

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS



Department of Agricultural Resources

225 Turnpike Road, 3rd Floor, Southborough, MA 01772
www.mass.gov/agr



Maura T. Healey
GOVERNOR

Kimberley Driscoll
LIEUTENANT
GOVERNOR

Rebecca L. Tepper
SECRETARY

Ashley E. Randle
COMMISSIONER

MEETING MINUTES MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF AGRICULTURE

Wednesday, June 12, 2024

10:00AM Hybrid Meeting (in-person & via MS Teams)

AGENDA

Board Members in Attendance: Skip Vadnais, Dale Leavitt, Peter Mezitt, Al Rose, Dawn Gates-Allen

Virtual: Tina Bemis, Kat Chang, Dave Shepard, Kim Trust, Pat Spence, Bill Crawford

Absent: Lisa Colby, Elizabeth Keen

Staff: Ashley Randle, Winton Pitcoff, Alisha Bouchard, Margaret Callanan, Rebecca Davidson

Public: Andy Linkenhoker (Smith Vocational High School), Derek Costa (Bristol Agricultural High School), Paul Crofts (Essex North Shore Agricultural & Technical High School)

1. **Start/Call to Order:** Chair Vadnais called the meeting to order at 10:05am. A quorum was established. All votes must be taken by rollcall.

2. **Approval of 4/17/24 Meeting Minutes:** Discussion of 4/17/24 meeting minutes, Mr. Leavitt requested a few changes be made to his update portion of the minutes. Ms. Gates-Allen moved to approve the meeting minutes of April 17, 2023. Mr. Leavitt seconded the motion with minutes amended. The minutes were approved by the board via roll call vote unanimously.

3. **Department Updates**

a) **Staffing updates:**

Ms. Bouchard states that as reported last meeting, temporary hiring controls per the Governor went into effect on April 3rd, 2024. MDAR submitted waiver requests for 6 pending positions. Waiver approvals grant agencies the ability to continue with the hiring process. Recently, MDAR was approved to proceed with the hiring process for two positions including - the new Director of Food Security and the Food Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) program coordinator position. The coordinator will report to the Food Security Director.

In addition, MDAR was approved to proceed with hiring a Federal Funds Program Manager and were able to fill this position with an internal candidate and offer them a promotion into the position. We do however have to wait to backfill that person's position that they vacated to take the promotion.

We have not received approval to proceed with a new Accountant V position, Animal Health Dairy Inspector, or for the APR Stewardship Supervisor.

b) **Program updates:**

1. Commissioner Randle reports on status of High-Path Avian Influenza (HPAI). HPAI in dairy cattle has impacted 12 states nationally, the issue began in Texas, the Commissioner explained how they think it is passing through the cattle. There have been 3 reported human cases, their symptoms are 1st two pink eye, 3rd person respiratory. We are working with Department of Public Health (DPH) to ensure strict biosecurity on farms. USDA is a partner in this work, keeping the animal welfare piece mindful as dairy cattle move over state lines in New England to auctions within the states and to PA for slaughter. Some markets have a 40% reduction in animals going to markets creating the issue of animals getting stuck. MDAR is collaborating and being proactive with our partners at DPH; last week a letter was sent out to dairy farms for voluntary testing. Other New England states considering this as well. It's very complicated issue and very different than HPAI in poultry. Trying to ensure no restrictions on the movement of cattle and ensure the welfare of the animals.
2. Commissioner Randle reported on the hemp program and the proliferation of products in the market with CBD and THC that has been in the news. It is a challenge because MDAR regulates hemp but not in the retail space whereas DPH does, and local boards of health are responsible for pulling all these products. On May 29, 2024, the Alcoholic Beverages Control Commission (ABCC) issued a notice about the prohibition on unregulated hemp and adulterated products including beverages sold at liquor stores and other retail markets. On June 11, 2024, Commissioner Randle testified at the legislative hearing on hemp and highlighted the various concerns including marketing of products and access by youth.

