

Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan and RPAs

Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG)
Planning Board Meeting on Thursday, May 22, 2025 at
6pm. Online.

Katharine Otto, Farmland Action Plan Coordinator



Agenda and Today's Goals

Agenda

- ❖ Introductions
- ❖ Farming in Massachusetts today and looking forwards
- ❖ Importance of Farmland Action Plan
- ❖ Implementing the Farmland Action Plan
- ❖ How could RPAs get involved?
- ❖ Discussion and next steps

Today's Goals

- ❖ Understand how MDAR and RPAs can collaborate and coordinate

Introductions

Katharine Otto, Farmland Action Plan Coordinator,
MDAR

Context

Farming in Massachusetts today

According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, Massachusetts has:

**7,083 farms on
464,451 acres**



of farmland (about 9% of MA land) with
land and buildings worth

\$6.4 billion

13,896 producers* and
14,032 hired farm workers

with a payroll of

\$204 million



**\$607
million**

of agricultural
products
sold



* A “producer” is a person who is involved in making decisions for the farm operation

What does the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture (MDAR) do?

Mission



Cultivate a robust and equitable agricultural economy



Promote a safe and resilient food system



Preserve a healthy environment for Massachusetts farmers, animals, and consumers.

Areas of expertise

- ❖ Land preservation
- ❖ Farm business planning
- ❖ Urban agriculture
- ❖ Farmers markets and Agricultural fairs
- ❖ Crop and Pest Services
- ❖ Compost
- ❖ Animal Health
- ❖ Food Systems
- ❖ And more!

Why are farms
and farmland
important to you?

Feeds
community

????

Contributes
to local
economy

Preserves
rural
heritage

????

Grow
foods from
my cultural
heritage

????

Helps
address
climate
change and
mitigate its
impacts

Sustains
family
businesses

Protects
vital
natural
resources

Contributes
to soil
health

???

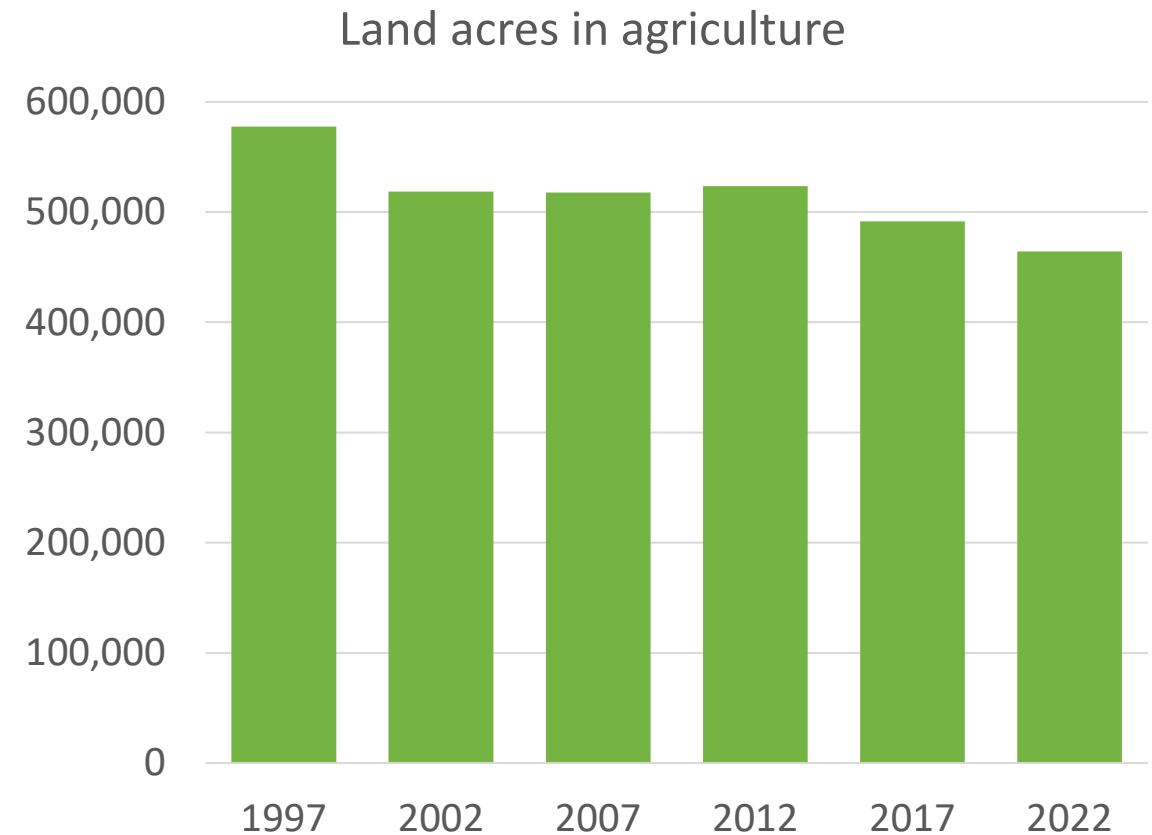
Why is the Farmland Action Plan important?

