance: [https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/ZoningDevel/Amendments/Ordinances/zngamend\\_1400\\_beekeeping.pdf](https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/ZoningDevel/Amendments/Ordinances/zngamend_1400_beekeeping.pdf)
- Somerville urban ag ordinance: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/urban-agriculture-ordinance.pdf>
- Boston urban ag: <https://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/8405c72c-7520-43ad-a969-0e27dddae7a2#:~:text=Small%20Roof%20Level%20Urban%20Farms%20are%20Allowed%20in%20all%20Districts%20and%20Subdistricts.&text=Urban%20Farm%2C%20Roof%20Level%2C%20Medium,all%20other%20Districts%20and%20Subdistricts.>

### *Zoning and Regulations support farm viability*

- Challenges farmers face with agritourism, including individual municipalities and locally administered Boards of Health - kitchen spaces, selling product, etc. This is in addition to zoning and tax programs. Need to define agritourism – statewide help, including with the Rural Policy Council? It's not just about Chapter 61A, not farm fresh, farms are going under the radar.
- HIP as a policy – it helps to protect farmland by encouraging connection to our local farms
- Voc/Tech Schools have good ideas for Public Service Announcements – a good potential partner
- Consider a revamp municipal zoning toolkit for ag?

### *Other outreach and education*

- Ag comms don't have capacity. They meet during winter months when not farming. They need support.

### *Equity and EJ*

- What relationships are established with the state to connect underserved or beginning farmers with services?
- Consider wrap around services including workforce development. New farmers often women so need childcare and elder care

### *Other potential areas of overlapping interest*

- How is the language in plan crafted around sustainable and chemical free farming, versus conventional farming? Already expensive to farm in the northeast so hard to do things like reduce greenhouse gases
- Can we talk a bit more about ag com support? Do other RPAs have experience with very active Ag coms and what they may be doing differently?
- Need for integrated planning shown in this slide. Partnering with others so important. Give a boost to the Ag comms even – many are not updating their 5 year action plans. CEDS is important also to have agricultural considerations in there. As RPAs we need to plan for ag not around it. May not be addressed in other plans.
- Solar development policies – How do agrivoltaics fit with larger projects that go beyond municipal control? Is there conversation at MDAR about this? How does it interplay with the Farmland Action Plan?
- Are you looking at the Mass Audubon solar siting guidance? Maintain connection between food system and ecosystem – pollinators, habitat, and how they interact with farm
- Town of Harvard have active agricultural advisory committee
  - o [https://www.harvard.ma.us/sites/g/files/vyhlif676/f/uploads/20190618\\_harvard\\_agriculture\\_final\\_report\\_only\\_low-res.pdf](https://www.harvard.ma.us/sites/g/files/vyhlif676/f/uploads/20190618_harvard_agriculture_final_report_only_low-res.pdf)
  - o [https://www.harvard-ma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif676/f/uploads/bmp\\_ag\\_11.20.19\\_0.pdf](https://www.harvard-ma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif676/f/uploads/bmp_ag_11.20.19_0.pdf)
- Resilient Mass Metrics includes food and water categories so would be good to connect
- State Land Use Plan being updated with Kurt Gaertner as the Project Manager