

Planning for Farmland in Massachusetts

An Overview at a Municipal and Regional Level

Online webinar

Wednesday, September 23, 2026 at noon

Katharine Otto, Farmland Action Plan Coordinator

The presentation portion of this webinar will be recorded and posted online alongside the slides on the [Ag Resources for Municipalities webpage](#). Please keep your video off and your microphone muted for the presentation portion. The Q&A portion will not be recorded.



Agenda and Today's Goals

Agenda

- ❖ About the document
- ❖ Section 1 - Agriculture in Massachusetts
- ❖ Section 2 – Tools to support farming and protect farmland
- ❖ Section 3 – Understanding farmland and agriculture in your community
- ❖ Section 4 – Things to keep in mind when developing strategies to protect farmland
- ❖ Next steps and upcoming opportunities
- ❖ Questions and Answers

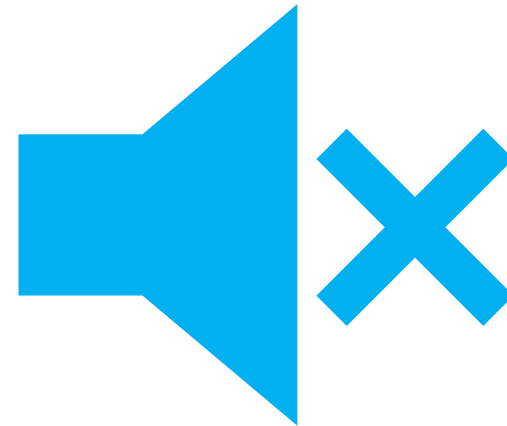
Today's Goals

- ❖ Give brief overview of the contents of the new “Planning for farmland in Massachusetts” document
- ❖ Highlight some additional resources and future opportunities to learn more

Logistics

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The Q&A portion will not be recorded. Questions will be taken from the chatbox first, then orally from those who raise their hand.



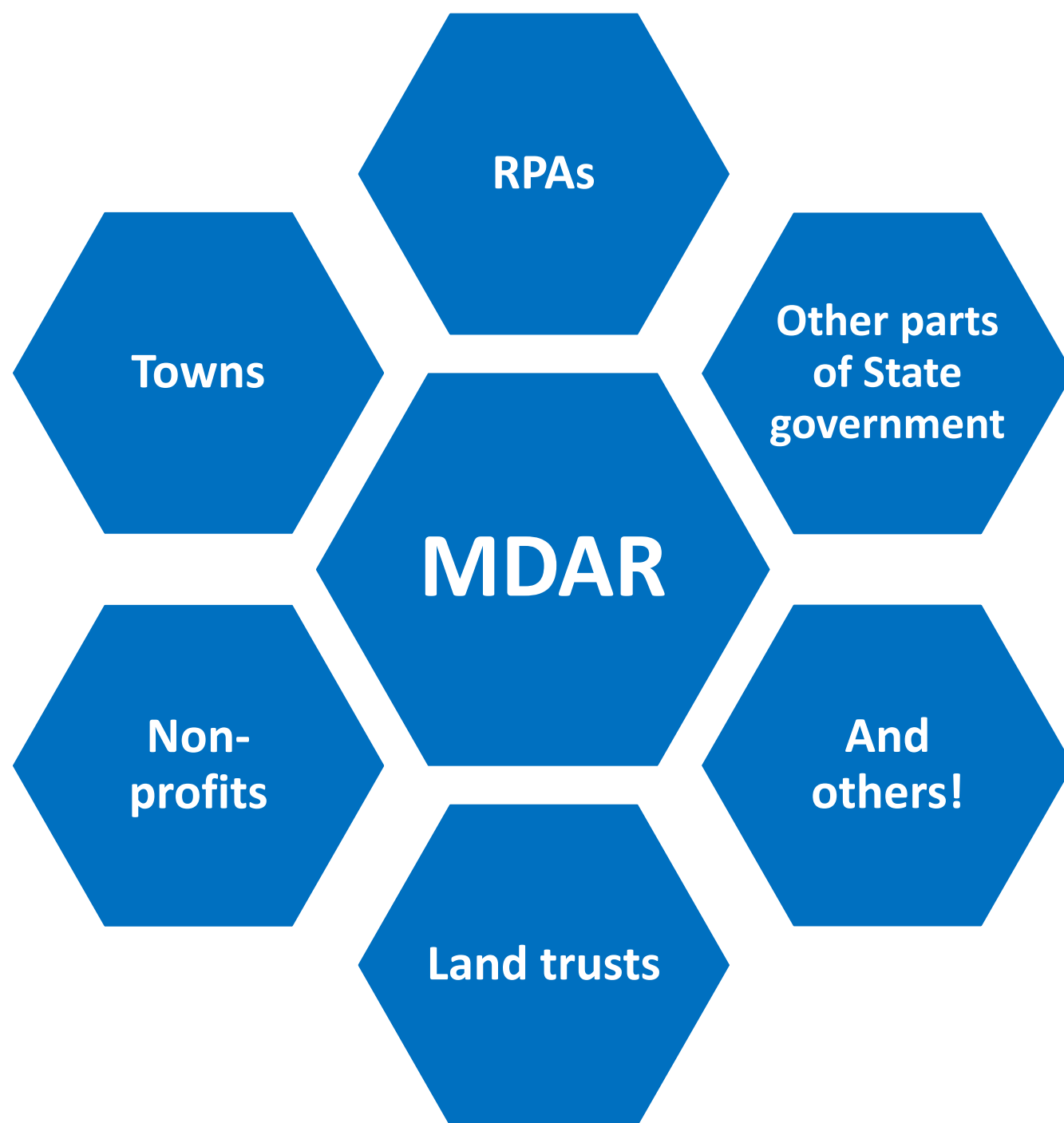
References and credits

- All photos used in this presentation are by MDAR staff
- For full references and credits on all content within this presentation, please see the [Planning for Farmland in Massachusetts](#) document published in August 2026



Thank you to the
many reviewers
and contributors!

