

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

Thursday, September 24, 2020
Via Zoom

Board Members in Attendance: Chair Abrams, Don Chase, Lisa Colby, Michael Smolak, Lydia Sisson, Fred Dabney, and Lucinda Williams.

1. **Call to Order:** Chair Abrams called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m. with full remote participation. All votes were taken via roll call.
2. **Minutes Summary:** Mr. Dabney moved to approve the minutes of June 30, 2020; Ms. Williams 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 described MDAR's continued response to COVID-19. MDAR has successfully transformed into a primarily remote Agency, and it has been done through a cooperative process between the department and the unions. Currently managers Ashley Randle and Commissioner Lebeaux do most of the touring. As far as the budget, Senator Rodrigues stated he expected a \$6 billion budget shortfall, but that was recently downgraded to \$1.5 billion. MDAR is currently working on a spending plan. The department has been involved in many COVID-related projects. MDAR has been involved with the Food Insecurity Grants which have been going out since June. MDAR has three people on the Review Team as well as a fiscal person. We have also released the MASS Grown Exchange, a business to business connector that MDAR hopes will continue to grow over time and outlast COVID. There was recently a Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) 2.0 that came out expanding to aquaculture operations.

Ashley Randle mentioned that aquaculture was very limited before just to trout and a small number of other species. The funding needed has been expanded to mollusks and now barramundi. She encouraged farmers to work with FSA to get into the program.

b. NASDA update: Commissioner Lebeaux reported that MDAR joined the NASDA meeting which was very successful despite being online. The entire agency was able to sign up for \$125 so MDAR staff was able to hear the different presentations. The new NASDA commissioner for next year is Commissioner Ryan Quarles from Kentucky. The VP is the

Commissioner in New York, so if we are lucky enough to have a meeting next year that will be in Louisville, KY next year.

c. Operational Updates, Staffing & Facilities:

Alisha Bouchard then discussed the hiring of stewardship staff and the process for returning staff to the field. She discussed the Southborough office and plans to move staff from the Causeway location. The plan is to move in two phases; one in October and one in December.

Chair Abrams asked if there are any updates on EEE.

Alisha Bouchard reported 5 human cases of EEE and 6 West Nile Virus cases- the risk will continue until there is a hard-killing frost which may have already happened in Western Massachusetts. The drought has helped because there are fewer mosquitoes. The human cases seem to not be as severe this year. We did one spray in August.

d. DACTA/APR Program Updates:

Gerard Kennedy summarized APR staffing changes. He mentioned that MDAR has over 350 federal projects that need to be monitored and we have brought that work in-house. There are several other new appointments and hires as well as a position for a new APR planner in the western part of the state about to be posted. The APR program is supported by our capital funding as well as reimbursed federal funds. Stewardship is an area requiring more investment.

Don Chase asked Mr. Kennedy to elaborate on the burden that bringing aerial surveys in-house will have on the department.

Gerard Kennedy responded that MASS GIS conducts a flyover every few years. The department then compares aerial photography over time to make sure there haven't been any changes. The federal APRs require a visit every 5 years; we contracted that work out this year but it wasn't a significant expenditure. Staff looks for encroachments and any new buildings that don't have approval. All landowners receive a report of the aerial survey for signature. The NRCS is co-holder of many of the APRs, but we are obligated to do this monitoring; the entity that holds the APR has the responsibility. New APR applications came in June and we brought 12 of these to ALPC for nomination. They are currently being appraised and we will make offers by the end of the year and hope to close them by 2022. We have a list of 21 projects currently in play as well, so we have a very active APR program. Mr. Kennedy then discussed FY '21 grants which were submitted to the department last year and are currently being reviewed. These include grants for Composting, Manure, Ag Energy, climate resiliency, Urban Ag, and Food Ventures, among others.

Fred Dabney asked for information on specific grants that have been approved.

Gerard Kennedy said he's happy to come back at a future meeting and discuss the specifics of the programs we are funding.

e. Spotted Lanternfly:

Commissioner Lebeaux next brought to the board's attention the issue of an invasive insect in PA that is moving towards us - the spotted lanternfly. It is attracted to grapevines and nursery products but can come in via truck as well. One dead insect was found in Boston last December, and more have been discovered since. There was also a live discovery in Connecticut. While it is an easy insect to identify it is going to be very difficult to control.

