

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS



Department of Agricultural Resources

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2024

Governor Maura Healey
Massachusetts State House, Room 280 Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Healey,

On behalf of the Massachusetts Food Policy Council ("Council"), I am pleased to provide this Annual Report pursuant to M.G.L. Chapter 20, Section 6C(e) on the Council's ongoing work related to the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan (Plan) <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/ma-local-food-action-plan>.

Please accept this letter as the Council's 2024 Annual Report. Throughout the year, Council members continued to work towards the priorities and goals from the Plan. The recommendations continue to be foundational and very relevant. Issues including recent climate-related weather disasters and continued reverberations from the pandemic mobilized the Council and partners to work to strengthen and build the resilience of the Massachusetts food system. Topics focused on racial equity, reducing hunger, food insecurity, agricultural sector support including land access, and programs to address the wide range of challenges within the food system.

Council meetings during 2024 had strong participation as continued allowance of public meetings conducted through remote means allowed real-time public access. Hybrid meetings with remote and in-person participation were also held. The synergistic relationship between the Council, the MA Legislature's Food System Caucus, the MA Food System Collaborative, local food policy councils, and other stakeholders continues to be an asset to develop and support policy and program recommendations. Council communications and trusted relationships have been an advantage for efficiency in developing, continuing and advancing food system initiatives.


2024 highlights for the Council and its partners include:

- The renewal by the legislature and administration of a \$250,000 state Local Food Policy Council Grant Program.
- A first-time Farmers Market Sustainability Grant Program with awards of over \$205,000 to help farmers markets grow and expand their outreach to consumers.
- MDAR's management of the Food Security Infrastructure Grant, launched in 2020. This year \$24.6 million in grants were awarded, helping to sustain Massachusetts' food production and distribution sectors, while working to ensure that fresh, healthy, local food is available to all residents.
- MDEP's Massachusetts Gap Energy Grant awardees included food system operations.
- The launch of second round of the USDA-funded Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program.
- The Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement, funded by USDA and coordinated by DESE.
- A new MDAR staff position dedicated to facilitating implementation of the Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan.
- A new MDAR staff position, director of the department's new Division of Food Security.

- National recognition for state's food waste ban, implemented by MassDEP in 2014, which has caused more than 380,000 tons of food waste to be diverted and repurposed.
- An ongoing partnership between Project Bread, the Council, and other partners, to develop a road map to end hunger in Massachusetts by 2030.
- Publication of a report highlighting ten years of successes of MDAR's Urban Agriculture Program.
- Passage of legislation enabling MDAR to buy and sell land.
- A disaster relief program bill passed, allowing direct payments to farmers suffering losses as climate change-related weather events continue to have unpredictable impacts on food production.
- Continued initiatives to promote and integrate environmental justice considerations across programs, policies, and activities to ensure the equal access and meaningful involvement of all people residing in the Commonwealth.
- The Council also considered and passed one resolution urging full funding of the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), following a cut in program funding which resulted in a reduction in benefit amounts for users in December. The program strengthens and amplifies the importance of policy that connects local food and communities that have historically been underserved by the food system HIP program benefits SNAP shoppers with additional funds for nutritious local produce, and Massachusetts farmers through increased sales.

The Council respectfully acknowledges the Healey-Driscoll Administration and the General Court for their continued support in 2024 of the Plan's goals and the programs that work toward those goals and illustrate the connections between the food system and other policy issues. In addition, the Council appreciates the Administration's and the General Court's ongoing support for a sustainable, equitable, and resilient food system. We ask that you give continued consideration for the Plan's recommendations and goals as relevant legislative and regulatory actions are developed. As always, members of the Council would be happy to meet with you or your staff to offer further detail on opportunities to strengthen the Massachusetts food system or on the work of the Council. Electronic versions of this Report and its attachments will also be provided to you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ashley E. Randle".

