

Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan at the Massachusetts Food System Forum 2024 in Worcester

Notes from discussion on 12/17/2024

Context

Panel Session - Furthering implementation of Massachusetts' food system plans

This panel focused on the [Farmland Action Plan](#) and the Healthy Soils Action Plan. Key points of discussion will included sharing out what work being done currently, discussing next steps, and plans for partnering on implementation. The upcoming 10 year anniversary of the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan was also discussed.

Presenters

- Katharine Otto, Farmland Action Plan Coordinator, MDAR. Katharine.s.otto@mass.gov
- Rebecca Davidson, Director of Food and Climate Equity, MDAR. Rebecca.davidson@mass.gov

The following is a summary of input collected via [mentimeter](#), a live polling software, from participants in the room. Participants answered the questions through a link on their phones. A paper option to answer the questions was distributed but not used by any participants.

Some notes regarding the comments:

- Some have been slightly edited or combined.
- Comments have been collated by topics, 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 such as the EEA EJ Strategy and the MA Local Food Action Plan.
- 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 be worked on next?

For these slides participants were asked to tell us their priority on what they think should be worked on next. These tasks could be led by MDAR staff or one of the many potential partners for the plan.

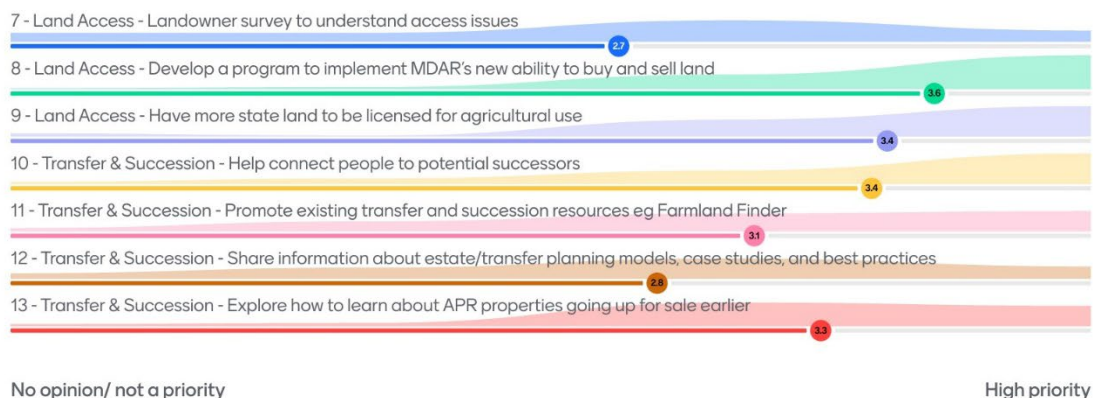
The options were: no opinion/ not a priority, low priority, medium priority, and high priority. A higher number on the scoring means higher priority for participants as a whole.

45-48 people answered questions on the following three slides.

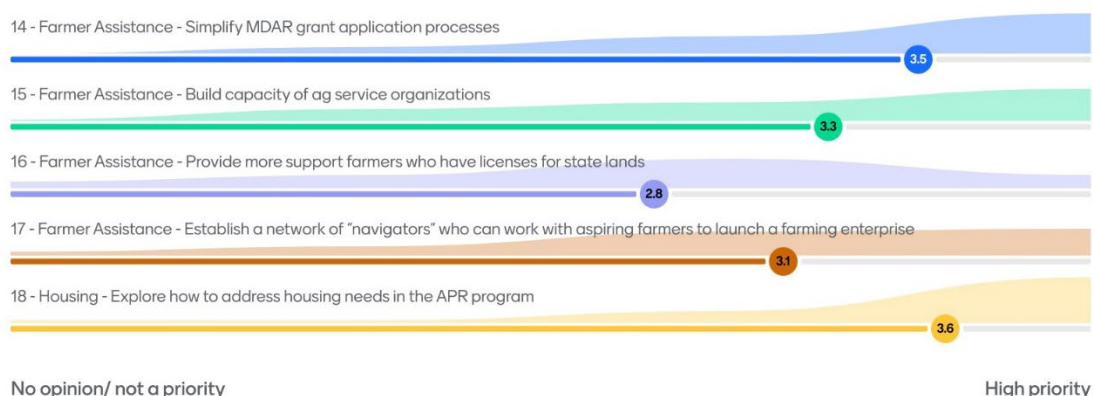
Municipal Support and Land Protection - What would you like to be worked on next? Indicate the priority for you



Land Access and Transfer/ Succession - What would you like to be worked on next? Indicate the priority for you



Farmer Assistance and Housing - What would you like to be worked on next? Indicate the priority for you



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

The following comments were written by participants into mentimeter. 35 people contributed to this question.

Protecting farmland

- Implement buy protect sell program and assign to land trusts.
- Create a revolving loan fund for land acquisition costs
- Private APR funding source
- Agroforestry with forest protection
- Financing support for farmland purchase

Bringing land into agricultural production

- Develop land reclamation grant program to bring marginal and overgrown land back into production
- Mapping state/municipal/institutional land appropriate for farming

Farmers on land owned by public lands (state or municipal)

- Build infrastructure on state license lands for new farmers – 2 people
- Navigate farmland and farmer protection for farms leasing from municipalities
- For urban growers, are there plans for growers to either partner or purchase land directly from cities?

