

Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan at the MA Farm Bureau Federation Annual Meeting 2024 in Amherst

Notes from discussion on 12/05/2024

Context

Workshop – Accelerating farmland protection, increasing access to farmland and enhancing farm viability through the MA Farmland Action Plan

In December 2023 the Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan was released. It focuses on three overlapping goals – agricultural land protection, access and viability. In this workshop we'll share how implementation has started, including some recent changes and additions to MDAR programs such as the new Farm-Pass (farm transfer planning assistance). Provide feedback to help partners to decide what could be good to work on next. Explore how you could get involved with implementing the Plan, include providing feedback and advice from your experiences.

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The following is a brief summary of some of the questions and comments shared during the workshop or provided on the paper handout.

Some notes regarding the comments:

- Some have been slightly edited or combined.
- Comments have been collated in no particular order
- Many comments align well with existing tasks within the Farmland Action Plan.
- A few comments highlight potential new tasks to be considered when implementing the Farmland Action Plan.
- A few comments may not belong within implementation of the Farmland Action Plan, because they are better aligned with other statewide plans or initiatives.
- 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.

What would you like to see worked on next?

Polls were carried out throughout the discussion. Polls were answered by most participants – using hand raising in the room just for high priorities, as well as written responses using a handout for broader range of options (high, medium and low priorities, and no opinion). Comments were also shared by participants orally and on the handout.

Priorities for activities to work on next



Transfer and succession comments

- The issue seems to be that no one who wants to buy a starter/interim farm can afford to buy a farm with decades of equity. These questions don't address economic reality.
- There are big gaps of financial accessibility between farmland owners and buyers.

Farmer assistance comments

- #15 Service providers: There are so many! Bumping into each other on farms. We don't need to build capacity, we need a strategy so that organizations government or non are competing with each other for farmer attention, MDAR funding etc., Farmers don't know where to go because there are too many options. Spend less money on assistants and more on farmers.
- #17 is a good concept but how would it work?
- #17 – Who would "navigators" be?

Housing comments

- #18 will be difficult but is important to look at
- Housing is an issue on all farms whether they are protected or not
- UMass Dartmouth has empty dorms – could that be helpful

Is there any additional information we should be aware of related to any of the items listed above?

- APR restrictions around cannabis and wedding venues can be unappealing.
- Farmer need to have reduced restrictions and help industry become more profitable. Make ag profitable less land going out of use.

Do you have any other suggestions of what to work on next?

- Helping the younger gen be able to buy farmland
- Work on housing for seasonal workers as state college campuses. UMass?
- I am so happy MDAR is committed to forward thinking regarding land access and farmland preservation.
- More funding opportunities for building construction/ repair. Young farmers are walking into properties with expensive deferred maintenance items (roofing, electrical systems) and there isn't a lot of funding beside maybe Farm Viability grants.
- Networking might for farm owners who want to sell and people looking for farmland.
- A regulation that keeps state or town land that was in agriculture in agriculture. (prisons, state hospitals, conservation land that was farmland).

Organizations and Committees

What groups are you involved with?

Participants identified if they belonged to this group

	Hands raised in the room	Written responses
Farm Bureau	13	10
Buy Local (eg CISA, Berkshire Grown, Central Mass Grown, SEMAP)	6	4
Commodity Group	6	5
Town Selectboard	1	2
Town Planning Commission	1	0

	Hands raised in the room	Written responses
Town Ag Comm	1	0
Town Conservation Commission	2	1
Land Trust	1	1
Statewide committee	1	1
Other (please list below)		
UMass Extension	4	2
Grange	1	1
4H	1	1
UMass Animal Science		1
Town Forest Comm		1

What do these groups understand about farmland? What more do they need to learn?

- I think many farm bureau members do not fully understand how many barriers are in place for non-land owners.
- MA Association of Dairy Farmers needs to be at the table. Dairy farmers use large portion of states ag land.
- They understand that each commodity and area has different needs.
- Most boards don't have any farmers on them to be able to make good decisions for the benefit of farmers
- Right to Farm bylaw support for farming among residents. Works well in the Berkshires
 - o How does it work well? Right to Farm as an incentive for financial and community support. Using it to get state grants.

General questions and comments from workshop

- Use marketing to show success of farmland protection
- Farmers not use to the amount of money they receive from APR payments – how do we set them up for success as they use that money?
- A lot of what's in the plan affects farmers but if farmers are not bought into them they may not work
- People making policy suggestions should be those that are trying to make a living on a farm. For example some of the challenges with APRs and why some are against it is rooted in telling farmers what to do with their own land
- Need value from sale of my farm. Can't offer it as a bargain.
- Some land trusts hold lots of underutilized agricultural land. How can we encourage it to be used?
- How do you make the industry profitable so the land stays in use? Eg dairy tax credit
- This state invests in its farms
- Ag Comms and select boards vary by town in their interpretation of regulations and priorities and are volunteers with no training. Can MDAR provide training for town employees/volunteers?