Ashley Randle, Commissioner
Chair, Massachusetts Food Policy Council

2024 Annual Report of the Massachusetts Food Policy Council

An Act Establishing the Massachusetts Food Policy Council was signed into law on November 7, 2010, which created the 17-member Council that was tasked with developing recommendations for food system goals for the Commonwealth. An 18th member was added, created by the MA Healthy Soils Bill which was signed into law in January 2021. Pursuant to Section 6C(e) of Chapter 277 of the Acts of 2010, the Council must submit an annual report outlining its findings, conclusions, proposals, recommendations, and progress towards reaching the goals that have been set forth.

In 2024, the MA Food Policy Council (FPC) focused on environmental justice and climate change, forming the meeting themes for the year. Throughout the year, Council members returned to review the priorities and goals from the Plan. With the Plan's recommendations continuing to be very relevant, the persistent reverberations from the 2020 coronavirus outbreak and the ongoing climate events affecting agriculture challenged the Council and partners to support the Massachusetts food system. Topics focused on reducing hunger, food insecurity, racial equity, agricultural sector support, and programs to address the wide range of challenges within the food system. Detailed minutes of all meetings throughout the year are available at: <https://www.mass.gov/massachusetts-food-policycouncil>.

Meetings continued to be held remotely in accordance with An Act Relative to Extending Certain State of Emergency Accommodations ("Act"), which was signed by Governor Baker on July 16, 2022. This Act extends the expiration of certain provisions pertaining to the Open Meeting Law to March 31, 2025, allowing a public body to continue holding meetings remotely without a quorum physically present at a meeting location as long as it provides "adequate, alternative" access to remote meeting. Hybrid meetings were also held, with in-person and remote participation.

The MA Local Food Action Plan (Plan) accepted by the FPC on December 10, 2015, continues to be pertinent. The Plan was designed to increase the production and consumption of MA-grown food; create jobs and improve wages in food and farming; protect the land and water needed to produce food; ensure food safety; reduce food waste; and reduce food insecurity while making fresh and healthy food more accessible for the residents of the Commonwealth. The Plan offers recommendations for the public and private sectors to see these goals through to fruition and continues to be an important platform for this work.

State Agency Members: Ashley Randle, Commissioner, MDAR; Yvonne Hao, Secretary, MEOHED, Designee: Anne Gobi (Director of Rural Affairs); Robert Goldstein, Commissioner MDPH, Designee: Jessica del Rosario; Bonnie Heiple, Commissioner, MDEP, Designee: Danah Tench; Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner, MDESE, Designee: Robert Leshin; Commissioner Jeffrey McCue, MDTA, Designee: Shelly Varny.

Legislative Members: Senator Joanne Comerford, Senator Ryan Fattman, Representative Daniel Donahue, Representative Hannah Kane.

Industry Members (appointed by the Governor): Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, Distribution; Farmer, Dave Dumaresq; Amanda Kinchla, M.S., Food Safety Extension Specialist, UMASS Amherst; Mackenzie May, (January), Margaret Moulton (December) Direct to consumer; Phoebe Walker, Local boards of health; John Waite, Food processor and handler; Ayn Yeagle, Public health. EEA Secretary appointed member: Caro Roszell, Soil Health.
Contact: Bonita Oehlke, MDAR, Bonita.Oehlke@mass.gov

Attachment A

Six meetings were held in 2024. Each meeting included updates from the Massachusetts Legislature's Food System Caucus (Caucus) and the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative's (Collaborative) Executive Director Kristina Pechulis and Policy Director Becca Miller. Meetings were typically held from 9:30 – 11:30 AM. Attendance ranged from 35 – 64. The Advisory Committee met six times. The Nominating Committee met twice.

The January, March, and September meetings were held remotely. Hybrid meetings were also held, with in-person and remote participation, in May, July, and December. The December hybrid annual meeting was held in Room 428 at the Massachusetts State House, thanks to Senator Comerford and staff Rachel Klein.

