

# THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS



## Department of Agricultural Resources

251 Causeway Street, Suite 500, Boston, MA 02114  
617-626-1700 fax: 617-626-1850 www.mass.gov/agr



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Governor

KARYN E. POLITO  
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## MEETING MINUTES, MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF AGRICULTURE

Tuesday, June 30, 2020  
Via Zoom

**Board Members in Attendance:** Chair Abrams, Lucinda Williams, Alison Carr, Lisa Colby, Don Chase, Fred Dabney, Elizabeth Keen, Lydia Sisson, Crystal Card, Michelle Harvey, Michael Smolak, Meghan Russell, and Skip Vadnais, Jr. Ms. Williams signed off at 11am.

- 1. Call to Order:** Chair Abrams called the meeting to order at 10:10am with a quorum via full remote participation. All votes taken via roll call.
- 2. Minutes Summary:** Mr. Chase moved to accept the minutes of 04/08/20; Mr. Dabney seconded. Roll call vote – all voted to accept the minutes. The minutes were unanimously approved.
- 3. New Business:**

### Department Updates:

- a. COVID-19 Updates:** Commissioner Lebeaux provided a report to the Board on the status of staff inspections that were suspended due to the pandemic. Deputy Commissioner Randle reported on COVID-19 guidance and remarked that the department has published over twenty guidance documents. MDAR is working on an Agritourism guidance document for the EEA as part of the Outdoor Recreation Task Force. Weekly and biweekly stakeholder calls are being conducted and the agency is working with Farm Bureau. The Commissioner explained pesticide exams taking place in parking lots.

The Board discussed whether there was opportunity for stakeholder input on guidance documents regarding farmers markets and concerns around not letting consumers touch product. The department reviewed with the Board the process of developing guidance documents.

- b. Food Security Task Force:** The Commissioner updated the Board on the activities of the task force and the working groups that started up in April. A variety of recommendations, funding and areas being worked on was discussed such as emergency food stop gap solutions, increased demands on food banks, expanding the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), food security resiliency funding, and food system market connections.

The Board raised challenges the aquaculture industry is facing due to COVID-19 and the restaurants being shut down. The Commissioner talked about the concept of a market maker to assist farmers including aquaculture and fish industries as a means to help make connections with a business to business platform to match products with buyers. The Board asked about flexibility

with grant projects, extensions and budget cuts. The Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner Bouchard provided an update on budgetary concerns and the flexibility being provided with grant projects timelines to allow for challenges due to COVID.

- c. **Operational Updates, Staffing & Facilities:** The Board was informed that all employees are continuing to telework indefinitely. Some essential inspections such as animal health and crop and pest inspections are starting to resume or increase in frequency. Other inspections and field visits are going through an approval process that includes union and employee notifications before those services may resume.

Facilities, while state offices remain closed, staff need to request and receive approval before an office visit. This policy is to ensure a limited capacity within the offices for social distancing and the safety of staff. Work at the new Southborough office is near completion however, the scheduled move (originally planned for late May) is continuing to be carefully planned. Planning for employees to go into the office to purge files and pack for the move during COVID has proven to be very challenging. The agency is continuing to work on this with EEA. A move date has not been set.

- d. **The Big E/Fairs:** The Big E announced on 6/29/20 it would not hold the fair this year. Before the cancellation, MDAR was working on how to handle the Massachusetts building which was proving to be challenging. The Department heard concerns about volunteers that work the fair including MDAR staff. Approximately thirty (30) out of forty (40) fairs decided to cancel this year. The agency is waiting to hear if the Topsfield Fair will continue. Issues and items being worked on at the Mass building were discussed with the Board. **Discussion:** The Board was interested to know what other states at the Big E were planning if the fair did open. The Commissioner noted several discussions at various levels with the building managers and the New England state departments of agriculture at the Commissioners level. Other states raised concerns with bringing in staff, lodging, quarantine, etc. The news of the fair's cancellation brought some relief to concerns raised by the states.
- e. **Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE):** Since the historic 2019 EEE mosquito season, the department never stopped meeting, planning and implementing after-action items. The Commissioner talked about the partnership between MDAR and Department of Public Health, the items the two agencies have been working on over the last year and the 2-3 year cyclical nature of EEE.
- f. **DACTA/APR Program Updates:** Gerard Kennedy, Director of the Division of Agricultural Conservation and Technical Assistance (DACTA), provide updates on the Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program (APR). Gerard reported on the APR program and today's June 30<sup>th</sup> deadline for applications for the FY21 cooperative agreement with the federal government. The USDA's, Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), has a new rolling process that is being introduced vs. an annual deadline. The department is waiting for additional details. The next Agricultural Lands Preservation Committee (ALPC) meeting is scheduled for July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020 via Zoom.

