

# THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS



## Department of Agricultural Resources

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## MEETING MINUTES, MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF AGRICULTURE

Wednesday, April 8, 2020  
Via Zoom

**Board Members in Attendance:** Chair Abrams, Elizabeth Keen, Lydia Sisson, Lisa Colby, Lucinda Williams, Alison Carr, Meghan Russell, Crystal Card, Don Chase, Fred Dabney, and Michael Smolak

1. **Call to Order:** The meeting started at 10:13am, with full remote participation.

Staff: John Lebeaux, Ashley Randle, Margaret Callanan, Alisha Bouchard, and Gerard Kennedy

Roll call vote

2. **Minutes Summary:** Ms. Lucinda Williams moved to accept the minutes of 02/18/20; Ms. Alison Carr seconded. Roll call vote – all voted to accept the minutes.

3. **New Business**

### Department Updates:

- a. **COVID-19 Updates:** Commissioner Lebeaux provided a report to the board. Around March 15<sup>th</sup>, MDAR received guidance about remote working based on the Governor's Orders over the weekend. MDAR immediately started determining who was core staff, who could work remotely, etc. Technically we are not first responders for COVID, but MDAR has food safety, dairy inspections and other functions that are considered essential. Getting PPE equipment has been challenging, especially masks. Now MDAR is trying to acquire cloth (non-medical) masks. There are challenges getting inspectors on the road; particularly access to public restrooms. Farmers Markets questioned whether they could operate, but that has been resolved. Commissioner Lebeaux discussed issues with retail and horticultural stakeholders. Last Sunday, DPH issued an order clarifying that nursery/horticulture could open if they sell plants that grow food. MDAR has a COVID-19 webpage with our official bulletins. About 10 bulletins are posted with an additional 5 under consideration. Everything goes through the COVID command center through EEA. As they are approved, they are put on the mass.gov general site then they get posted to the MDAR site. Ag Markets is working to promote the industry for nurseries, farmers markets to consumers and contact with industry to help with market access. SEE LINK TO COVID LINK. EEA Communications is working to help us help push out messaging on social media.

Commissioner Lebeaux thanked Ms. Elizabeth Keen for her work and effort on the COVID web page. He then thanked Ms. Lydia Sisson for her help with nurseries; it seems a lot of people are looking to grow their own food & there is an opportunity to promote the importance of local food.

**Discussion:** Laura Abrams asked whether LBOHs can close down farmers markets? Commissioner Lebeaux answered that the bulletin gives a lot of guidance on how to operate. Laura Abrams then asked are there any pop-up markets & do you need a permit for those? Commissioner Lebeaux answered that the whole retail market for food is very well established; it may depend on the operation. Ms. Williams queried, how about getting the product to market? Milk—there is a lot out there, but stores are limiting; we don't want prices plummeting. Is there anything MDAR can do to help get the commodities get to people who need them? Commissioner Lebeaux answered that MDAR is trying to work on this – there are difficulties with transportation, processing and packaging. A letter from NEASDA was drafted to Sec. Perdue regarding actions he could do to take action to address this issue. MDAR signed on to this letter to the Secretary.

Commissioner Lebeaux continued, speaking about MDAR's responsibility regarding MEFAP. MDAR is largely the funding mechanism that distributes food through the food banks. Food banks are seeing an uptick in demand for food in greater Boston; there has been up to a 50% increase in demand. Other regions of the state have seen a 20-30% increase in demand. They are trying to move food as quickly as possible. All the funding has gone out to the food banks and we'll see pressure to increase funding. Food banks are looking for another \$6.3m increase in funding based on demand due to unemployment numbers and anticipated demands on the food banks. MDAR spoke with food banks about taking surplus mass-produced products. Food banks are interested in purchasing from mass producers. We hope MDAR can help make the connection with farms and the food banks. MDAR's ag market team is working on solutions to try and connect markets to buyers. Ms. Sisson stated that MDAR shares best practices around food safety to reduce risks for food banks, volunteers, labor & farms on how to keep a healthy workforce. Ms. Sisson asked Commissioner Lebeaux what he is hearing about food pantries and food security—is MDAR looking into labor and volunteering? Commissioner Lebeaux answered that MDAR is hearing about some food banks shutting down operations. Food banks expect a dramatic uptick in demand. Ms. Sisson then asked how to get local produce into emergency food. Commissioner Lebeaux answered that so many organizations are doing so many things; buy locals are very active.