We are losing agricultural land fast!

Between 1997 and 2022

Massachusetts lost 113,000 acres

- 3.7 times the size of the land area of Boston
- 1.8 times the size of Martha's Vineyard
- 12.4 acres per day



Farms Under Threat

American Farmland Trust's "Farms Under Threat 2040" Report, between 2016 and 2040 Massachusetts, without additional investment and policy changes, is projected to lose



Crisis for agriculture in Massachusetts

Land and climate

- Land prices have risen significantly
- Losing land to competing land uses
- Climate change is exacerbating extreme weather impacts

Economics

- Food system economics favor larger scale farms in other areas
- High input costs so average cost of production is greater than the value of goods produced

People and systems

- Farmer population is aging and many do not have plan for after they step away
- Lack of comprehensive statewide land-use planning with clear goals for farmland protection
- Historic and current inequities in accessing farmland

Funding available to farmers

Division of Agricultural Conservation
and Technical Assistance

Land Use Programs



**Agricultural Land
Protection**



**Farm Viability
Programs**



**Renewable Energy/
Energy Efficiency**



**Environmental
Protection and
Climate Resiliency**



Food Safety



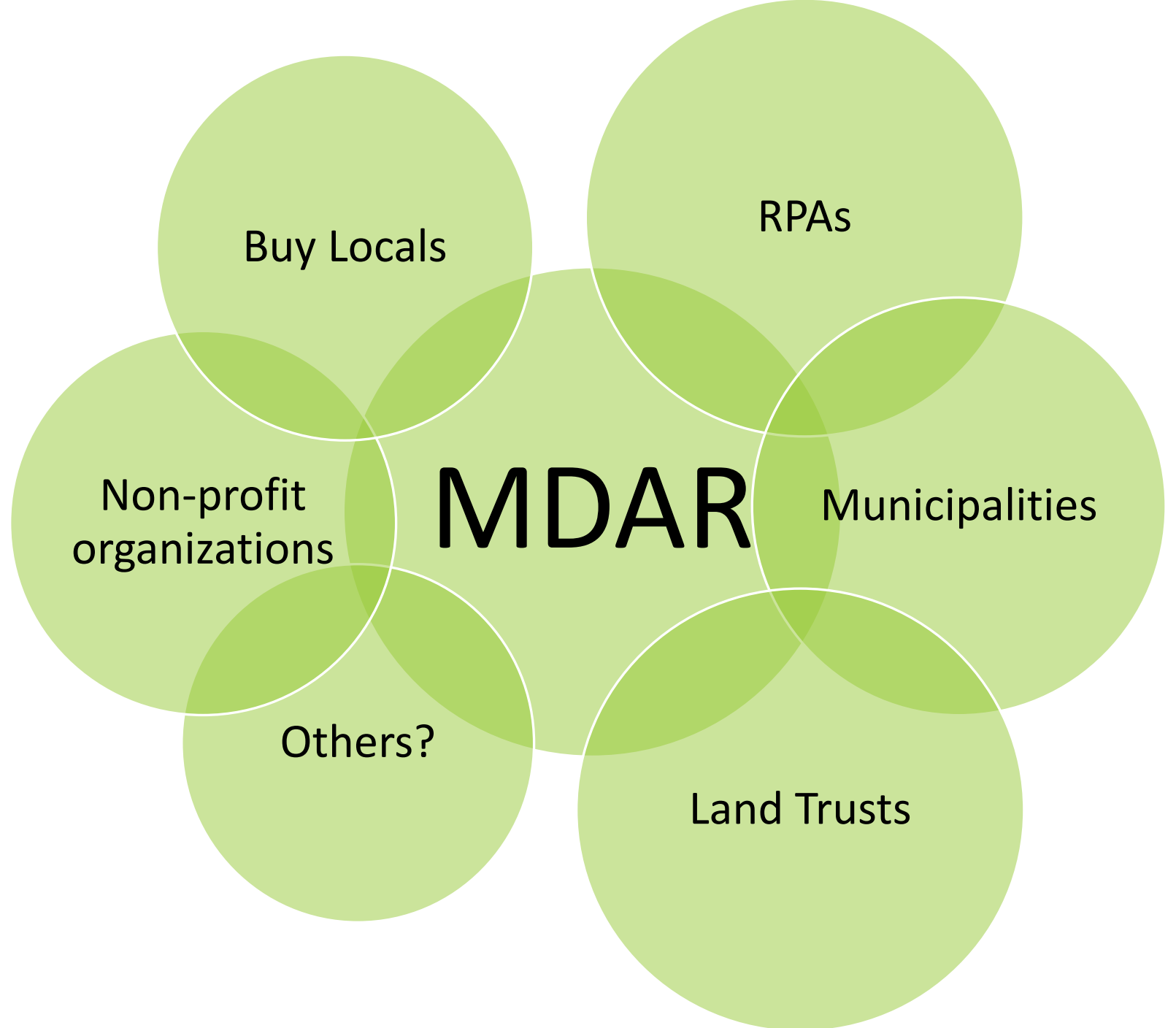
**Urban Agriculture/
Food Systems**

How can MDAR work more with local partners?

Important for implementing the Farmland Action Plan!

Some existing relationships

Some relationships need to be built



What is the Plan?

- State funded
- State coordinated
- Long range strategic initiative
- Statewide, not just for state government
- www.mass.gov/farmland-action-plan