Over the last year, the APR manual and APR Resource Guide was updated on MDAR's website. The purpose of these updates is to provide more clarity on how the program operates and the resources available. Mr. Kennedy updated the Board on two new staffing recruitments for land stewardship in the APR program and the regional territories they will cover.

**Discussion:** The Board discussed the number of APR applications this year vs. last year and noted the numbers are down slightly this year. Applications are submitted to NRCS then to APLC for a final vote after they are on a federal cooperative agreement. The Board was interested in knowing the status of state and federal funding. Mr. Kennedy provided information on funding and how

many projects he expects will be funded. Other funding programs such as the Agricultural Climate Resiliency & Efficiencies (ACRE) and the Ag Food Safety Improvement programs have received over 90 applications and are currently under review. Mr. Kennedy wrapped up his report with information about other popular department funding programs and explained how staff are working on some project close outs.

- g. Division of Crop & Pest Services Updates:** Taryn LaScola, Director of the Division of Crop & Pest Services started by briefing about delays in the issuance of Hemp Program licenses. Ms. LaScola noted new criminal background requirements implemented by the federal government and how this led to some people deciding to retract their applications. Ms. LaScola talked about how the CBD market is down significantly as growers are having a hard time unloading hemp. Division inspectors are conducting some inspections virtually &/or over the phone and program staff will be offering a Hemp 101 session for growers.

The challenges with the pesticide exams were highlighted and the temporary solution of giving exam in vehicles in parking lots which started up a couple of weeks ago. MDAR has a 500-exam backlog, staff did a lot of outreach to examinees who still wanted to take tests. Director LaScola mentioned after this week the department will be caught up with the backlog and open up new exam dates. At the same time, the agency is exploring the online exam option.

**Discussion:** Board members talked about their positive experience with Hemp program staff and a discussion about background checks and fingerprints briefly took place. Online pesticide credits were discussed with members along with how the requirements are reduced as to how many hours are needed. Gypsy moths and winter moths were briefly discussed.

- 4. Commodity / Industry Updates:** Board members provided commodity and industry updates some highlights included: Challenges with slaughterhouse/processing and the impacts of COVID-19 and meat shortages on the industry. Nursery and greenhouse industry incredibly busy and fairing well compared to other states where big box stores were allowed to stay open but not greenhouse and nursery businesses. Farms and farm stands doing well with people staying and buying local. Challenges finding farm help and labor. The Commissioner also reported that the state Drought Task Force met recently, and recommendations were made to the Secretary who determined certain areas in the Connecticut River are at a Level 2. A second meeting of the Task Force is scheduled for July 8<sup>th</sup>.
- 5. Agritourism/PYO:** The Board briefly discussed COVID-19 challenges to agritourism and pick-your-own operations. The department is working on guidance documents.
- 6. Grants and Availability of Funding for Agriculture:** The Commissioner reported on the availability of department program funding opportunities and talked about funding being made available through food security infrastructure grants.
- 7. Next Meeting:** The next meeting of the Board of Agriculture is scheduled for September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020 at 10am; location TBD.
- 8. Adjournment:** Mr. Smolak motioned to adjourn; Mr. Dabney seconded. Action Taken: Roll Call Vote: Ms. Abrams – Aye, Mr. Dabney – Aye, Mr. Chase – Aye, Ms. Carr – Aye, Ms. Sisson – Ms. Card – Aye, Ms. Colby – Aye, Mr. Smolak – Aye, Ms. Russell – Aye, Ms. Keen – Aye, Ms. Harvey – Aye, and Mr. Vadnais, Jr. The motion passed and the meeting adjourned at 12:05pm.