Over 40 people were
involved from a variety
of expertises



Key takeaways

Today, and in the Planning for Farmland document, we will primarily be focusing on the needs of commercial farmland, although much of what is shared today will also benefit non-commercial farmland.

We know that municipalities and land trusts are juggling many competing priorities for scarce resources. Our goal is to share enough to help farmland be considered alongside other priorities with an informed understanding of its complexities and nuances.

1) Farmland is not the same as open space and other land uses

2) Farmland is more than the land

It is also the operation on the land – one which needs to stay fiscally viable and at some point will change hands

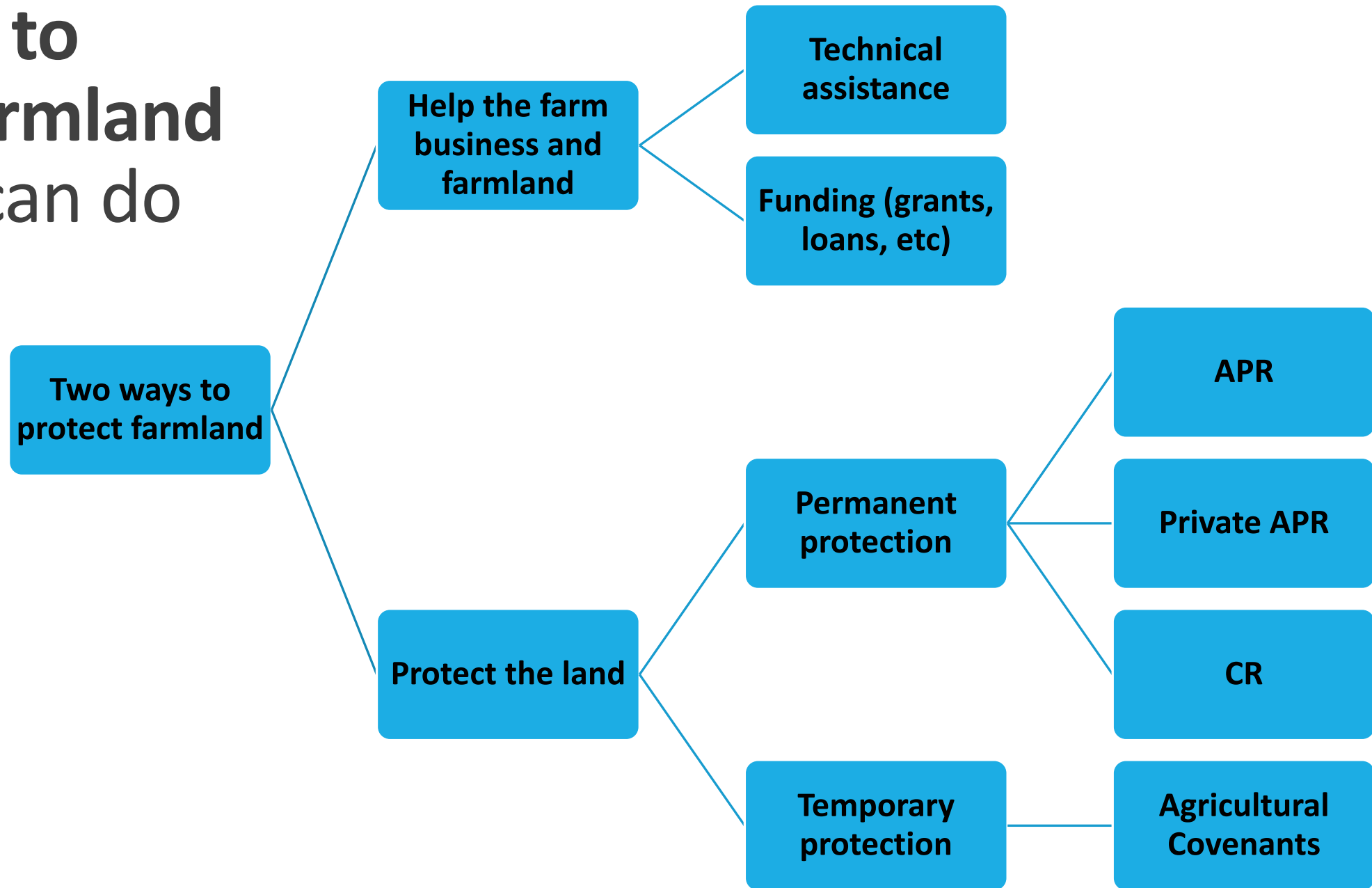
3) Commercial farming is not easy

Farmers are juggling many challenges as they grow food and produce other items at a scale that is economically viable and meets the needs of the local and non-local population.