MASSACHUSETTS FARMLAND ACTION PLAN 2023–2050

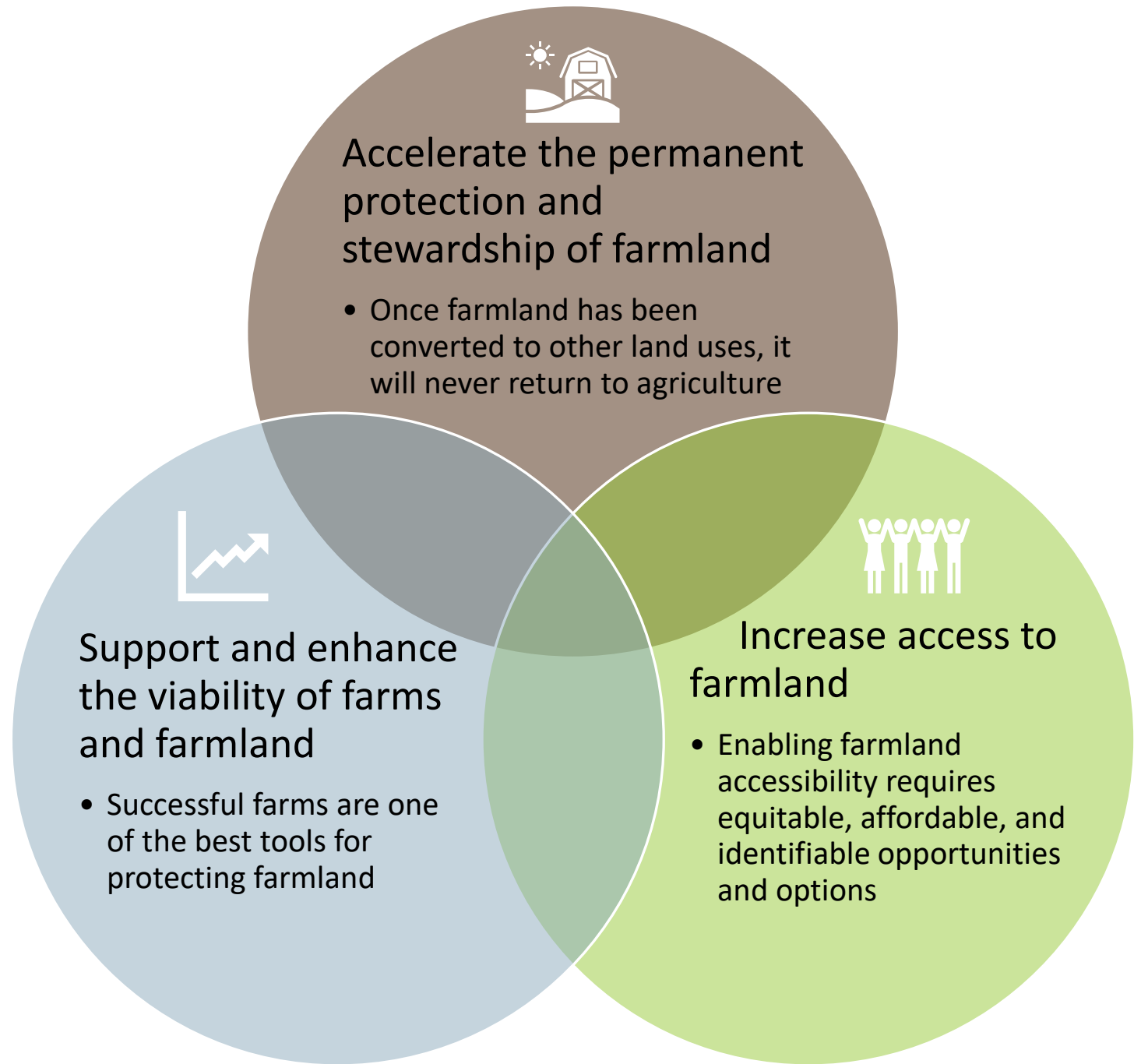
Other related statewide plans

- Local Food Access Plan (2015)
- Decarbonization Road Map (2018)
- Rural Policy Plan (2019)
- Clean Energy & Climate Plan (2022)
- ResilientMass (2023) (State Hazard Mitigation and Climate Adaptation Plan)
- Resilient Lands Initiative (2023)
- Healthy Soils Action Plan (2033)
- EEA Environmental Justice Strategy (2023)
- Special Commission on Agriculture in the Commonwealth in the 21st Century (forthcoming)
- And others!

What are the goals of the Farmland Action Plan?

Three overlapping goals:

- Protection
- Access
- Viability



Overview of the matrix

Goals – what the plan hopes to achieve.

Strategy – clarify what aspects of each Goal will be addressed

Action – direct how each strategy will be advanced.

