

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS



Department of Agricultural Resources

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MEETING MINUTES, MASSACHUSETTS AGRICULTURAL TOURISM STUDY COMMISSION

Monday, August 10, 2020
Via MS Teams

Board Members in Attendance: Chair John Lebeaux, Senator Anne Gobi, Representative Smitty Pignatelli, Representative McMurtry Designee: Peter Morse, Keiko Orrall, Brad Mitchell, Erin Williams,

1. **Call to Order:** The meeting started at 1:06pm, with full remote participation.

Staff: Ashley Randle, Margaret Callanan

2. **New Business:**

Introductions:

Outline Goals/Objectives of Commission: Chair Lebeaux referenced H.4962 Chapter 3 Resolves of 2018: <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Resolves/2018/Chapter3> that established the Commission, membership, objectives, and reporting requirement.

Mr. Mitchell noted four areas regarding agritourism that remain a challenge for farms: 1.) Zoning MGL Chap. 40A Sect. 3, 2.) Building codes, 3.) APR Program guidelines and procedures/clarity around special permit process, and 4.) Board of Health regulations.

Mr. Pignatelli noted that zoning is a local issue and inquired about what the challenge with zoning is at this time? Mr. Mitchell responded that agritourism is not included in MGL Chap. 40A Sect. 3 and case law is activity dependent. Local Building inspectors have various interpretations of the case law and this creates a disconnect between towns, businesses, farms, and local authorities.

Mr. L'Etoile indicated that generating additional support and momentum around supporting agritourism in the state is needed, including funding, promotion, and outreach and education. Ms. Matsudo Orrall noted that MA Office of Travel and Tourism (MOTT) will be launching a "My Local" campaign; marketing and promotional effort.

Chair Lebeaux asked the Commission about a reasonable timeline for reporting. Ms. Schwalbe said that it will depend on how much feedback we are able to have with farmers and their input. Mr. Mitchell noted that with new session starting in January it will help to drive policies. Ms. Williams echoed Ms. Schwalbe's concerns as a farmer and indicated also utilizing reports and information from other states as a starting point. Mr. Pignatelli noted that best practices from other areas as a guide will be helpful and need to survey farmers for information. A possible date of June 2021 was suggested. A new norm for travel and tourism with outdoor recreation will also benefit agritourism. Ms. Gobi noted that it's a time to put more attention on agritourism and can get a great deal of the leg work done in the next few months. Chair Lebeaux summarized that a firm date will not be set at this time for reporting but the Commission will be mindful of legislative session, background/research already conducted as a starting point, and marketing/promotional campaign data.

Overview of MA Agritourism Industry: Phu Mai, Division of Ag Markets at MDAR, provided an overview of the MA agritourism industry.

USDA Definition of Agritourism:

Agritourism is "a form of commercial enterprise that links agricultural production and/or processing with tourism in order to attract visitors onto a farm, ranch, or other agricultural business for the purposes of entertaining and/or educating the visitors and generating income for the farm, ranch, or business owner."

In Massachusetts, agritourism encompasses many activities and programming for a wide consumer audience including Pick Your Own (PYO) operations, petting zoos, hay rides, corn mazes, farm stands, retail stores with local produce and ready-made value added items for sale, hosting farm-to-table meals, weddings and birthday parties, field trips and farm stays (similar to a Bed and Breakfast)

Emerging trends in agritourism:

-Agricultural Festivals/Events as a driver for agritourism (Garlic Festival in Orange, Chili Festival in Sunderland, Asparagus Festival in Hadley, various Sunflower Festivals throughout the state, fairs

Agritourism stands as an ancillary benefit of the "Buy Local" movement with an engaged public who demand to know from where their food is being grown and produced. Through agritourism, farms achieve a high level of direct sales by providing fresh produce and value-added products. The Buy Local movement can no longer be considered a trend but is here to stay so there will always be great potential for agritourism programming as it relates to locally-sourced food.