4) There is no one-size-fits-all for planning for farmland

Because farmland and farming includes any different types of products, scales, operation types

Two ways to protect farmland (and you can do both!)



About the Document

Planning for Farmland in Massachusetts
An Overview at a Municipal and Regional Level

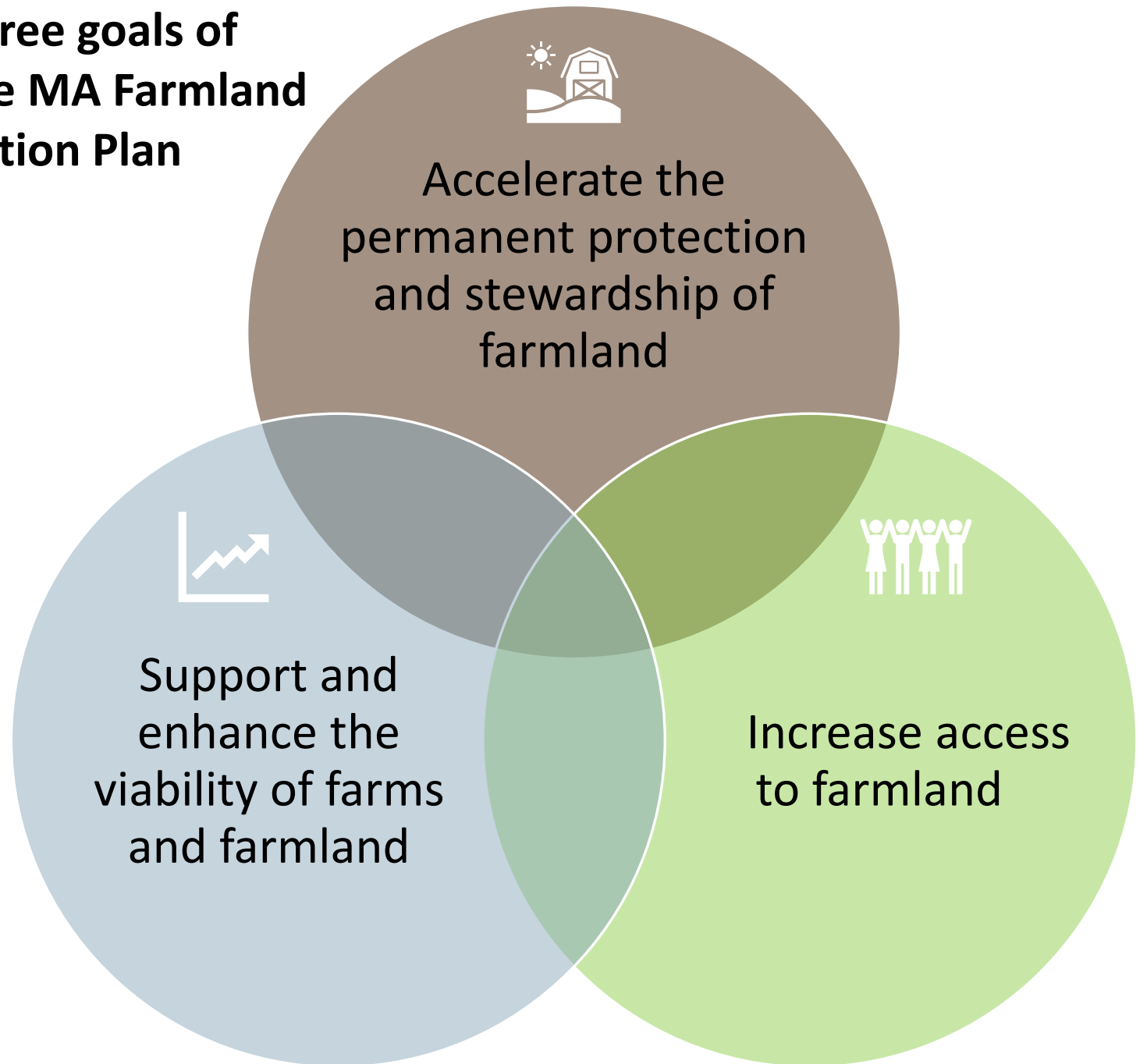
Massachusetts is losing farmland and farms fast

Many conversations about how to address this.

Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan 2023 created in response to this

- Long range strategic initiative
- Implementation by partners across the state, not just for state government
- www.mass.gov/farmland-action-plan

Three goals of the MA Farmland Action Plan



Why are farms and farmland important to you?

**Feeds
community**

????

**Contributes
to local
economy**

**Preserves
rural
heritage**

????

**Grow
foods from
my cultural
heritage**

????

**Helps
address
climate
change and
mitigate its
impacts**

**Sustains
family
businesses**

**Protects
vital
natural
resources**

**Contributes
to soil
health**

???

Planning for Farmland in Massachusetts

– Purpose of the document

Why create this document?

- Several requests for additional information about how to incorporate farmland protection into municipal plans, including Open Space and Recreation Plans (OSRPs).
- In Spring 2025 an updated [Open Space and Recreation Planner's Workbook \(OSRP Workbook\)](#) was released by the MA Division of Conservation Services (DCS).