Laura Abrams asked if Pennsylvania has not been able to get a control of this?

Commissioner Lebeaux answered that Pennsylvania has not been able to get it contained. It is an aggressively moving insect. Unfortunately, there has not yet been any federal action on this.

Alisha Bouchard said MDAR does have an online form where people can report these insects and stated that an announcement to the general public will be going out next week.

f. Stakeholder Outreach:

Commissioner Lebeaux said we have been doing regular stakeholder calls that are open to anyone on most Fridays and all are welcome to join. He also mentioned a situation in which beekeepers were having difficulty finding the large quantity of sugar they rely on. The department assisted in trying to address supply chain issues by reaching out to the cranberry industry and making beekeepers aware of some potential sources.

4. Massachusetts Food System Collaborative: Laura Abrams opened a discussion about the Massachusetts Food System collaborative.

Winton Pitcoff, Director of the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative summarized the public input process for a report that he expects will be final in November. They are still taking comments. He stated that it is a challenging time financially but it is his belief that the more people become aware the more people will prioritize this. He talked about how vital commercial farmers are to a functioning food system. We have been one of four states where the cost of production has been higher than the total products created. Fred Dabney commented on the number of people who don't seem to understand the huge importance of agriculture and Michael Smolak commented on the importance of farms on the economies of our towns and cities.

5. Old Business: Laura Abrams asked if there was any other old business.

Fred Dabney mentioned the ongoing discussion of solar on farms and the difficulties that are being encountered by the farmers. There has been a lot of local opposition to solar panels, so he asked if there has been any state level thinking to support farmers who want to install solar panels.

Commissioner Lebeaux said MDAR is working with DOER to recognize some of those concerns and said we could bring in some people to talk about this at a future meeting.

Laura Abrams asked if there anything new on hemp.

Commissioner Lebeaux said Massachusetts has come into compliance with the USDA and that it is still an emerging and evolving industry. More land is being farmed for hemp this year than last year but some farmers have also reported that benefits are more limited than expected.

Don Chase thanked the division for all its work.

6. Commodity/Industry Updates: Board members provided commodity and industry updates. Lucinda Williams mentioned Chocolate Milk Day on Sunday, September 27. Dairy is a vital industry and prices have not been great this year for dairy farmers. Schools are not purchasing milk as in the past because of remote learning and plenty of challenges continue for the dairy industry.

Michael Smolak mentioned that the pick your own business has been busy; this year has seen one of the best apple crops they've had in a while. Everyone he talks to has had issues retaining labor, but they have had a lot of people coming out to pick apples.

Lisa Colby said they opened the sunflower field to the public and had limited parking and signs for people to have masks. People didn't always wear masks and neighbors complained about the crowds so they had to shut down.

Lydia Sisson asked if there were any updates on slaughterhouses from last meeting. She wasn't sure if there was a push across the state for more options for livestock farmers.

Commissioner Lebeaux said that there is an effort out in Berkshire county for a USDA slaughter facility there.

Fred Dabney mentioned the dry conditions in his area.

Marty Dagoberto, Policy Director at NOFA introduced himself. He said the healthy soils action plan is in the final stages of wrapping up. He wanted to answer any questions if there were any.

Michael Smolak reported that the pick-your own guidance has worked very well; at his farm they require masks at all times and only allow 10-12 people in the farm stand at one time.

Lydia Sisson asked if there will be updated winter farmer's market guidelines and Ashley Randle answered yes; they are working on updated guidelines for the winter markets.

7. Next Meeting: The next meeting of the Board of Agriculture is scheduled for November 18, 2020 at 10 am; location TBD.

8. Adjournment: Laura Abrams asked if anyone else had any business. Hearing none, she asked for a motion to adjourn. Michael Smolak motioned and Lisa Colby seconded. A roll call vote to adjourn passed unanimously and the meeting adjourned at 12:01 p.m.

Chat

From Ashley Randle to Everyone: 10:08 AM

If you are a member of the public joining, please identify yourself and your affiliation/organization in the chat. Thank you.

From Winton Pitcoff to Everyone: 10:12 AM

Winton Pitcoff, MA Food System Collaborative