

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, February 12, 2025

10am Hybrid Meeting

Board Members in Attendance: Dale Leavitt, Al Rose, Dave Shepard, Kimberly Trust, Peter Mezitt

Virtual: Skip Vadnais, Kat Chang, Dawn Gates-Allen, Patricia Spence, Elizabeth Keen

Absent: Lisa Colby, Tina Bemis, William Crawford

Staff: Ashley Randle, Winton Pitcoff, Joanna Shields, Margaret Callanan, Juli Stelmaszyk

Public: Derek Costa, Karen Schwalbe

1. **Start / Call to Order:** Chair Vadnais called the meeting to order at 10:02am. A quorum was established. All votes must be taken by rollcall.
2. **Approval of 10/16/24 Meeting Minutes:** Mr. Leavitt moved to approve the meeting minutes of October 16, 2024. Ms. Chang seconded the motion. The minutes were approved unanimously by the Board via roll call vote.

Peter Mezitt and Pat Spence joined the meeting at 10:05am.

3. **Vice Chair Vote:** Mr. Shepard makes a motion to elect Mr. Rose as Vice Chair of the Board. Ms. Chang seconded the motion. Mr. Vadnais asks if anyone opposes, none do. Mr. Vadnais then asks for a motion to accept; Mr. Leavitt moves to accept, Mr. Shepard seconds. Mr. Rose is appointed Vice Chair of the Board of Agriculture unanimously by roll call vote.

Mr. Vadnais then turned meeting over to Mr. Rose.

New Business:

4. Department Updates:

- a. **Legislative/Budget Updates:** Deputy Commissioner Pitcoff reported on the current legislative session and reported many of the bills that have been filed are refiled bills and duplicates both in the House and Senate. MDAR is monitoring approximately 80-90 of these bills. MDAR is trying to identify priority bills and particularly monitoring a Constitutional Amendment Article 99 to benefit Chapter 61A. Many bills are related to food access, animal health, pets and shelters/rescues. Several bills have been filed on pesticides and rodenticides. The filing bills to kick off conversations with legislators. Annually, about 7,000 bills get filed with approximately 100-150 voted on and passed.

Deputy Pitcoff reported on the Environmental Bond Bill and explained how the Governor submits a bond authorization that forms the capital investment plan. Many of MDAR's grant programs are funded through this such as land acquisition, urban ag, etc. Bonds through the

capital invest plan, lays out what the Governor can spend over the next 4-5 years. The bond bill outside sections can be attached with not only funding but policy items such as providing the department the ability to issue fines. The bond bill filing is estimated to take place in late April with legislative debate to follow. Agencies are at the beginning of the process.

Continuing Deputy Pitcoff updated the board on the potential for federal disaster funding in the amount of \$220 million in the form of a block grant from USDA for small agricultural states including the six (6) New England states plus Alaska. States report what they need then USDA uses a formula to disburse how much each state gets funded, then the department distributes those funds to farmers. MDAR did a survey to farmers to help determine the amount of loss for MA farms. Losses not previously covered potentially could be covered with this. MDAR expects the funding may come this Spring. There are some things happening in the federal government that may impact funds to states but MDAR has been reassured by USDA that these funds will not be touched. As Board members talk to farmers, we encourage them to keep their eyes open for this.

Discussion: Ms. Chang asked a question regarding site visits and what if farms have already fixed/replaced the losses. Deputy Pitcoff noted that receipts and things like that are looked at but the department understands that farms may have already dealt with the losses and addressed repairs by now. It is based on the losses and not what the farms will spend the funds on.

5. **Staffing Updates:** Deputy Bouchard noted that the hiring freeze has been lifted and that MDAR currently has four open positions. There is a lot of interest from federal government workers.

6. **Program Updates:**

- a. **High Path Avian Influenza (HPAI):** Commissioner Randle reported that since January one farm has been impacted by HPAI but mostly it is in wild birds that are sick or deceased. Biosecurity is the main message for farms to protect poultry flocks this includes keeping birds inside which is the best prevention this time of year. MDAR anticipates dealing with HPAI till sometime in April. MDAR is trying to reach backyard flocks across the state and developing a map.