This document is intended to

- supplement the OSRP Workbook
- provide information relevant to the wider realm of planning for farmland
- support the implementation of the 2023 MA Farmland Action Plan

Task 1017 of the Farmland Action Plan, under Action I.A.3 –

“Add guidance to the Open Space and Recreation Plan's Workbook and other EEA program and funding guidance that would meet NRCS requirements related to agriculture to allow local and regional OSRPs to be used for ACEP-ALE eligibility.”

This is the **first** step towards implementing this task.

Audience, scale and focus

Audience

- Primary – staff at municipalities, Regional Planning Agencies (RPAs) and land trusts.
- May also be a useful starting point for volunteer board and committee members of municipalities and land trusts.

Other resources exist for farmers

Scale

- Focus on municipal and regional levels
- Not at statewide and multi-state levels

Focus

- Farmland, rather than broader agriculture
- Aquaculture and forestry are not included within this focus.

Document structure

How to use the document

- Quick intro to key tools and terminology
- Highlight some key issues with variety of perspectives and ways forward
- Hub to link to other resources

Section 1 - Agriculture in Massachusetts

A brief overview of some useful context related to agriculture in Massachusetts

Section 2 – Tools to support farming and protect farmland

Including some definitions of terms used later in this resource

Section 3 – Understanding farmland and agriculture in your community

In addition to what is already on the municipality's radar when planning

Section 4 – Things to keep in mind when developing strategies to protect farmland

In addition to what is shared in the OSRP Workbook

Section 1 – Agriculture in Massachusetts

A brief overview of some useful context related to agriculture in Massachusetts.

Agriculture in Massachusetts

Communities across Massachusetts are rooted in a long and evolving agricultural tradition.

Agriculture

- provides food and other products,
- supports local and regional economies,
- contributes to natural resource protection and enhancement, and
- strengthens community character and quality of life.

From working landscapes to smaller-scale operations in developed areas, agriculture remains an important land use across the Commonwealth

What is in this document?

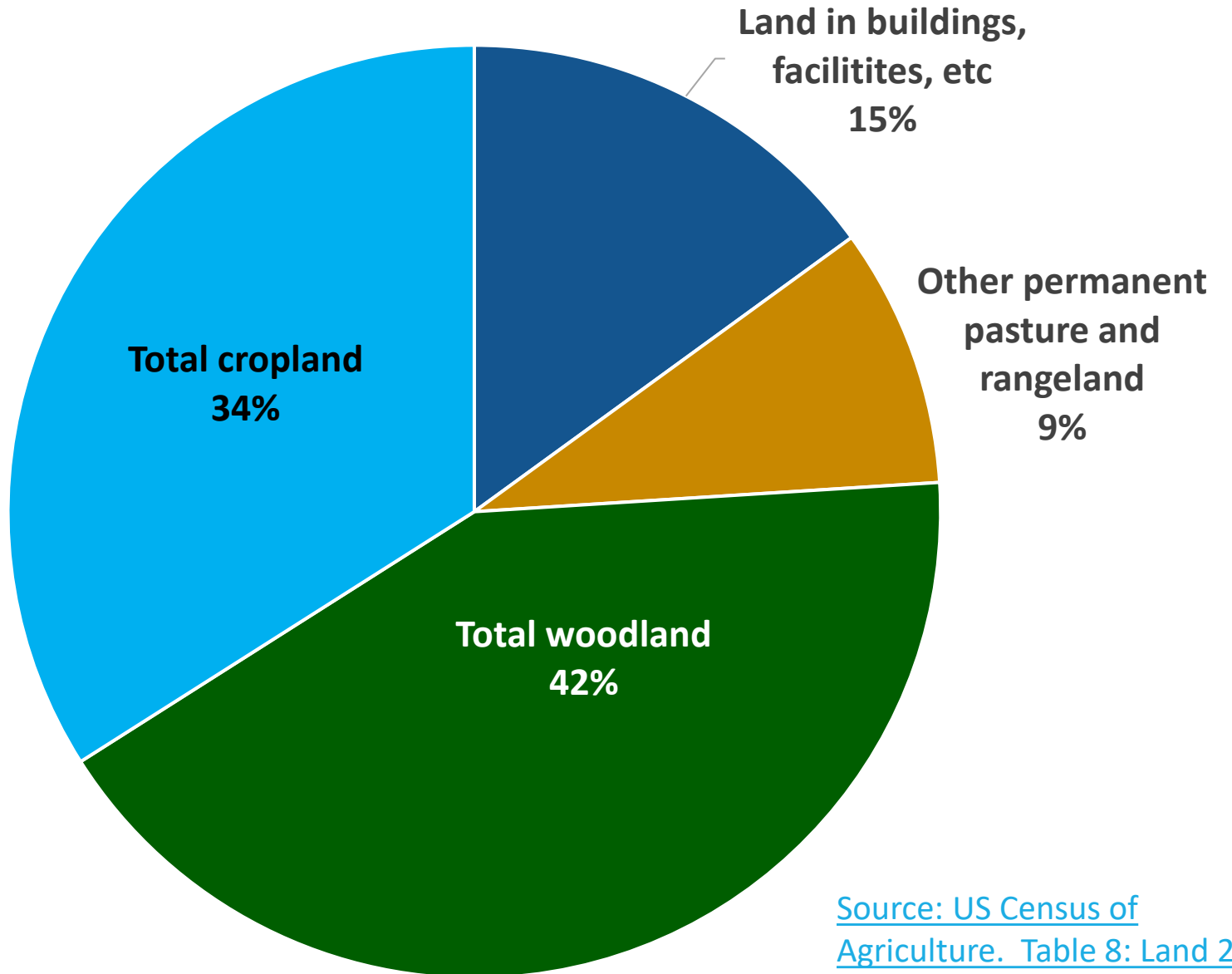
- What is “agriculture” according to state statute?
- What is farmland?
- What are the benefits of local agriculture?
- Why protect farmland?
- What are the challenges for farmers and farmland in Massachusetts?
- Additional Context

Defining farmland

Farmland is more than just cropland.

