# Statewide Food System and Farmland Strategies in Action:

## Lessons from Rhode Island and Massachusetts

**Regional Conservation Partnership (RCP) Network Gathering**

**Thursday, November 5, 2026 at UMass Amherst**

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MDAR
MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

RHODE ISLAND FOOD STRATEGY 2030

Cultivating a Shared Food Future
Through Conservation, Community & Collaboration

# Today's Goals

- Highlight how Rhode Island and Massachusetts are building collaborative, statewide approaches to strengthen regional food systems, protect farmland, and support farm viability.
- Share lessons from the Rhode Island Food Strategy 2030
- Explore implementation of the Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan 2023-2050
- Share strategies for reducing silos, connecting hundreds of partners, and leveraging funding, staffing, expertise, and partnerships to advance shared goals.
- Demonstrate how state agencies can use collaborative planning, cross-sector coordination, and community engagement to address farmland loss, strengthen food systems, and create durable networks that support long-term agricultural and food system resilience.

# Agenda and Approach

- Who's in the room?
- Comparing the planning efforts
- The Plans in Brief
- Developing the Plans
- Implementing the Plans
- Themes and concluding thoughts – Strategies for reducing silos, connecting hundreds of partners, and leveraging funding, staffing, expertise, and partnerships to advance shared goals
- Questions and Answers

**For each agenda item:**

- Highlight strategies for reducing silos, connecting hundreds of partners, and leveraging funding, staffing, expertise, and partnerships to advance shared goals
- Cover two processes and documents
  - Rhode Island Food Strategy 2030
  - Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan 2023-2050

# Today's presenter and presentation authors



## Katharine Otto, AICP

Farmland Action Plan Coordinator

Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR)



## Alison Macbeth

Food Strategy Project Manager

Rhode Island Commerce (RI Commerce)

# Who's in the room? Questions for the audience

**What type of organization do you work for?**

1) State government
2) Regional or municipal government
3) Land trust
4) Advocacy organization
5) Farm service organization
6) Other? Please should out!

**What state(s) do you work in?**

1) Massachusetts
2) Rhode Island
3) Vermont
4) New Hampshire
5) Maine
6) Connecticut
7) Other

**What type of work do you do?**

1) TA for farmers and/or food entities
2) Land acquisition or stewardship
3) Regional or local planning
4) Other? Please should out!

**Have you been involved with any of the following?**

1) Creation of a statewide food plan (eg VT, NH, RI, MA)
2) Implementation of a statewide food plan
3) Creation of a statewide farmland plan (eg MA Farmland Action Plan)
4) Implementation of a statewide farmland plan

# Comparing the two initiatives

# Commonalities between the planning efforts

- Focus on a topic – Farmland, Food – but reference the wider system
- Collaborative approach, including bringing in new partners
- Fostering a sense of ownership for implementation
- Role of people in state government to be the go between – bridging the gap between local partners and state administration
- Limitations of scope and process based on being led a state agency, and the mission of that organization and the wider administration's goals

# Different Approaches, Shared Priorities

**Shared priorities – Collaborative, Systems Thinking, Shared Ownership in Implementation, State Leadership**

**RI Food Strategy 2030**

- Broader food systems focus
- High level, actionable priorities
- Flexibility to adapt across administrations
- Tasks & timelines developed in implementation

**MA Farmland Action Plan 2023-2050**

- Tried to be specific in the plan with Goals, Strategies, Actions, Implementation Objectives and Tasks
- Developed a mechanism so the plan tasks could evolve over 27 years of the plan (Implementation matrix)
  - eg Add missing tasks
  - eg Divide tasks with multiple components
  - eg Assign partners and timeline

# Timing

**Commonalities**

- Nothing involving state government happens fast
- It always takes way longer that you expect
- Approvals take time and can impede momentum

**Challenges**

- Moving at the speed of trust takes time
- No state/legislative mandates to keep things moving
- Administration and leadership changes

# Key lessons

**Power of relationships cannot be underestimated**

- Trust
- Political pressure
- Build new relationships, not just rely on existing
- Strategic planning as a vehicle for building new relationships

**Core tenants we oriented around**

- Listen to all voices, not just loudest
- Weave together wide variety of perspectives
- Existing system cannot be thrown out, but also can't stay the same – how do we navigate the in between
- Goal of shifting the needle/ incremental changes, rather than 180 degree change
- Don't sacrifice good for perfect