MDAR's role

-MDAR maintains a MassGrown Map of Farms in Massachusetts where the public can find their closest farm and search using a number of parameters, it's mobile friendly understanding that our user is not stuck behind a computer when doing these searches, they are out and about on their smartphones or tablets

-MDAR maintains various social media accounts Facebook, Twitter, and IG (Instagram is solely for a consumer audience). Used to highlight certain events and national days or weeks. (ie Maple Month in March, Farmers Market Week during the first week in August). We always link the MassGrown map in our bio

-MDAR works with the Regional Buy Local groups (9 in total) Berkshire Grown, CISA, Central MA Grown, SBN, Northeast Harvest, SEMAP, Cape Cod By Fresh Buy Local, Sustainable Nantucket and Island Grown with farm tours, meetings, programming and promotion of agritourism farms in each region

-In conjunction with DOT, MDAR has an Agricultural Directional Signage Program which allows for the placement of agricultural directional signs along state roadways for farms located off those roadways (different from attraction signs that DOT solely handles)

-MDAR collaborates with the Mass Office of Travel and Tourism in promotion of agritourism and recently this past spring, hosted a series of Craft Beverage Workshops geared towards the industry.

2017 Census of Ag Figures:

National Level

-U.S. agri-tourism had 28,575 farms in 2017-> down from 33,161 farms in 2012 (-14%)

-U.S. agri-tourism was valued at \$949,323,000 in 2017-> up from \$704,038,000 in 2012 (+35%)

-U.S. agri-tourism: average farm value in 2017 among participating farms in agri-tourism was \$33,222-> up from 2012 which was \$21,231 among participating farms (+56%)

State Level

Number of farms participating in agri-tourism: 240 farms (287 farms participated in 2012-> decrease 16.27%)

Total MA income from agri-tourism: \$13,476,000 (\$12,034 income in 2012 -> 11.89%)

Average per farm income from agri-tourism among farms who participated in agri-tourism: \$56,150 (\$41,929 income in 2012 -> increase 33.91%)

-In 2012, MA was the 5th highest state in the U.S. for agri-tourism value per farm among participating farms (#1 New England state)

-In 2017, MA was the 8th highest state in the U.S. for agri-tourism value per farm among participating farms (#2 New England state behind CT. CT has made big strides and is #2 overall in the nation now, so perhaps there are lessons to be learned from them)

-MA dropped in this per farm stat national ranking but still gained 34% in average per farm value among participating farms, so this is an overall positive

County Specific Level for Worcester County

-Worcester county has 11 fewer farms participating in Ag tourism from 2012 to 2017 (47 farms in 2012 to 36 farms in 2017; decrease 23%), but the value has increased by 65% (\$8,875,000 to \$5,393,000).

-In 2017, Worcester County is responsible for 65.8% of MA ag tourism

-This is an increase from 2012. In 2012, Worcester County is responsible for 44.8% of MA ag tourism

-In 2017, Worcester County has the highest average value per farm among participating farms for agri-tourism at \$246,528. This is a 115% increase from 2012 where it was \$114,745

Ms. Gobi inquired about the current agritourism industry during Covid and what type of outreach is occurring now? MDAR has been actively promoting MassGrown map (mobile friendly). Transition to socially distant events and virtual events. Farms are adapting and implementing safety measures and Chair Lebeaux noted that early on in Covid a need to increase promotion was recognized and developed a COVID-19 Resource Page for farms and a How and Where to Buy Local page for consumers. It took time for local food system to adjust but the majority of farms have seen a good year in terms of demand and sales. Mr. Mai noted that in years past CSAs that were challenged by finding membership now have a waitlist for members.

Discussion of Future Meeting Topics: Chair Lebeaux noted a discussion about the definition of agritourism and whether a legislative definition of agritourism would be beneficial/needed. Ms.

Schwalbe noted that accessing information remains a challenge and resource/centralized listing of where to find information would be helpful to farms and businesses. Mr. Mai mentioned that the Agricultural Direction Signage program with DOT has presented challenges for farms and denial based on population of towns/rural communities; Potential to discuss this topic and amendment to guidelines. Mr. L'Etoile indicated an interest in evaluating investment opportunities for the Commonwealth and investing in agritourism.

3. Other Business

- 4. Next Meeting:** Mr. L'Etoile noted that it would be helpful to have an update of resources/actions from MDAR, over the last 3-5 years, such as APR program regulations, Local Food Action Plan, and what other states have done in terms of agritourism. Mr. Mai will assist with this request in anticipation of the next meeting. Ms. Schwalbe indicated that a monthly meeting basis would be preferable, Mr. Mitchell concurred.

The next meeting will be held in mid-September, via remote platform. A poll will be sent to members to establish a quorum and set next meeting date.

5. Adjournment.

Mr. L'Etoile motioned to adjourn; Ms. Schwalbe seconded. Roll call – all members voted yes to adjourn at 1:56pm.