It is important to recognize the diversity of what farmers do on their land to sustain their farming operation.

Land uses on farms in Massachusetts in 2022



[Source: US Census of Agriculture. Table 8: Land 2022 and 2017. Massachusetts](#)

Benefits of local agriculture



Economic

- Generates revenue
- Provides employment
- Contributes to local economy
- Attracts tourists and visitors



Environmental

- Provides carbon sequestration
- Retains biodiversity
- Provides flood mitigation
- Reduces carbon footprint of transporting food
- Improves soil quality



Food security

- Improves access fresh and healthy food
- Creates a more resilient and secure food source



Scenic and social

- Contributes to scenic vistas
- Provide possible passive recreational opportunities
- Opportunities for community activities

Why protect farmland?

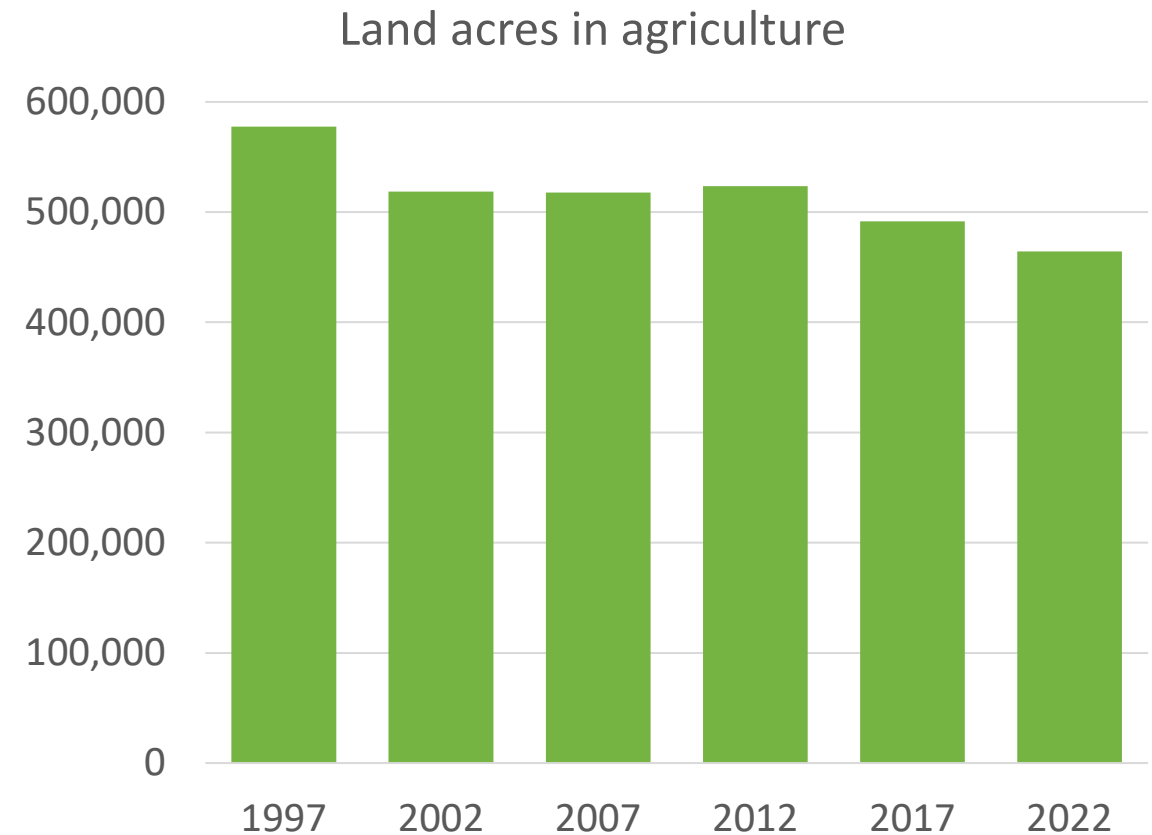
Massachusetts is losing agricultural land fast!

Between 1997 and 2022 Massachusetts lost 113,000 acres

- 3.7 times the size of the land area of Boston
- 1.8 times the size of Martha's Vineyard

Per day that means a loss of

- 12.4 acres
- About 9.4 football fields
- About 28-32 ice rinks



Source: Census of Agriculture 2022 and earlier. Table 1

www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Massachusetts/

Farms Under Threat

American Farmland Trust's "Farms Under Threat 2040" Report, between 2016 and 2040 Massachusetts, without additional investment and policy changes, is projected to lose



Challenges for farmers and farmland in Massachusetts

- Land cost
- Competing with other land uses
- Economics of small scale farms
- Aging farmers
- Climate change
- Limited labor pool
- Limited farm service providers
- And more!