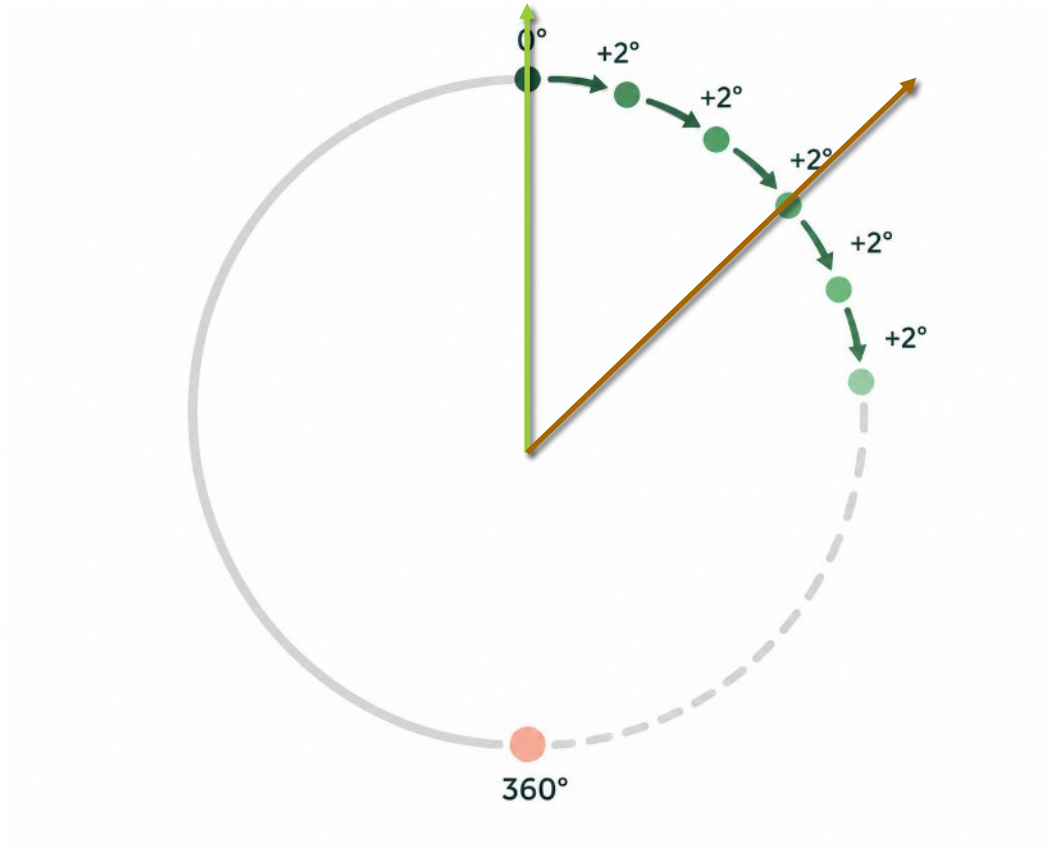




# Finding the North Star

- **Consider scale**: Identify the different types of support needed at each stage and scale of the "system."
- **Make strategic choices**: Recognize that not everything can be prioritized or addressed at once.
- **Focus on opportunities that**:
  - Have the greatest potential impact.
  - Are ready for action, with the right partners, resources, and timing in place.
  - Align with broader goals, available capacity, and emerging opportunities.
- **Inclusive collaboration & leadership**: Design plans with flexibility but recognize that structures (outside of the project) are in place

# Small Changes Add up




## Progress doesn’t have to be all or nothing

Consistent, incremental changes in many areas can add up to create a meaningful and lasting impact!