Ms. Randle stated a food safety bulletin is being worked on for farms and labor—the Small Business Administration' Economic Injury Disaster Loan program that came out and how farms may benefit. It turns out farms are not eligible but maple, nurseries, etc. are eligible. At the same time, there is the farm protection program—See resource page on how to apply. Ms. Randle will send out a resource link. We are still waiting to hear how the Stimulus CARES Act will be distributed to states; we are hoping for block grants to allocate funds to states. Legislation appears to be at a standstill as they are trying to operate in this new normal. The house hasn't come out with their budget yet. Ms. Carr then said to backup to Lydia's (Ms. Sisson's) point, thank you to the dept for all the hard work—are we doing anything regarding school lunch program to help support? Commissioner Lebeaux answered that some of the programs are run under the Dept of Elementary & Secondary Education; all kinds of efforts are going on. Ms. Randle said that Boston public schools reached out to Michael Botelho at food safety to look for sourcing produce and other school systems have reached out looking to source. The food safety team is happy to work with them.

#### **b. APR Program Listening Sessions Review, Schedule and Outreach**

Mr. Kennedy provided a Power Point presentation regarding the APR program the legislation requiring a review and modernization of the program (SEE THE PRESENTATION); comments were received and MDAR held listening sessions throughout the state. A lot of comments were positive, saying that increased communications were helpful. In terms of communications we've enhanced our webpage and finalized a new APR program guide. The legislation requires we share the comments with the board, you should have received the written and online comments. The idea is for ag board and ALPC to review those comments and make a recommendation to the department on any changes you think we should focus on with the program. **Discussion:** Mr. Smolak asked if this is online. Mr. Kennedy answered that the guide is online, but we haven't yet actively promoted it until we can run it by the board and ALPC and then can circulate the comments. We can identify the value in the listening sessions and while we can't do 5 sessions every month, the staff are inspired to hold annual listening sessions. People found the sessions a great way to network with staff and other farmers. Comments at the Amherst session stated that it gave the opportunity for established farmers to network with new beginning farmers. Mr. Smolak then asked if it makes sense to send to all the farmers the manual. Mr. Kennedy answered yes, we will want to make sure before we print that it includes any changes forthcoming from the feds/NRCS. Mr. Smolak then commented on the lack of consistency of the forms for the different programs. Ms. Sisson then interjected that the specialty crops is USDA. Mr. Kennedy stated we are moving to a common application with grants and we are trying to do that. Chair Abrams asked Mr. Kennedy, are you looking for any kind of vote or just hear back from members? Mr. Kennedy stated he hoped to hear back any concerns members may have. Chair Abrams then asked for a timeframe. Mr. Kennedy stated receiving comments before next ag board meeting would be great and to please send them directly to him (Mr. Kennedy).

#### **c. DOL SJC Ruling Guidance**

Commissioner Lebeaux said the Dept of labor standards had the difficult task to take the SJC ruling and flesh out what it means. Ms. Randle mentioned the guidance document we reviewed; we don't believe it has been posted yet. The draft from what we saw was very comprehensive and ag friendly. Ms. Randle said she can circle back to see the status.

#### **4. Old Business:**

**Discussion:** Mr. Smolak said he must get in touch with Ms. Randle and will follow up. Mr. Dabney asked about staff and staff health. Commissioner Lebeaux responded by saying that staff is working very hard but that some transitions to remote work have been easier than others depending on their jobs and how much can be done remotely. Acquiring laptops has been a challenge. Mr. Dabney then asked if another ALPC meeting has been scheduled. Commissioner Lebeaux answered that he did not know and will check with Mr. Kennedy. Mr. Dabney asked about any activity for results on ALPC comments received. Commissioner Lebeaux said when we talk about COVID we are reasonably electronic at MDAR but that we have run into some difficulty with processes such as mail delivery.

#### **5. Date, Time and Location of Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, June 30<sup>th</sup>. Location to be determined.

#### **6. Adjournment.**

**Mr. Smolak motioned to adjourn; Ms. Sisson seconded. Roll call – all members voted yes to adjourn at 11:37**