Discussion: Ms. Chang asks if there is a concern with the map and people going out to kill wild birds? Commissioner Randle responded that the biggest concern is getting people not to touch diseased birds. MDAR issues press releases with county level information only, as USDA does. Mr. Rose noted that HPAI has been around since 2022 and asked if its higher this year. Commissioner Randle reported that in wild birds this is the largest outbreak and in commercial poultry 30million birds have been depopulated causing price increases. She also noted that it takes a year to get birds back into production.

Following a question from Mr. Shepard, Commissioner Randle said there are approximately 10 commercial poultry flocks in Massachusetts that MDAR test especially prior to birds attending fairs or other events. The total number of birds is around 3,000. The virus strain continues to change with a new strain in cattle found in Nevada. There is no vaccine currently available, however, development of one is being investigated. Currently, infected herds are quarantined herd resulting in decreased milk production, but cattle do not have to be depopulate like with birds.

- b. **Second Generation Rodenticides:** Commissioner Randle reported receipt last May from the Havard Law School, Animal Law and Policy Clinic requesting the Pesticide Board Subcommittee ban second generation rodenticides. As a result, the subcommittee will conduct a scientific review and an individual review using an outside contractor. The contractor should be secured by next month. Based on the results of the study, the subcommittee will decide whether to take any action on banning rodenticides with

consideration of the impacts on wildlife and public health concerns especially given increased rat populations.

- c. **Invasive Pests:** The Commissioner mentioned cooperative agreements with USDA fund staff and programming that support the regulation of invasive pests. MDAR continues to see the Spotted Lantern Fly population increase around the state. There is limited funding through USDA APHIS putting the future of cooperative agreements in question.

- 7. **Upcoming Events:** Commissioner Randle reported that the department received over 30 applications this year from high school juniors and seniors for the Youth Council. The current Youth Council class has been amazing and has a meeting scheduled next week at Essex Agricultural High School to talk about slaughter and processing which is an interest to students. Students have also expressed an interest to learn more about aquaculture. Other New England states are now looking to establish their own youth councils.

MDAR's Agricultural Resource Fairs are scheduled for February 18th in Western MA at Smith Vocational Agricultural High School and on February 21st at Essex Agricultural High School.

Ag Day at the State House in Boston will on March 18th.

The Food Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) will be posted in early March funded at \$25 million. HPAI biosecurity projects are now eligible for funding. Other grant programs haven't been able to fund such projects along with schools, food pantries, and aquaculture. The FSIG program is very broad and MDAR is looking at more infrastructure needs across the state.

MDAR is planning to have an agricultural literacy summit this April/May to convene around agriculture and literacy for teachers from kindergarten to college.

Next weekend Commissioner Randle and Deputy Pitcoff are headed to D.C. for the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture's (NASDA) Winter Policy Conference. Interesting discussions around food safety and other topics are expected with some states possibly receiving a 30% reduction for food safety programming and may have to dissolve their programs. MDAR has been putting contingencies in place.

Commissioner Randle and Deputy Pitcoff reported on the Governor's Budget for next fiscal year that included a 1% reduction and primarily impacts MDAR's Division of Agricultural Markets with some potential impacts to grants but staff will not be impacted. This kicks off the beginning of the budget process.

Deputies Pitcoff and Bouchard reported that the department's 2023 Annual Report has been published and MDAR will be kicking off the 2024 annual report development shortly.

- 8. **Board Member Updates:** Vice Chair Rose turned to board members for their updates.

Ms. Gates-Allen reported that the cranberry industry really struggled with the drought this year. She mentioned it took a week to pick 14-acres that should normally take 2-days. The Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association (CCCGA) is working hard on behalf on the industry, fortunately they got a grant to help farmers with farm planning which is a big help to the industry. Happy to hear about the grant work being done at MDAR. She is concerned about Spotted Lantern Fly and said it would be helpful is there was an AI tool to take a photo to identify if its SLF.

Mr. Vadnais reports that there is a new livestock processing facility over the line in Connecticut which helpful to the industry. They are struggling in Bristol County with avian flu especially in the coastal area.