# **The Plan in brief**
# MA Farmland Action Plan

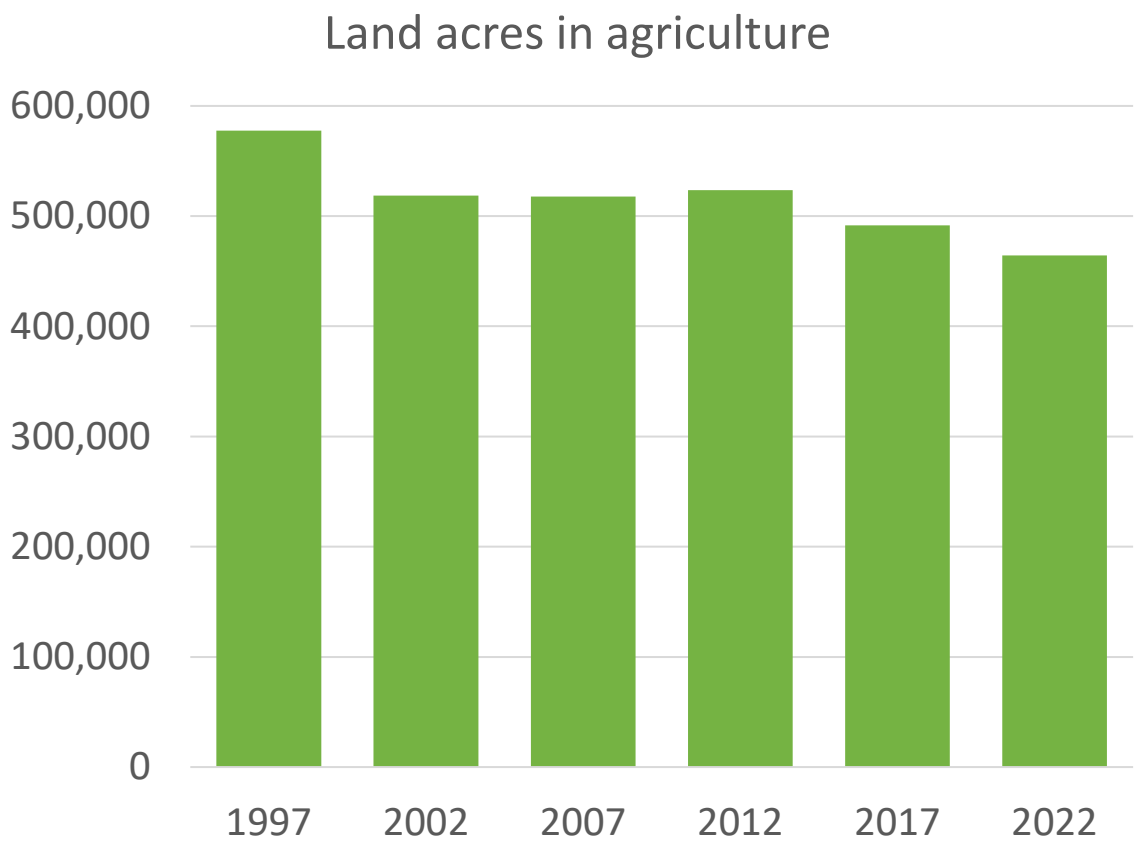
# Why is the Farmland Action Plan important?

## Massachusetts is losing agricultural land fast!

## Between 1997 and 2022 Massachusetts lost 113,000 acres

- 1.8 times the size of Martha's Vineyard
- 12.4 acres/ 9.4 football fields per day

American Farmland Trust's "Farms Under Threat 2040" Report estimates that between 2016 and 2040, without additional investment and policy changes, Massachusetts is projected to lose an additional 50,000 – 89,000 acres of farmland.