Did you know?

- 40% of MA producers were 65 or older in 2022 and most have not identified what will happen to the farm when they pass away or are no longer able to manage the operation.
 - Source: [US Census of Agriculture 2022 and earlier. Table 52](#)
- The average farm earned 95 cents for every dollar spent on production in 2022.
 - Source: [US Census of Agriculture 2022 and earlier. Table 52](#)
- Massachusetts farmland prices have risen significantly in recent decades, particularly in the last six years
 - Source: US Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). [Land Values 2025 Summary. \(August 2025\)](#)

Section 2 – Tools to support farming and protect farmland

Explains some tools that can help support farming and protect farmland, including some definitions of terms used later in this resource

Tools to support farming and protect farmland

Municipal decisions, permitting, regulations and actions can have notable impacts on farm businesses and farmland, and they can vary significantly between municipalities and boards over time.

Farms of various sizes produce a wide range of agricultural products and services.

The diversity of the agricultural sector highlights the need for a range of equally diverse policies and actions to support farmers and the agricultural economy.

Tools covered in this document

- 1) Municipal Master Plan and other planning documents
- 2) Chapter 61A Rights of First Refusal (ROFR)
- 3) The Community Preservation Act (CPA)
- 4) Agricultural Commissions (AgCom) and other municipal committees
- 5) Right to Farm Bylaw
- 6) Zoning Bylaws
- 7) Farmland protection options (APR, Private APR, CR, and Agricultural Covenants)
- 8) Municipally owned farmland
- 9) Buy-Protect-Sell

Tool 3 – Community Preservation Act (CPA)

The CPA is a local option law adopted by 201 Massachusetts municipalities that generates funding for farmland is part of the open space category.

CPA funds can be used for farmland protection both via purchasing the land outright and by purchasing a restriction (APR, CR or Private APR).

CPA funds can also be used as match for state, federal and private funding sources.

Using CPA fund in a timely manner

- CPA requires a town meeting or city council vote for funds to be appropriated
- Additional tool – Create Conservation fund with conservation commission
 - [Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 40, Section 8C](#)
- Additional tool – Create Agricultural Preservation Fund with agricultural commission
 - [Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 40, Section 8L](#)

Tool 4 – Agricultural Commissions (AgCom) and other municipal committees

An AgCom

- is a municipal committee of resident volunteers
- is an important tool to give farmers a voice in the community
- can be an advocate for farmers and agricultural businesses.

It is important to involve your AgCom in the development of planning documents and processes that involve farmland, including OSRPs.

Resources

MDAR provides funding to Conservation Works, LLC to support their work around Agricultural Commissions (AgComs) and municipalities interested in establishing an AgCom.

Learn more on the [MDAR AgCom webpage](#).

Tool 7 – Farmland protection options

When protecting farmland there are several protection options available.

It is important to look at

- the needs of the landowner and farmer
- the needs of the community
- the protection type that balances those needs
- available funding sources

Protection mechanisms used in Massachusetts include:

- Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR)
- Private APR (PAPR)
- Conservation Restriction (CR)
- Agricultural Covenants

Municipalities can get involved in these protection tools in a variety of ways, including

- purchasing the land outright
- contributing funds for purchase of a restriction
- holding or co-holding a restriction

Permanent protection

An Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) is an easement/ restriction held by the state through MDAR.

- pay eligible farmland owners the difference between the fair market value and the agricultural value of their farmland in exchange for a permanent deed restriction on the title to the farmland
- restricts any use of the property that will negatively impact its future agricultural viability
- secures a commitment to keep the land in agricultural production in perpetuity.

Learn more

- [MDAR's APR webpages](#)
- [AFT's MA Farmland Protection Options document](#)

A private APR (PAPR) is an APR in which the primary holder is an entity other than MDAR (eg municipality or land trust)

Learn more

- [MDAR's PAPR webpage](#)
- [AFT's MA Farmland Protection Options document](#)

A Conservation Restriction (CR) is a legal agreement that protects natural resources, which can include agricultural resources such as soil and water, on private property.

- Uses of the land are limited in order to protect specified conservation values including the natural, scenic, or open condition of the land.
- Can be held by state agencies, municipalities, land trusts and others

Learn more

- [DCS's CR Review Webpage](#)
- [DCR's CR Stewardship Webpage](#)
- [AFT's MA Farmland Protection Options document](#)

New resource - Summary of Municipal Role for APR Application and Enrollment Process

About the document

- Released August 2026
- Written by MDAR

Audience

- Primary – staff at municipalities
- May also be a useful for land trusts and volunteer board and committee members of municipalities.
- Other resources exist for farmers

This document is intended to increase the awareness among municipal staff and officials of their statutory responsibilities and many opportunities to support the mission of the APR program to permanently preserve farmland for its economic, cultural, and environmental benefits.

Learn more from [MDAR APR Program Resources for Municipalities webpage](#)

Tool 8 - Municipally owned farmland

Why is publicly owned farmland helpful?

- low-cost mechanism for farmers to access land

Municipalities can choose to purchase farmland and then set up an agreement with farmer(s) to use that land for agriculture, typically using a license or a lease. If there is an AgCom, it should be involved in this process.

Resources

- [State-Owned Farmland Licensing Program](#)
- Coming soon as part of [MDAR's Farmland Partnership Program](#) in 2026 and 2027 through several projects, including [Education for municipalities with new licensing programs](#).