Task – details on how each action will be achieved

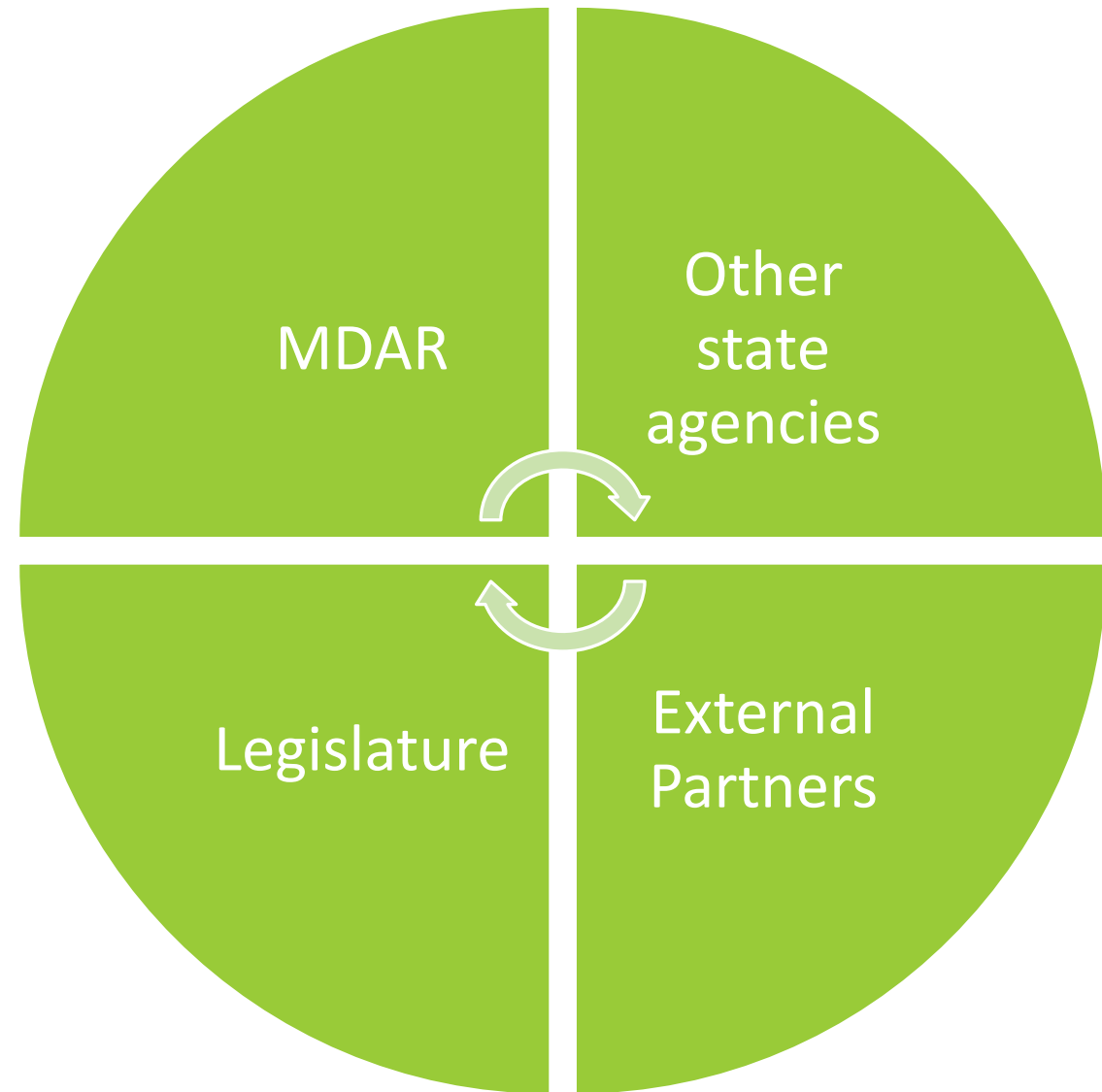
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Who will implement the Plan?

This is a plan for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

- **MDAR** is promoting, monitoring and facilitating implementation of the Plan, building momentum from existing programs and initiatives.
- It is an integral part of the Commonwealth's climate and natural resources initiatives being implemented by **other state agencies**.
- **External partners** include non-profits, municipalities, RPAs, land trusts, federal agencies, educational institutions, private entities and others.
- The plan also identifies opportunities for the **legislature** to make policy and fiscal choices to support farmland goals



How can I get involved?