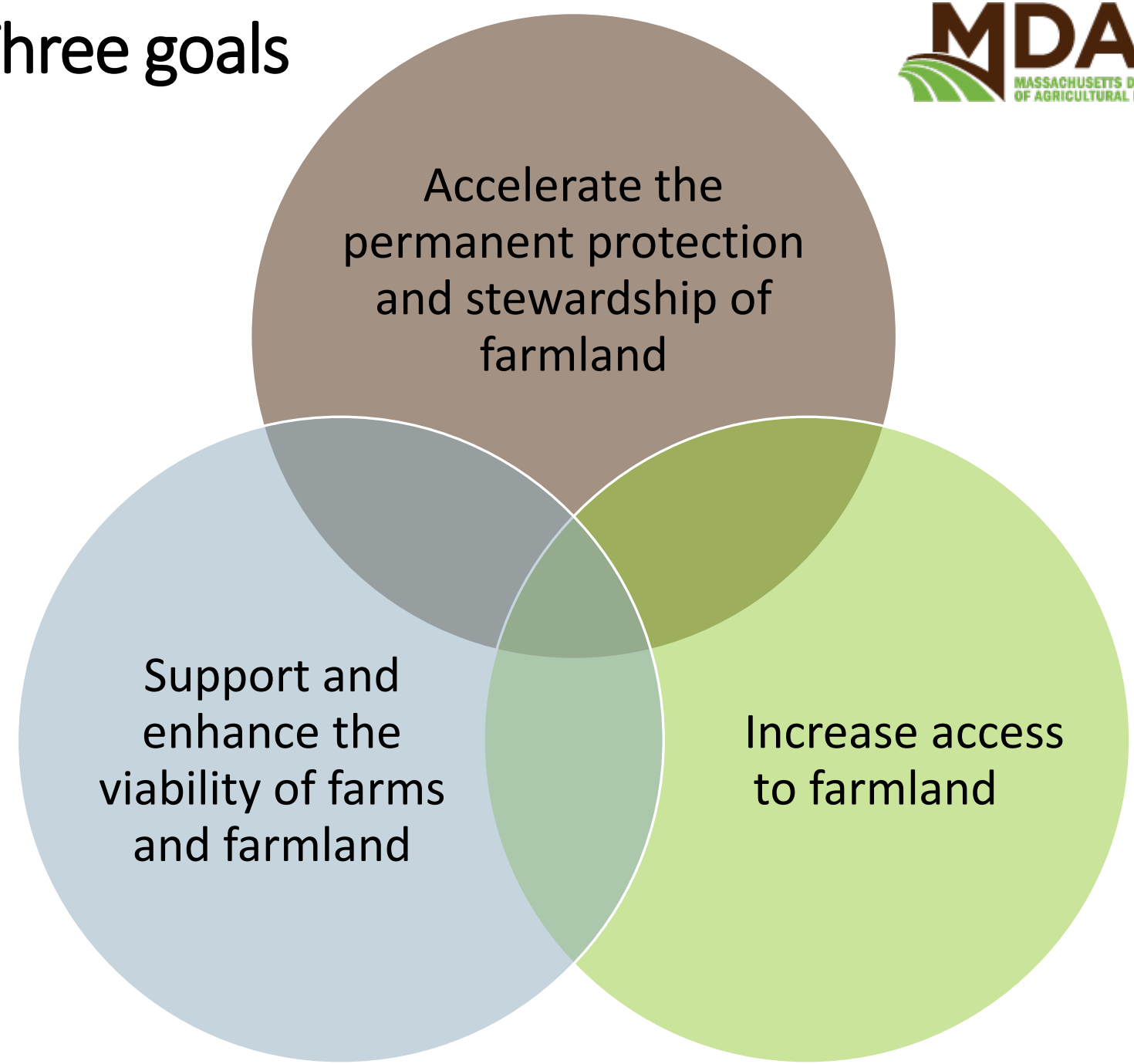



Sources: Census of Agriculture 2022 and earlier. Table 1 , and American Farmland Trust's Farms Under Threat 2040. Choosing an Abundant Future and Farms Under Threat. 2040 Future Scenarios. Massachusetts