Discussion: Mr. Mezitt asks if hemp is derived from out of states is that how they get around it? Commissioner Randle states that they are basically taking synthetic materials such as delta 9 and manufacturing the products. Hemp that tests over 0.03% THC changes the intent of the products. FDA unfortunately has not taken action to address this. At the Northeastern State Departments of Agriculture (NEASDA) meeting last week, other states are looking to replicate what MA is doing and local boards of health to regulate this issue. Ms. Gates Allen says that locally she can see these products at gas stations and that it is concerning.

3. **Workforce development study:** MDAR has been working with a consultant since January to look at workforce development needs to build a sustainable workforce for the future. Timing to have our ag high schools here today to find out what is needed and where we can provide support as well as for youth that cannot attend ag high schools but still interested.
4. **Launch 2025 Climate Service Core:** Commissioner Randle briefly reported on the development and launch of a climate service core in conjunction with EEA and MDAR's focus on agriculture. The objective is to drive awareness and develop career paths integral to climate and agricultural critical solutions. Outreach will be conducted to local high schools and host sites and will require some training and oversight. A report will be issued in the coming months and will be shared with the board.

- c) **Upcoming events:** The Commissioner's office can send a list of all the upcoming events, fair visits, farmers market week, urban ag week, June dairy month tours (tomorrow and Friday – we can send out that list today) – will make sure we get you those dates and information.

- d) **Legislative/budget update** – Mr. Pitcoff reports that the formal session ends 7/31, and that anything controversial needs to pass by then. MDAR is still tracking all the bills previously reported on, nothing is moved since last meeting. Hopeful that the Ag Bill will fall in the priorities by end of the session. Budget moved through the bulk of the process, now the House and Senate Conference Committee will hash out differences. Governor's budget continues to support us, but we may be looking at a 1% cut that we can absorb.

There is a disparity between House & Senate chambers on the Food Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) Program – it is being used as a bargaining chip. The FSIG RFR application deadline is in early May but no decisions on grant awards until the budget is done. The Constitution says they must approve the budget by the end of July.

4. **Guest Speakers' Roundtable Discussion:** MA Agricultural High Schools joined the meeting and provided board members presentations.

Superintendent Andy Linkenhoker at Smith Vocational High School presented. In addition to animal science, the school has mechanics and agriculture. There was a groundbreaking yesterday for a new horticulture building following a fire at the school. There is a new companion animal building and program at the school as well. A wide catchment area of students from many areas attends the school. Mr. Linkenhoker spoke about the animal science program and the various aspects of the program offerings. Animal science hands-on program, learning theory and on the farm in a practical setting. Additional information is available at: <https://www.smithtec.org/>

Discussion: Board member Ms. Gates-Allen asked questions about the number of applicants and the capacity of the school. Mr. Linkenhoker reported 320 applicants but that the school can only accept 150 students for Fall freshmen entry and talked about the school's long-term vision for programs and how to offer more seats.

Ms. Spence asked when enrollment was last increased, Mr. Linkenhoker said that the problem is that there are not enough academic classrooms, and more space is needed. Ms. Spence asked about diversity at the school and if that's a goal. Mr. Linkenhoker stated diversity is goal and noted there are more females than males at the school, but that horticulture is more male dominated. When it comes to racial diversity, having the school in Northampton there are some struggles around class. In comparison to Northampton High School, Smith Vocational High School is more diverse but outside of Northampton students mostly white.

Commissioner Randle then introduced the Bristol County Agricultural High School Superintendent, Derek Costa. Mr. Costa provided a presentation to the board.

Discussion: Board members asked Mr. Costa a couple of questions about the programs within the school, where students tend to go for college after graduation and Mr. Costa talked about some of the trends.

Paul Cross, Education Coordinator for Essex North Shore Agricultural & Technical School Career, Technical was then introduced by the Commissioner. Mr. Cross provided the board a presentation about the high school.

Chair Vadnais let the board know the reasons for these presentations, members can share this information and these schools need to have a forum to share information like we did here at this meeting – its up to board members if they want to consider bring it back to members industry

and take this to another step and establish a cooperative, trained, stable workforce for our industry and to have a generation ready to take our place. This is one of the challenges

5. Board member updates.

Ms. Gates Allen is excited to see this happening, the cranberry industry is always thinking about workforce development – we think about how we incorporate the information we learned today, there will be dedicated space for workforce development.