Meeting Summaries

Friday, January 12, 2024 The meeting was called to order by vice chair Mackenzie May. The Collaborative's legislative director reported on priority bills, important for resiliency, food security, climate change, workforce development, and supporting a robust local food system. The annual Food System Forum had 250 attendees, with up to half attending for the first time. DTA thanked food system advocates for HIP support. The administration is committed to full HIP funding in 2024. Senator Bruce Tarr was welcomed as a co-chair for the Caucus. The Caucus has been inspired by DESE's Tasty Tray program, universal school meals and the increasing focus on nutrition and its impact in our schools. The MA Farmland Action Plan is focused on implementation of key policy and program provisions. A motion passed to fill positions on the Nominating Committee. Potential bylaw changes were discussed. Local Food Policy Council grant awardee reports were from Mill City Grows, which developed policy recommendations and strengthened their capacity, and the Somerville Food Security Coalition, which updated their mission, values, and structure. MassDEP shared an update on food waste diversion, progress and trends, with impressive results. They offer compost site technical assistance, and grants to cities, towns and businesses managing food waste. The State Commission for Soil, Water and Related Resources will have ARPA funding for the Commonwealth's Healthy Soils Program.

March 15, 2024, Chair Randle called the meeting to order. The Caucus reported that the budget cycle is challenging due to decreases in tax revenue and increased costs. The Special Commission on Agriculture in the Commonwealth in the 21st Century worked with UMASS Extension to understand technical resources and support needed for farmers. Extension has been underfunded for their work in agriculture, important with increased climate disasters. This season's legislative maple tour was well attended. In the Housing Bond Bill, funding is included for climate technology which supports rural communities and aligns with food policy and farming. The Collaborative reported their support of funding for programs including HIP, FSIG and MA Farm to School, as well as a third round of grant funding for the Local Food Policy Council Grant program. The Collaborative's advocacy aligns with the Food System Caucus. Many items are included in Omnibus legislation filed previously including HIP enabling legislation, food waste, ag equity, APR, and a next generation farmer fund. The latest Ag Census show a continuing trend of losing farmland. Massachusetts had increases in ag value, direct sales, and young farmers. It also showed increases in ag tourism. MDAR is adding a Division of Food Security. The FSIG grant is moving to MDAR. EEA's Environmental Justice strategy was recently released. A consultant will identify workforce needs and launch a food systems and climate change program in 2025. MDAR launched an Agricultural Youth Council to explore their perception of barriers and opportunities to pursue an agricultural career. MDAR organized a first annual Agricultural Resource Fair. All Advisory Committee (AC) positions have been filled. The AC met with the Collaborative to discuss leveraging resources efficiently to build on existing work. Local Food Policy Council reports were shared by the City of Holyoke and the Town of Hudson who shared outcomes and lessons learned.

May 10, 2024 The meeting was called to order by Commissioner Randle. The Caucus discussed priority and endorsed bills. There was a 21st Century Ag Commission hearing. The Collaborative reported on the House Budget. Local Food Policy Council Grant budgets were not included or language for year-round operation for HIP. The Farmer Peer Support Network for mental health challenges has trainers across the state, including a BIPOC focus.

June is dairy month, and tours will be held across the state. MDAR is working with the MA Office of Travel and Tourism and the MA Dairy Promotion Board to develop an Ice Cream Trail. Work continues on the “Make Hunger History” project, led by Project Bread, a continuation of Congressman McGovern’s priority to end hunger in the Commonwealth. The Advisory Committee is fully populated. They met with the Collaborative’s local food policy council community of practice. Local Food Policy Council reports were from Mystic Valley YMCA, and the Boston Food Access Council. The grant funding has been critical to reach strategic goals. DESE reported on several successful programs. “MA Fresh” awards for schools zeroed in on food literacy, farm field trips, inviting a farmer to the classroom, and investing in their food service. Massachusetts is ranked #1 in the nation for healthiest school meals. The Senate plans to continue to fund free and universal meals, an investment in our students. Regarding hemp-derived THC, there are many products that are illegal but remain commercially available. Regulatory guidance is being discussed. American Farmland Trust is working closely with partners to strengthen healthy soils work.