# What is the Farmland Action Plan?

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

## Three goals

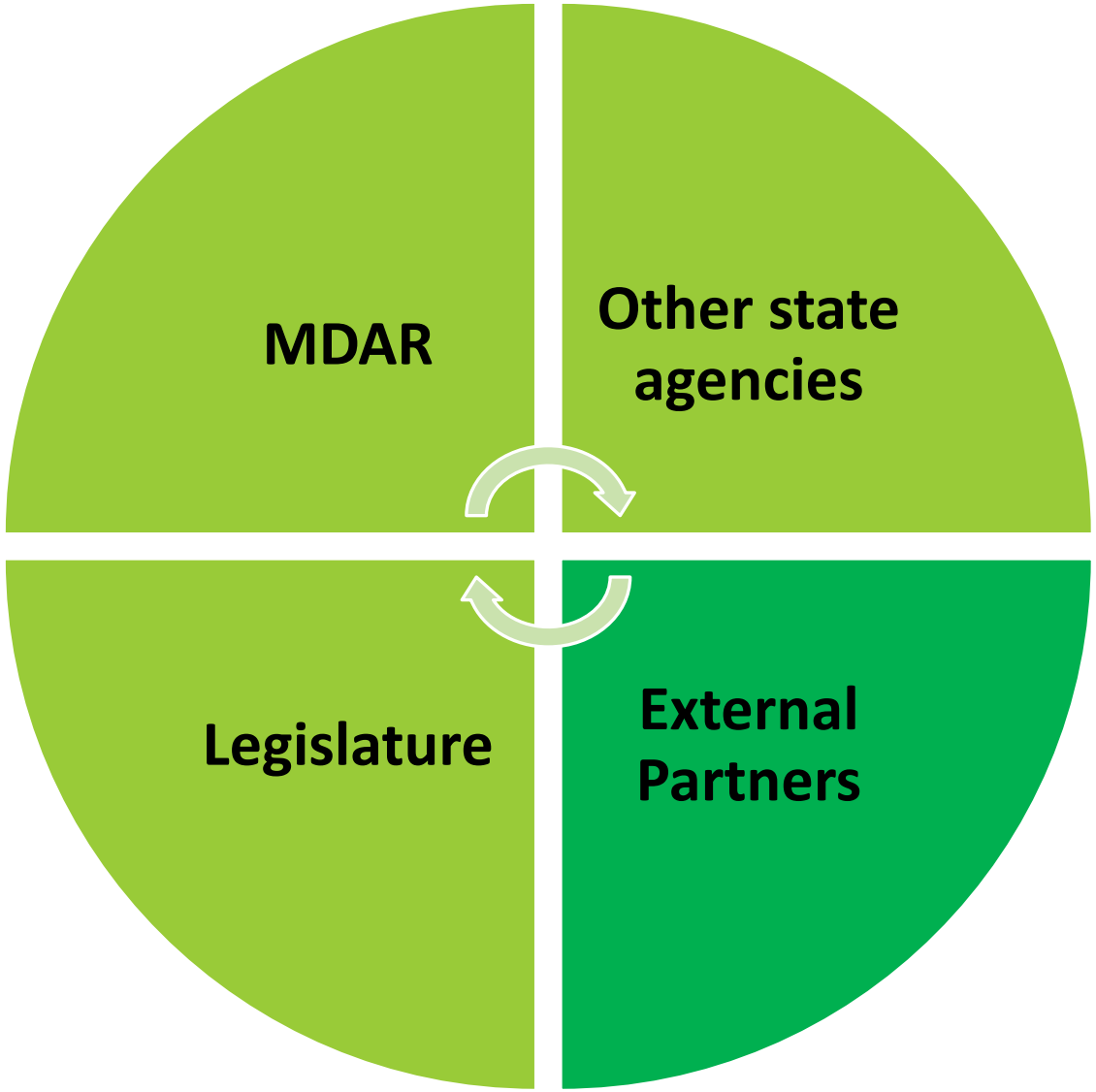


# Who will implement the Plan?

**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.

Many partners working together to implement it.