Section 3 – Understanding farmland and agriculture in your community

In addition to what is already on the municipality's radar when planning

Understanding farmland and agriculture in your community

Within this document

- Planning guidance in state statute
- Planning documents helping implementation
- Current conditions
- Identify resources, needs and threats

Current conditions

- Find out what the needs of farmers are in your community.
- Analyze where local agricultural fits into the physical landscape.
- Several additional questions to consider



Identify resources, needs and threats

In addition to what is shared in the OSRP Workbook, the following context is useful to keep in mind when identifying resources, needs, and threats to protecting farmland.

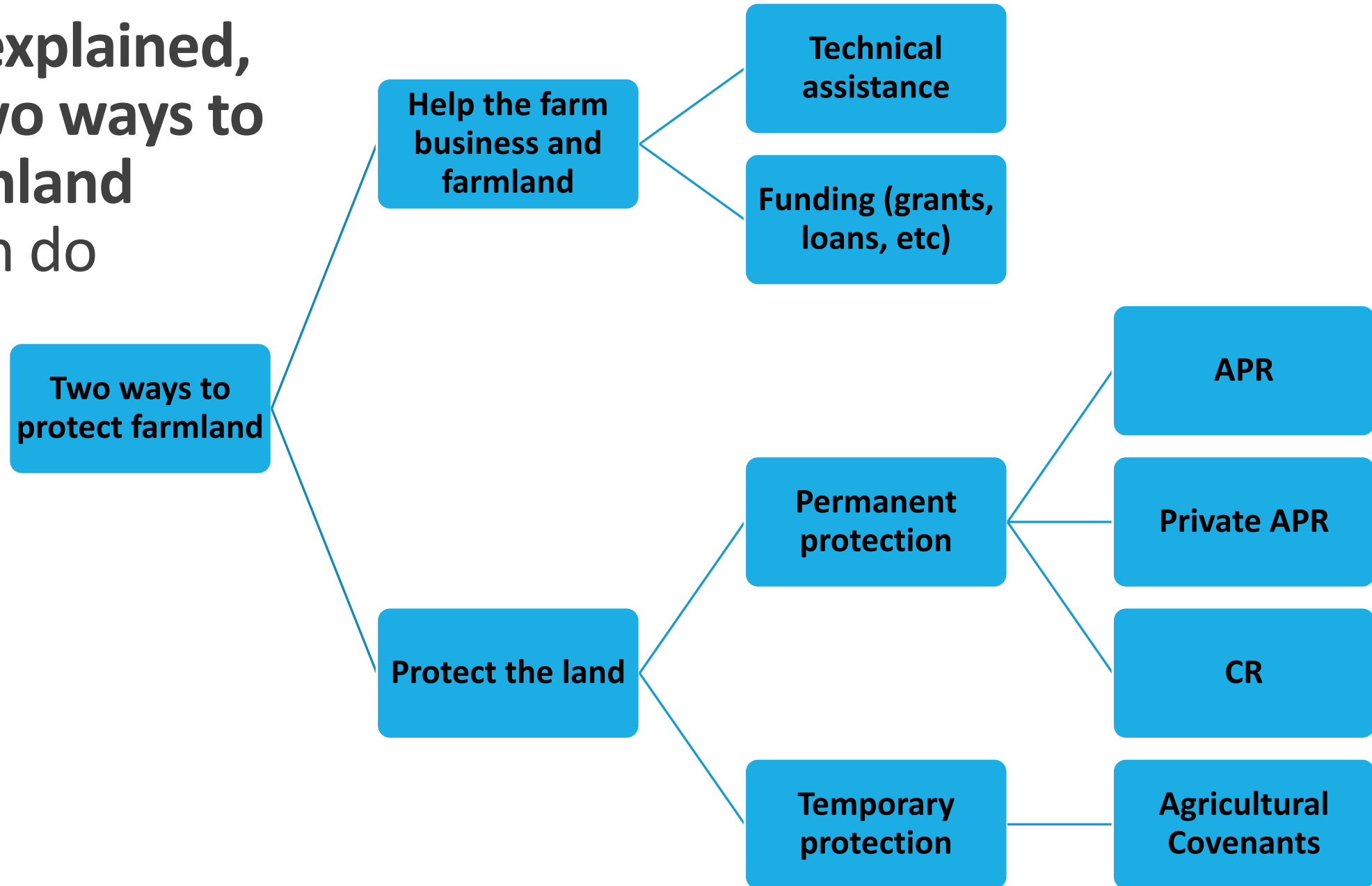
- Farmland protection is about an ongoing relationship rather than a single transaction for the purchase of land or an easement.
- Farm businesses are affected by local rules and regulations
- There have been historic patterns of inequitable access to farmland, some of which continue to impact historically underserved farmers today.
- Farmland and farm businesses are one part of a larger food system.



Section 4 – Things to keep in mind when developing strategies to protect farmland

In addition to what is shared in the OSRP Workbook

As already explained,
there are two ways to
protect farmland
(and you can do
both!)





Protecting farmland is different

Protecting farmland is not the same as conserving other land

Key difference is the ongoing relationship between the entity holding the easement/restriction and the landowner/farmer.