July 12, 2024 The meeting was called to order by Chair Randle. Caucus members reported on legislative food systems priorities, including food donation. The Caucus held a briefing with the Greater Boston Food Bank and others to support the “Make Hunger History” campaign. The Senate passed several provisions in the Economic Development Bill. The Collaborative thanked legislators for their work and encouraged continued advocacy. The Council was reminded of the one-year anniversary of the floods here, and the creation of the Massachusetts Natural Disaster Recovery program. Resiliency in the food system is critical. The Cannabis Control Commission, DPH, and MDAR developed joint guidance, important for local boards of health. Farmers Market Week, and for the first time, Urban Agriculture Week, focused on site visits across the state. The Bylaws Committee discussed issues requiring legislative support, and those that do not. The Advisory Committee met with the Collaborative to discuss complementary work. The Local Food Policy Grant report included the City of Chelsea, who used funding to support strategic food system planning. Cape Cod Cooperative Extension also presented. Their funding helped to assess food system needs for five towns of the Cape. A process for the Council to create legislative letters of support was discussed. DESE shared a two-year review of school funded meals which reflects increased student participation, a strong ROI on state funds with universal meals, and an explosion of farm to school activities. DTA worked with DESE for a new EBT program to support food purchases through the summer. DTA shared their concern about less money for HIP, putting the state in a precarious position moving forward. MDAR’s Farmers Market Spanish language program had strong participation and positive feedback. The Massachusetts Ice Cream Trail was launched!

September 13, 2024 The meeting was called to order by Chair Randle. The Caucus shared a HIP update. DTA thanked HIP advocates, and shared disappointment that funding was reduced. Congressman McGovern hosted farm tours for legislators and the press. Council members and partners advocated for local food to be included in the mission statement of “Make Hunger History.” Though it wasn’t included, local food is considered a pillar of the program. The Special Commission on Agriculture in the Commonwealth in the 21st Century’s report is close to being complete. The Collaborative discussed priority bills, including those in the Economic Development Bill. MA Farm to School and DESE hosted twelve USDA officials to see the outcomes of the Local Food Promotion Program, who were impressed by the testimonials and impacts. A committee is exploring how the Council can write letters of support for legislative action. Danah Tench is leaving the Council after eight years and was recognized for her leadership and support of the Council. MDAR has a new Farmland Action Plan Coordinator. Farmers Market Week was successful with USDA visits to markets with SNAP and HIP benefits. MDAR released a Ten-Year Urban Agriculture [Report](#). A motion passed to add positions for the Division of Marine Fisheries and UMASS Extension, and to amend the statutory language to allow for compensation for the Advisory Committee. Changes to bylaw language which the Council can approve also passed. The Advisory Committee met with MassDEP to discuss food waste. A Local Food Policy Council report was from Mill City Grows, who also discussed Health and Flex Services programs and impacts for small farmers. The Massachusetts Food Trust was discussed by the Local Enterprise Assistance Fund and Franklin County CDC, who summarized the past six years including successes to create jobs, and address food access and insecurity. DESE’s partnership with DTA for summer EBT has shown significant benefits for Massachusetts youth.

December 4, 2024 Chair Randle presided over the hybrid meeting held at the Massachusetts State House. She welcomed legislators and their staff and thanked them for their support. The Caucus highlighted the progress of priority bills, as did the Collaborative. Special recognition was given to Legislative Joint Committee on Agriculture Co-Chair, Representative Paul Schmid. A slate for the open Advisory Committee positions, the Bylaw Committee, and Letters of Support Committee were accepted. New Council members Margaret Moulton, direct to consumer; and Dave Dumaresq, farmer, were welcomed. All Council seats are filled. The program featured state, federal, and partner grants showing impacts for the long-term viability and sustainability of the Massachusetts local food system, strengthening food security, and ensuring equitable access to healthy food including: (MDAR) [Farmers Market Sustainability Grant Program](#), Gardner Farmers Market; (USDA) [Local Food Purchase Assistance](#), Boston Area Gleaners; (MDAR) [Food Security Infrastructure Grant](#), Berkshire Grown/Off the Shelf Farm, Great Barrington and (DMF) Red's Best, Boston; (MDEP) [Massachusetts Gap Energy Grant Program](#); Elliott Farm, Lakeville; and (USDA) [Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program](#) Worcester Regional Food Hub. A motion was passed for full funding of the HIP program. The meeting was followed by a MA Grown & Fresher networking reception, taking advantage of in-person participation to re-connect over refreshments.

Addendums: (forthcoming)

Massachusetts Legislative Food System Caucus
Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection
Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education