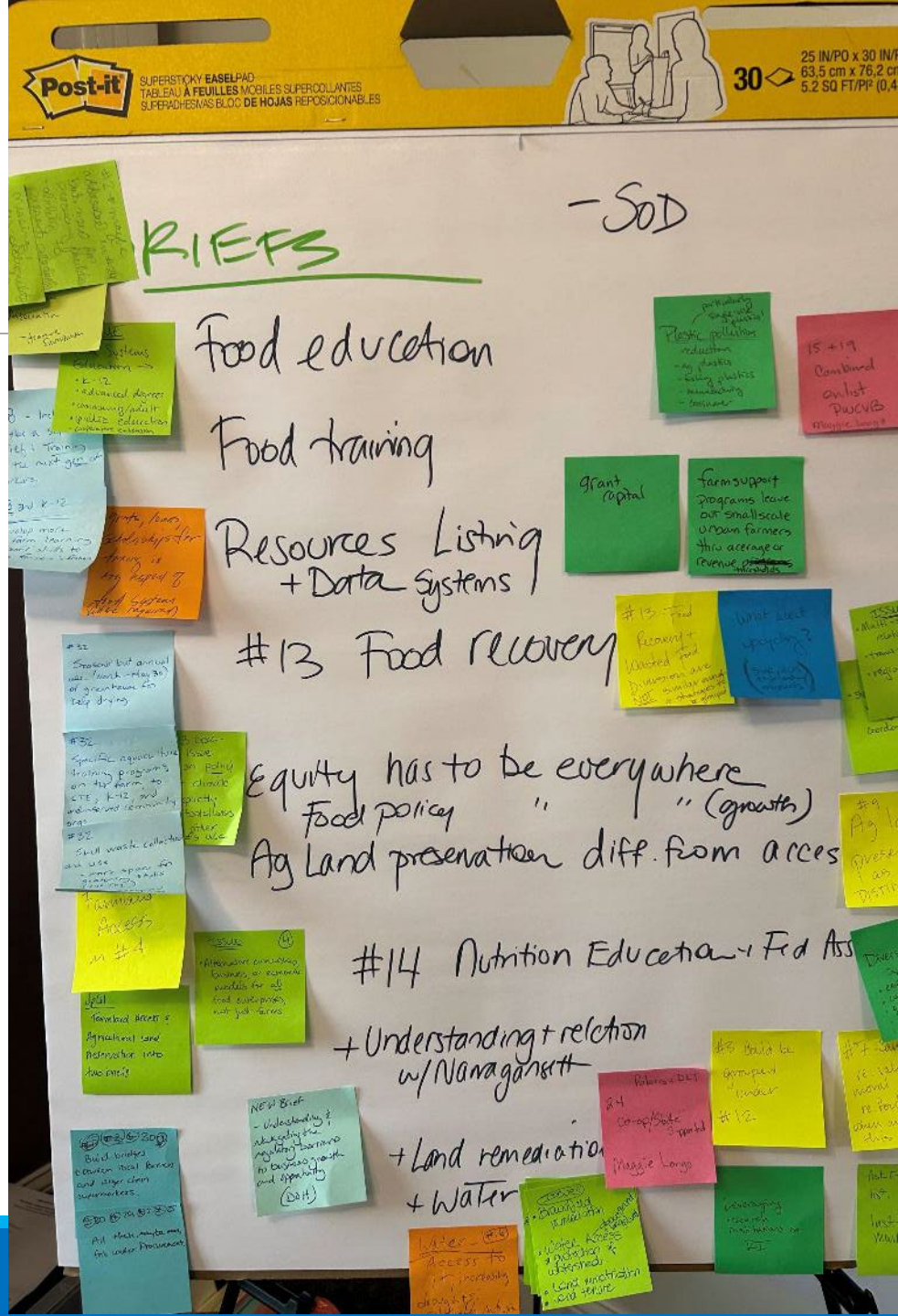

- Non-profits, including land trusts, Buy Locals
- Municipalities
- RPAs
- Federal agencies
- Educational institutions
- Private entities

# **Developing the plan**
# RI Food Strategy 2030

Unfortunately this section is shortened today due to the absence of presenter Alison Macbeth

# Lessons learned

- It will *always* take longer than expected!
- Create a workplan that works for you and clearly communicates expectations from all partners
- Iron out your goal, audience, sphere of influence, and decision-making governance model in the pre-planning stage – and be specific
- Determine ways to accept, review, and incorporate feedback

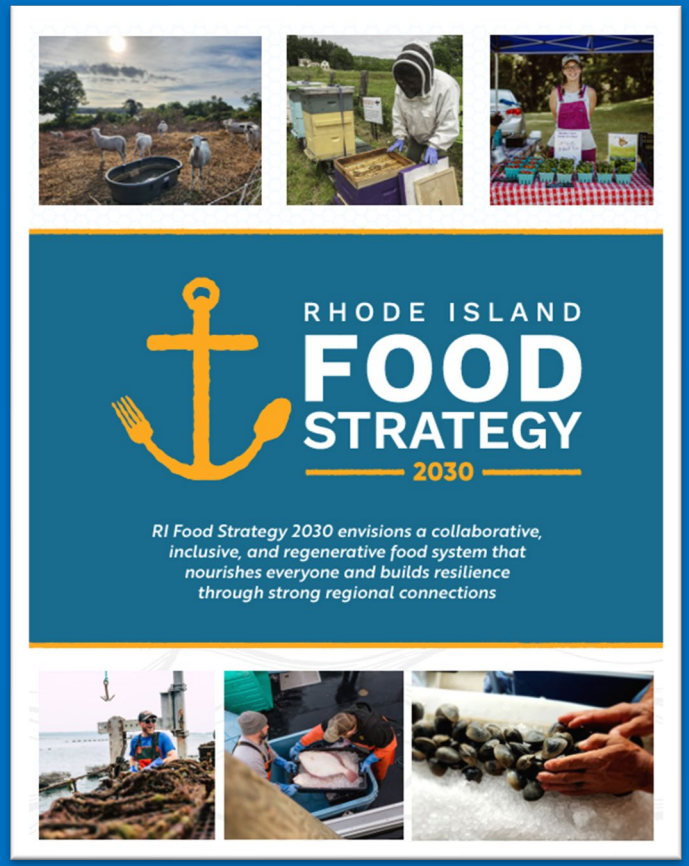


# The plan in brief

## *RI Food Strategy 2030*

Unfortunately this section is shortened today due to the absence of presenter Alison Macbeth

# The Structure




## 23 Cross-cutting, issue & market briefs

(foundational research)

## 23 Actions

(champions, indicators, partners, & description)

## 4 Priorities

(across the supply chain)