Ms. Chang updates on poultry; increase concern with HPAI, there was geese at UMass Amherst that tested positive which is close to her farm. They are sourcing chicks, but hatcheries have also been impacted. Also dealing with issues with grants from USDA and reimbursements, this is a big concern for equipment and things that the farm has already paid for. Ms. Chang asks if there is any notification system in place for HPAI. Deputy Pitcoff thinks her point about notifications are good, we see the HPAI press release for HPAI when the public does. Commissioner Randle remarks that MDAR is working on a map with DFG to show wild birds with HPAI at the county level, hopefully it will be created in the new few weeks.

Mr. Rose asks if you have a signed contract, are we okay? Deputy Pitcoff notes that Ms. Chang is not the first person we have heard this from, NRCS, FSA, etc. A lot of it is being held up. Farmers should let MDAR know if they are not able to access federal funds. Ms. Chang noted that the whole system was down for a couple of days, and she was unable to contact anyone.

Ms. Spence reports that many people in the areas she works in (Dorchester, Roxbury, Mattapan) are taking off diversity, equity and inclusion from their websites and that people are scared. Multiple urban ag organizations that are losing funding. There is a lot of fear, dealing with this daily. Urban farms wondering how they are going to deliver food. People of color and migrants are not leaving their homes; they are not going to church. Ms. Spence is wondering if there is any way we can help urban farms, assistance we can look to from the ag world in MA and independent grants. UFI committed to continue doing the work.

Ms. Keen remarks that in Western, MA there has been a lot of concern of not having the HIP funding, it is approximately 10% of the farm's income. It has been particularly cold, crops not bouncing back in heated hoop houses. The effect of the dry Fall means that cover crops are not recovering, and they have had to irrigate more. She is curious to see what comes up in the Spring. She has been involved in creating handbooks if farms have immigrant employees; trainings for farmers and businesses so they understand their rights if ICE arrives on their property. People are fearful and there are numerous concerns about losing people.

Mr. Shepard updates that dairy farmers hosted their annual meeting March 13th at Blue Bonnet in Northampton. They are watching several issues including HPAI, dairy farmers security fund, PFAS, and neonic covered seed crops.

Mr. Leavitt remarks on the aquaculture sector noting that they have not had ice in several years, and that it was a challenge to break ice. There was a meeting last Friday with industry and a couple companies are looking at alternative energy equipment. Some items coming up, new bill to form a commission to investigate financial strategies for Buzzard Bay on the south coast. 50% of product last year could not be harvested because of wastewater issues. New Representative Mark Silvia is meeting tomorrow to discuss funding an interstate shellfish conference for federal guidelines for handling shellfish. ISSC meets every 2-years to help establish the guidelines. MA farms are small to be able to send industry members to help influence these issues that need to be resolved. He would love to see it work thru MDAR.

Mr. Mezitt updates that a lot of small businesses lose employees because they are scared. They have had raids before; right before Spring that interferes with supply chain. He provided guidance to his workers and says that anything MDAR can do to help people not feel scared would be welcome. Hoisting license training is not taught in Spanish, RI has it, but MA does not.

Ms. Trust reports on the maple industry and that they are waiting for this weather to break, probably will not do anything till March which is normal for maple. Annual meeting had good turnout. February 28th is maple kickoff; the association moved everything back based on last couple years. March 8th & 9th maple weekend promotes visiting maple sugar houses.

Mr. Rose says that he loves this normal winter, for apples you want your trees to be dormant. Lost some new trees in the past because of the weather. Just back from North American Farmers

Marketing Association; the industry has evolved since 1993 with at least a thousand people in the room. March 11th, TD Bank his farm was nominated to take over the TD Garden with Red Apple logo everywhere. March 18th Red Apple is hosting the legislative Farm Bureau breakfast.

Ms. Gates Allen signs off @ 11:15a

9. **2025 Meeting updates** – Wednesday April 2nd meeting will be held at Bristol Agricultural High School. September meeting will be held at the Big E – Monday Sept 22nd noon –2pm.
10. **Adjournment.** The Vice Chair asks for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Leavitt motions to adjourn. Mr. Shepard seconded the motion. A roll call vote to adjourn passed unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 11:22am.