Farm transfer and succession

- Farm transfer incentives
- Tax incentives for landowners to transfer land to BIPOC and beginning farmers
- Increase financial support for one-to-one business technical assistance to support farmland succession, access, and transfer.

Land access

- Beginning farmer land access incentives
- Land access tools

Housing

- Farmer housing on protected farmland, including APRs – 2 people

Soil health, resiliency and climate change

- Regional collaboration on climate resilience and farmland protection
- Soil Health education and implementation support

Solar

- Research and share info on how the solar energy field impacts farmland access

Local regulations, zoning, etc

- Urban agriculture zoning for new farmland for school districts, cities, nonprofits, etc

Technical and fiscal assistance

- One on one farmer assistance for grants, business and technical support etc – 2 people
- Farmer business coaching and development. Support with implementing strategic projects or improving their bottom line
- Anything that can support farmers directly to grow
- More farm assistance in each county with staff who can assist across a range of services.
- Help farmers achieve financially viable
- Support for infrastructure on land, etc.
- More low interest financing options, raise FSA direct farm loan limit

- Offer retirement savings/ investment (eg: Simple IRA) plan for MA farmers.
- Helping farmers share resources & tools
- Design equity based accommodations to address the barrier of the match and reimbursement model of MDAR grants.

Legislative/ Policy

- Lowering acreage requirement to enroll in 61A (and perhaps then eligibility for APR program)

Labor and workforce

- Living wage for farm employees.
- Strengthening the labor pool.
- Supporting farm workers

Farmer engagement

- Working with farmers of color organizations
- Guidance for farmers looking to engage community
- More language accessibility – 2 people

General related to implementing the plan

- Money to implement the plan, including for partners – 3 people
- Connecting strategies across New England to further strengthen strategies and food system
- More clarification on actions and measure outputs to make it easier to see progress
- Advisory/steering committee to guide this process
- Data gathering and collaborations

Education for general public

- Consumer education about the real cost of food (includes farmer housing, land cost, the role of subsidies)

Food system

- Increased access to affordable locally grown produce
- Aggregated/expanded food storage capacity
- Tax incentives for farmers to give food to partners.
- Assisting farmers to access new market channels to increase viability

Other

- Connection between rural (for profit) production and urban/nonprofit resources
- Generally, the things that most directly support farmers themselves
- We need more farmers, we need to treat farmers as if they are superstars and also start paying for great/better food

What could MDAR and partners do to foster meaningful engagement, capacity-building, and equitable implementation around the Farmland Action Plan?

The following comments were written by participants into mentimeter. 30 people contributed to this question.

Language and communication, including interpretation and translation

- Communicate in plain language. Simplify!
- Interpretation and translation of resources and presentations
- Good communication channels and share successes early and often

- Understanding and working with what is already happening - don't reinvent the wheel

Ways of approaching people

- Ask farmers what they need, instead of assuming we know.

Engagement methods and tools

- Develop ambassadors
- Go to the people who farm and listen – 2 people.
- Visit farms and hold a hearing session.
- Outreach events on farms to help farmers understand resources available to them and how they can “steer the ship”.
- Forums and town hall gatherings for folks sharing input and offer suggestions.
- Regional forums open to public.
- MDAR regional representatives to support the farmers
- A support person assigned to each farm. (As in the past with extension workers).
- Identify targeted partners to help facilitate more boots on the ground conversations with stakeholders to improve outreach.
- Create a central clearinghouse for info about funding, support, etc. A one stop shop for farmers to find out what kind of help exists
- Direct communication to farms and agricultural orgs about upcoming forums so that farmers can access input sessions
- Speak with community members that are not always in contact directly with farmers. Such as farmer's markets, CSA pick up, schools, neighborhood associations, libraries.
- Kitchen cabinet of regional farmers
- Build good relationships
- Building relationships with new farmers/communities
- Working together

Compensation for participation

- Compensation for farmer and partner participation – 5 people
- Offer to meet them where they are, offer things like meals or child care, or alternate times

Building capacity of partners

- Multiyear funding for nonprofits to retain staff who are building relationships and not rebuilding programs annually.
- Continued support and capacity building for Buy Local Groups and other non-profits, ensuring you have “boots on the ground” support teams across the state

Advisory roles for implementing the plan

- An advisory committee to help guide and shepherd the plan – 2 people
- Leadership beyond MDAR staff to guide the implementation process
- Advisory committee of farmers of color to hold plan accountable for equity goals

Youth

- How are current youth farm workers voices and dreams for the future captured?
- Educate kids about what happens on farms day to day
- K-12 resources for students to understand the Farmland Action Plan and why it's important

Other topics raised

- Retirement security education/resources for farmers transitioning out

- Connect to 30x30 regional resilience
- Partner with UMass Stockbridge to educate about farmland access and business support resources - and connect with farmers looking to train and transfer in the future
- Programs to educate funders
- Continued discussions about why a vibrant local food system is so important

Do you have any additional questions or comments to share? This could include any recommendations about actionable next steps

- Very impressed by the growth and movement on this plan over the last year! Thank you Katharine & MDAR team!!
- Very glad Katharine is leading this highly complex effort and engaging so many stakeholders! Look forward to tackling implementation.

Questions and comments given orally

- Can you share more details about the upcoming funding source?
- Need for regional efforts across stateliness
- Interaction with update of Food Action Plan
- How to involve youth since this is a plan for their future
- Have other states done a plan like this?