# 4 Priorities



# **Implementation**
# MA Farmland Action Plan

# Important features for implementation

## Building partnerships and collaboration

- Reducing silos and building shared understanding
- Farmland Partnership Program (FPP)

## Evolving approach

- Look to the future while learning from the past and other programs
- Implementation Matrix - rooted in the Plan, but adjusts as needed

## Engagement

- Drop-In Sessions
- Events and meetings focus on specific tasks
- Webpage resources

## Reporting

- MFAP Newsletter
- MFAP Annual Progress Report
- FPP Annual Progress Reports

Sign up for the newsletter at www.mass.gov/farmland-action-plan

# Refining the implementation matrix

The matrix is a living document that tracks

- what partners have done, and
- what partners plan to do.

Published online with updates published as needed

Sort, filter and search for keywords – eg “food”, “municipality”, “policy”

*4-digit unique ID number*



# 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

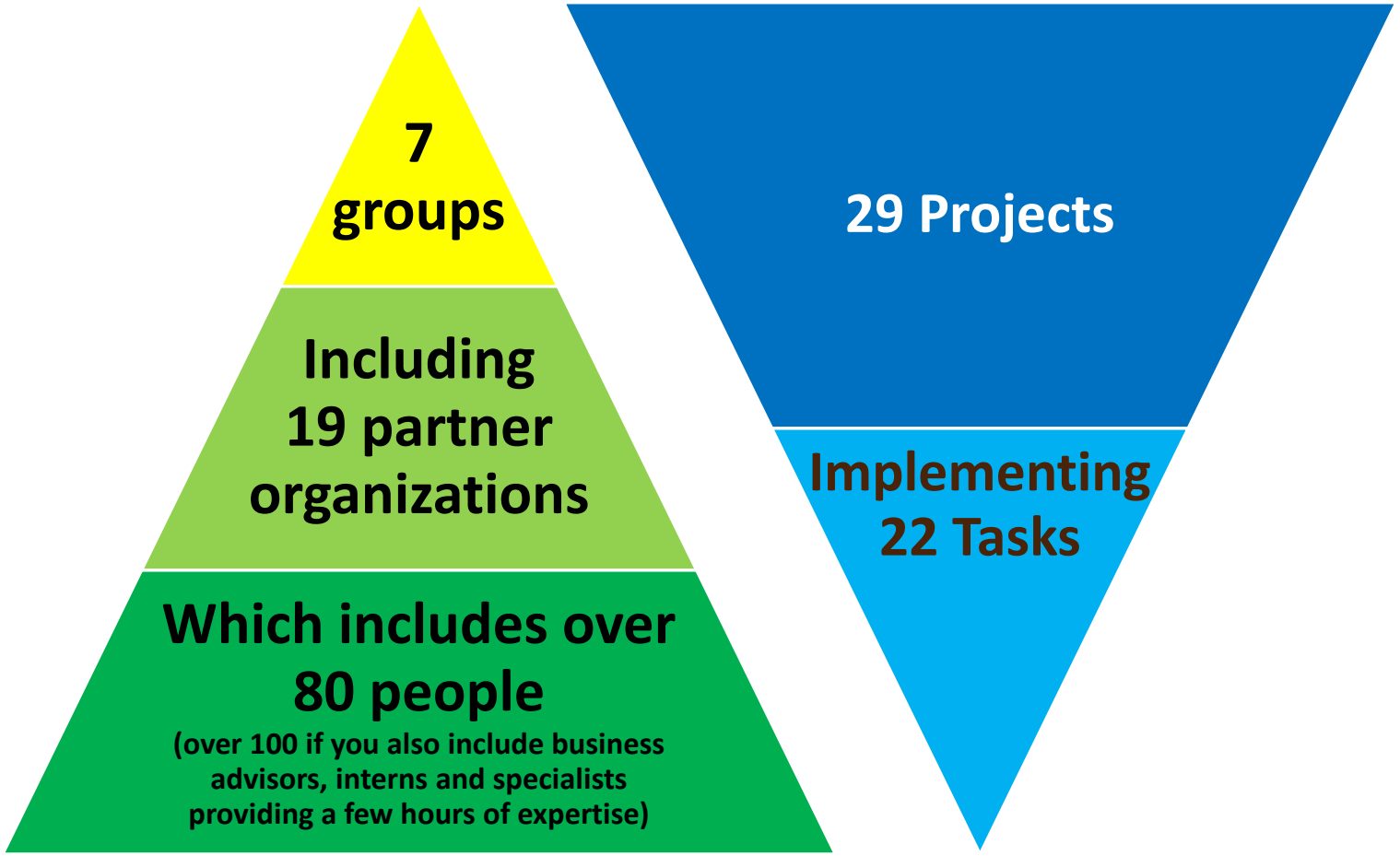
**Key characteristics of the program**

- Rooted in partnership and collaboration
- Fostering systems change
- Grounded in implementing tasks of the Farmland Action Plan
- Building capacity of partner organizations and staff
- Filling gaps between other funding programs and initiatives