Ms. Trust had to leave at 12:03PM

Mr. Leavitt states that he sits on an advisory board with Bristol Agricultural HS and is very active and will continue.

Mr. Rose was impressed with the agricultural high schools. The biggest challenges how do you deal with the demand and the need, something to figure it out and love to see kids have such a wide opportunity. He said that apples are looking good, there was a problem with thinning this year and that many farmers are having issues but overall, everything is going well including peaches. Hard cider from Red Apple Farm is now avail at Gillette Stadium.

Mr. Mezitt loves hearing about the agricultural high school demand, will follow up with Bristol High School and have been in touch with Norfolk High School. He talked about a compliance agreement on boxwoods and will follow up with Taryn LaScola from MDAR's Crop & Pest Division and will raise some questions that have come up from our growers. Deer overpopulations continue to be a challenge.

Ms. Bemis reports that flower growers have nothing remarkable for this season except maybe the boxwoods but not necessarily impacting the flower growers and everything else is normal.

Ms. Spence is celebrating tomorrow with elected officials on the purchase of a new farm and reported that the Urban Farming Institute off to a wonderful start this year, very excited about the year. Love hearing about the aggie high schools.

Mr. Shepard is trying to navigate through the HPAI situation and said there is a roundtable discussion this afternoon.

Mr. Crawford states that they have a good 1st honey flow the week of beautiful weather with excellent honey flow. There are issues facing the bees with the outbreak with American foul brood, along with town and neighbor issues. Neighbors calling in because they do not like bees in their backyard. Mr. Crawford farms in several locations, there are issues with H-2A housing and issues with overtime creating issues for farms. Farmers are losing some of their best workers because other states give more hours ever if its not time & ½ pay. Beekeepers will be at the MDAR apiary at UMass Amherst with honey flowing the end of this week.

Ms. Chang expressed her joy at working with students at Smith Vocational who are so passionate and dedicated. She has been working with them for several years and has hosted them for hands-on processing workshops each year. In poultry news, custom season is well underway. They are noticing a potential trend in lower mortality rates through the first few weeks of the season.

Ms. Trust informs the Board that the Mass Maple Association is hosting its annual picnic on August 3rd and invites them as well as MDAR's Commissioner's office to attend. Many maple farms tapped earlier than they usually do for the 2023 season with the but the majority reporting about 75 – 80% of an average crop with sap at lower sugar content and produced darker grades.

MA Maple continues to promote sugarhouse and sugarhouse restaurant visits throughout the season, there were four legislative sugarhouse visits this year to highlight MA Maple syrup across the maple producing counties. The annual meeting in January gathered over 120 producers to collaborate, visit with vendors, get hydrometers tested, and attend a workshop on the Spotted Lantern Fly. MA Maple also operated their booth in the Massachusetts Building at the Big E again with ear selling candy, cream, and syrup, as well as cream cones, maple cotton candy, and maple slushies, which have proven to be very popular.

Chair Vadnais reminds the Board that the next meeting will be held on September 19th at the Big E on Massachusetts Day. The last two meetings of the year will be on October 16th and December 11th.

Discussion: For next meeting, the board would like an update on workforce development as part of the department updates. Ms. Gates-Allen asked if there a need to form a subcommittee on workforce development; Chair Vadnais said to send info to Ms. Bouchard for next meeting. Ms. Gates-Allen asked if there are still funds thru ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act). Chair Vadnais asked if Ms. Gates-Allen has an interest in assisting the Chair if this moves forward. Ms. Gates-Allen confirms that yes, workforce is a priority and talking about how the agricultural industry should step up. Ms. Spence agreed it is something we should do.

The Chair asked that members send anything to Ms. Bouchard to help package for next meeting on workforce development.

6. **Adjournment:** The Chair asks for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Leavitt made a motion to adjourn. Mr. Rose seconded the motion. A rollcall vote to adjourn passed unanimously and the meeting adjourned at 12:25pm.