A choice has been made that the entity/community values not only the **open agricultural land** but also values keeping the **land in active production as a working farm**, and wants the land to remain a part of the economic fiber of the community.

The landowner/farmer in this way has a partner and is supported by the community for the community.

Things to keep in mind when developing strategies to protect farmland

Many topics covered in document

- Municipal roles
- Agricultural soils
- Farm businesses integral to farmland
- Farmers, landowners and messaging
- Leasing and licensing farmland
- Underutilized farmland
- Land use trade-offs, adjacent and co-located land uses
- Public access to farmland

Topics (continued)

- Transfer and succession
- Agritourism
- Farming in the urban environment
- Farmland as part of the food system
- Ongoing assistance for farmers

To keep in mind – Farm business integral to farmland

Farmlands cannot be separated from the farm businesses on them.

Municipal regulations and bylaws relating to land use can have notable impacts on both the farmlands and the farm businesses – for example, what uses are permitted and building locations.

Other municipal decisions and regulations can also impact farmlands and farm businesses, including:

- tax assessments
- rules on signage along roadways
- health regulations
- roadway ditch maintenance practices
- event permits
- traffic and parking rules
- and more.

To keep in mind – Farmers, landowners and messaging

The landowner may not be the farmer.

Many farmers in Massachusetts operate on land they do not own. This includes

- Leases
- Licenses
- Informal agreements

When strategizing on protecting farmland the messaging for a non-farming landowner versus a farmer may need to be different.



To keep in mind – Public access to farmland

Public access to farmland is case dependent.

APRs and Private APRs recognize that the farm is being protected for the public good, but that public access to that land is up to the landowner.

The following are some reasons for limiting public access to farmland:

- Farms need to protect the safety and welfare of the animals and crops that are part of their farm operation.
- Farms are a working landscape with large equipment, uneven terrain and sometimes large animals.

The following are some examples of how public access to a working farm could be integrated:

- Some farms have a community farming model and/or welcome visitors for Pick-Your-Own, tours, or events.
- Some farms allow passive recreation on non-agricultural parts of their property.

To keep in mind – Transfer and succession

With farms protected in perpetuity the farm business and farmland will need to change ownership in the future.

[An Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value \(OPAV\)](#)

in a protection agreement (APR or Private APR):

- Helps the land remains at agricultural value which helps it be more affordable for the next generation of farmers to purchase
- Requires that the land be transferred to another farmer.
- May also include a process to review who purchases the property.

Municipalities and communities can also support transfer and succession work by working with local and regional organizations who are doing this work to provide workshops and resources for local farmers.

Resources

- [Land For Good](#) website
- [New England Farmland Finder](#)
- [Buy Local organizations](#)
- Land trusts
- Upcoming through Farmland Partnership Project - [Municipal workshops on Chapter 61A and Right of First Refusal \(ROFR\)](#)

Next steps and
upcoming opportunities

Resources and upcoming webinars

Announcements will be shared in the [MFAP newsletter](#) and other locations as relevant.

Municipal Role when protecting farmland as APR

- Released Aug 2026
- [APR Resources for Municipalities webpage](#)

Saving the Farm: Municipalities' Right of First Refusal During Chapter 61A Transfer - 10/15 Webinar

- Hosted by Wildlands Trust as part of their Farmland Partnership Project
- More information and sign up on [SRPEDD project webpage](#)

Agricultural Commission technical assistance

- Hosted by Conservation Works as part of an MDAR contract
- Roundtables restart on 10/14
- More information and sign up on [MDAR AgCom webpage](#)

Another farmland planning webinar – Date to be announced

- Hosted by MDAR and several RPAs
- More information to come

Additional Farmland Partnership Program projects

Work is ongoing with some resources already published and additional ones due to be completed by the end of 2027.

The following is a highlight of some of the projects with oriented towards municipalities

- [Municipal Farmland Protection Plan template created and piloted](#)
- [Education on planning and zoning that reduces farmland loss](#)
- [Resources on how municipalities can respond to ROFR](#)
- [Municipal training on Chapter 61A](#)
- [Education on how to use Community Preservation Act \(CPA\) funds for protecting farmland](#)

For updates on opportunities, sign up for the [MFAP newsletter](#).

Getting assistance and updates

Help with next steps

- Municipalities who would like assistance with incorporating farmland protection into their work can reach out to their Regional Planning Agency who may be able to provide technical assistance.

Updates to this document

- For suggestions for edits for this document, please contact Katharine Otto, Katharine.s.otto@mass.gov



Closing takeaways

We know that municipalities and land trusts are juggling many competing priorities for scarce resources. Our goal is to share enough to help farmland be considered alongside other priorities with an informed understanding of its complexities and nuances.

Agriculture Resources for
Municipalities Webpage
[www.mass.gov/info-
details/ag-resources-for-
municipalities](http://www.mass.gov/info-details/ag-resources-for-municipalities)

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Farmers are juggling many challenges as they grow food and produce other items at a scale that is economically viable and meets the needs of the local and non-local population.

4) There is no one-size-fits-all for planning for farmland

Because farmland and farming includes any different types of products, scales, operation types

Questions and Answers

The recording will now be turned off.



For more information or questions

Farmland Action Plan Webpage www.mass.gov/farmland-action-plan

Agriculture Resources for Municipalities Webpage www.mass.gov/info-details/ag-resources-for-municipalities

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