# By the numbers for 2026-2027 grants

In December 2025, MDAR announced the award of the FY2026 Farmland Partnership Projects which will be implemented over two years from 2026 – 2027.

**Learn more with program overview and project factsheets at [www.mass.gov/info-details/farmland-partnership-program](www.mass.gov/info-details/farmland-partnership-program)**




Total awards of $1.9 million for individual projects and common activities

# What are the projects doing?

**What are they doing?**

- **Creating new resources** – eg municipal land used for farming, Chapter 61A Right of First Refusal (ROFR), municipal farmland plan template
- **Researching and sharing best practices** – eg municipal land used for farming, shared land tenure, mentoring
- **Refining existing approaches** – eg peer learning, mentoring, farmland linking
- **Training professionals who work with farmers** – eg land trusts, attorneys, realtors, business advisors
- **Defining and refining approaches to new concepts** – eg navigators, financial facilitators
- And more!

**Who are they reaching?**

- Farmers
- Farm technical assistance providers
- Regional planning agencies
- Municipal staff and local officials
- Land trusts
- Professionals who support ag work – eg business advisors, attorneys, surveyors, appraisers, realtors
- Other state agencies
- And more

# Cohort meetings



**Meeting goals**

- Connect partners both formally and informally
- Dive into some details from projects and explore what is needed
- Learn from each other

**What we have achieved so far (3 meetings)?**

- Brought together 45 partners and 17 MDAR staff into conversations – one-on-one, small group and large group
- Peer-to-peer learning on how to engage with farmers, municipalities, service providers and other audiences
- Learn about topics from subject matter experts and then discuss about how applies to work alongside sharing their experience

# Strategies and lessons learned

**Building partnerships and collaboration**

- Set clear expectations and share guidance ahead of things… with some space to adjust and evolve as the process happens
- Be consistent across all awardees… but also adjust to their needs
- Patience is important.  It takes time to build relationships and trust.
- Set aside time for intentional coordination – eg Cohort meetings
- Funder versus funding partner
- Differing experience and expectations for collaboration and coordination

**Evolving approach**

- Look to the future while learning from the past and other programs
- Implementation Matrix - rooted in the Plan, but adjusts as needed

# What is your focus?

**Lessons learned**

- Importance of capacity and knowledge building
- Importance of definition what is within and outside scope
- Recognizing competing priorities for scare resources

**Example of key takeaways from recent presentations to land trusts, municipalities and regional planners**

1) Farmland is not the same as open space and other land uses
2) Farmland is more than the land
3) Commercial farming is not easy
4) There is no one-size-fits-all for planning for farmland

# Implementation

## *RI Food Strategy 2030*

The strategy is not a static document, but an evolving framework for collective action, continuous improvement, and long-term food system resilience

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# Next steps

- **Build on existing momentum:** Reinforcing successful initiatives, accelerating emerging efforts, reconnecting partners, and engaging new voices.
- **Shifting to action**: Focusing on achievable, incremental progress rather than waiting for large-scale transformation.
- **Embracing continuous planning**: Regularly evaluating progress, updating priorities, and adapting to changing circumstances.
- **Strengthening shared accountability**: Leveraging IFNPAC, state agencies, and community partners to coordinate implementation and track outcomes.
- **Maintaining community engagement:** Use advisory boards, action groups, and regular communications to sustain participation and collaboration.
- **Leveraging limited resources**: Aligning funding, expertise, and partnerships to advance shared priorities and maximize impact.

# Themes and Concluding Thoughts

Strategies for reducing silos, connecting hundreds of partners, and leveraging funding, staffing, expertise, and partnerships to advance shared goals

# Key lessons shared

**Power of relationships cannot be underestimated**

- Trust
- Political pressure
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**Core tenants we oriented around**

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# Themes and takeaways

What did you hear?



# Questions?

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

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RI Food Strategy 2030 www.rifoodstrategy.com

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