Depending on the task you could be:

- **Lead implementer** – Partner who is the champion/ energy behind implementing a task
- **Other potential implementer** – Other partners who could be key for implementing a task, bringing specific expertise or insights that may shape implementation
- **Other interested entities and individuals** who may have useful information to share to inform the task, may be part of the solution, or are interested in the task outcome.

Lead implementer

Other
potential
implementer

Other
potential
implementer

Other
potential
implementer

Other
interested
individuals

Other
interested
individuals

Other
interested
individuals

Other
interested
individuals

Other
interested
individuals

Other
interested
individuals

How could RPAs get involved?

Example - Northwest RPC (VT) involvement in agriculture and farmland work

What types of work?

- ❖ Regional and municipal
- ❖ Land Use Planning and Regulations
- ❖ Regional Forestry Plans
- ❖ Workforce housing
- ❖ Grant application assistance
- ❖ Economic development
- ❖ Workforce development

Specific examples

- ❖ Leader in Education, Workforce and Labor Topic Exchange as part of Vermont Farm to Plate
- ❖ Assisted farms getting grants for high-efficiency modular housing
- ❖ Incubator for Healthy Roots Collaborative – region-wide Farm & Food resource

Source: Conversation with Kathy Lavoie at NRPC (May 2024), www.nrpcvt.com, www.healthyrootsvt.org and Farm to Plate Annual Report 2023
www.vtfarmtoplate.com/sites/default/files/2024-01/Farm-to-Plate-Annual-Report-2023-Final.pdf

Tasks from the Farmland Action Plan

Increase access to funding through planning

- Local (and maybe Regional) Plans can be used as justification to preserve farms that otherwise don't meet federal funding eligibility

Zoning reform and smart growth policies

- Work with municipalities and on regional level on education, planning and zoning that encourage density and development that do not result in the loss of farmland

Support farm viability via local zoning and regulations

- Work with municipalities to encourage zoning that supports farm businesses and farmland

Other opportunities

- Increased integration with other EEA grants – eg Planning Assistance
- Equity and EJ – access to land and engagement
- Urban agriculture
- Farm worker housing and affordable housing for farmers
- Solar development policies
- Food production assessment
- Workforce development
- Food production and licensing municipal land
- Climate adaptation and resiliency
- Support ecosystem services and Nature-based Solutions

Other ideas?

Next steps

Key features for implementation

Already started

- Regular newsletter to share information with partners and interested individuals
- Foster partnerships and collaboration
- Learn from feedback on previous processes, including plan creation
- Encourage wider engagement and implementation

Going forwards

- Focus on topics or specific tasks not the entire plan
- Better understanding of equitable engagement and feedback mechanisms
- Build trusted relationships
- Capacity building, including funding for partners to help with implementation

Highlights from 2024 Progress Report



Protect and steward land

- Leverage federal funding
- Build capacity of entities to protect land
- Increase applications to protection programs
- Prioritize protection of whole farms



Access to farmland

- State and municipal land licensing programs
- Expand farmland transfer and succession education and technical assistance
- Increase use of public lands by Historically Underserved Farmers



Viability of farms and farmland

- Farmer access to grants and financing



General

- Hire Farmland Action Plan Coordinator
- Elevate BIPOC and other historically underserved farmer voices in implementation

Learning about implementation so far

2024 Progress Report

- Released December 2024
- www.mass.gov/farmland-action-plan
- Explains how implementation is starting
- Shares more about what has happened so far
- 10 Highlights – Work in progress or starting soon

Resources by topic

- Created for specific audiences for many meetings with potential partners in 2024
- Presentations, meeting notes and other resources www.mass.gov/farmland-action-plan

New Farmland Partnership Program

Grant program to help implement the Farmland Action Plan at the local, regional or statewide level.

The goal of the Program is to **build networks of Partners who work together collaboratively and in coordination** to protect farmland, enhance farm viability, and ensure access to farmland.

Learn more at www.mass.gov/info-details/farmland-partnership-program

- Two year grants
- Applications due May 2025
- Expect to start work around November 2025



For more more information or questions

Farmland Action Plan Webpage www.mass.gov/farmland-action-plan

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