

Joint Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries

Bill Summary

Bill Number:	H.112
Title:	An Act fostering agricultural resilience in Massachusetts
Sponsor:	Representative Blais of Deerfield
Cosponsors:	Representatives Sabadosa of Northampton, Domb of Amherst, Ultrino of Malden, Sena of Acton, Uytterhoeven of Somerville, Kane of Shrewsbury, Montaña of Boston, Elliott of Lowell, Gentile of Sudbury, Arena-DeRosa of Holliston, Higgins of Leominster, Zlotnik of Gardner, Moran of Boston, Connolly of Cambridge, and Scarsdale of Pepperell; Senators Comerford and Rausch
Hearing Date:	Tuesday, September 16, 2025 at 10:00 PM - 01:00 PM, B-1
Reporting Date:	Saturday, November 15th, 2025
Similar Matters:	S.55 (Senator Comerford - Identical)

Prior History

New file; No prior history

Current Law

Chapter 6A of the Massachusetts General Laws relates to Executive Offices and their functions.

Chapter 20 of the Massachusetts General Laws establishes the Department of Food and Agriculture (now the Department of Agricultural Resources – MDAR). Section 6C of chapter 20 creates, enables, and details the membership of the Massachusetts Food Policy Council. Section 23 of chapter 20 relates to the agricultural preservation restriction program. Section 24 of chapter 20 relates to the agricultural lands preservation committee.

Chapter 29 of the Massachusetts General Laws establishes the General fund and many special funds.

Chapter 30B of the Massachusetts General Laws relates to governmental bodies. Section 20 of chapter 30B relates to the preference for agricultural products produced in the Commonwealth by governmental bodies.

Chapter 40A of the Massachusetts General Laws relates to zoning. Section 3 of chapter 40A relates to which subjects zoning may not regulate and zoning exceptions and hearings.

Chapter 61A of the Massachusetts General Laws relates to the assessment and taxation of agricultural and horticultural land. Section 2A of chapter 61A relates to land used to generate renewable energy. Section 14 of chapter 61A relates to the sale or conversion of land, notice of intent to a city or town, and option to purchase.

Chapter 75 of the Massachusetts General Laws relates to the University of Massachusetts. The board consists of a designee of the president of the university, a designee of the chancellor of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the commissioner of food and agriculture or his designee and the following persons to be appointed by the governor: four members of the Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation, Inc. chosen from a list of 12 members submitted by said federation; one member of the Massachusetts 4-H Foundation, Inc. chosen from a list of three members submitted by said organization; one member of the State 4-H advisory committee chosen from a list of three members submitted by said committee; one member of the Massachusetts Forestry Association chosen from a list of three members submitted by said association; one member of the Massachusetts Audubon Society chosen from a list of three members submitted by said society; two members of the Massachusetts Arborists Association chosen from a list of five members submitted by said association and one member of the Massachusetts Nutrition Board chosen from a list of three members submitted by said board. The chancellor of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst shall appoint the chairperson from among the membership of the board.

Chapter 128 of the Massachusetts General Laws relates to agriculture.

Summary

Section 1 of the bill directs the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) to develop an emergency preparedness plan to support agriculture, seafood and food production in all emergency preparedness planning efforts. The plan would be coordinated with the Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR), Department of Public Health (DPH), and Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA). The plan must consider factors such as food production, storage, distribution, and transportation and it must be updated every 5 years.

Section 2 of the bill requires the Massachusetts Food Policy Council to hire a full-time food system coordinator as an employee. The food system coordinator would serve in an advisory capacity to all relevant departments to inventory existing state programs which relate to the food system across state agencies. The coordinator must submit a report 1 week prior to each council meeting with findings, progress updates and recommendations to the house and senate clerks, the council, and relevant department secretaries and commissioners.

Section 3 of the bill defines the term “local food” and declares that MDAR and DTA must maximize the amount of local food that is distributed through state food assistance programs. This section also directs that MDAR, in collaboration with the 4 regional food banks, the Executive Office Elder Affairs, DTA, the Department of Higher Education and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to report on the distribution of local food through state food assistance programs annually. The report will include the quantity of local food distributed (by dollar value, percentage of food distributed, and by weight), a breakdown of the types of food distributed (ex: meat, dairy, produce), the quantity of local food distributed by state food assistance programs (ex: Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program, Healthy Incentives Program, Universal School Meals), recommendations on how Massachusetts can increase the amount of local food distributed through state food assistance programs in future fiscal years while maintaining affordability, and policy and budgetary recommendations for implementation of the report.

Section 4 of the bill requires that land being appraised for an agricultural preservation restriction is assessed at a value that includes easements and infrastructure on the parcel. Infrastructure includes dwellings, structures, plumbing and irrigation systems.

Section 5 defines the terms “agricultural preservation restriction” and “farm viability.” This section directs the agricultural lands preservation committee to create annual and long-term goals for enrolling land as an agricultural preservation restriction (APR). The goals must consider acreage, farm viability, soil health, carbon sequestration, infrastructure, access to markets, access to land ownership for historically marginalized communities, environmental justice principles, and vulnerability to being turned into a non-agricultural use. The draft goals will have a 60-day public comment period, and the goals will be updated every 5 years.

The committee will publish an additional annual report to evaluate their progress to meet the goals that are set. This report will include the number of acres and total number of farms enrolled in an APR during the past year and the total number of acres and total number of farms enrolled in an APR in the Commonwealth, the geographic distribution of farms in an APR, challenges to enrolling new land in APR, plans for the following year, budgetary, and statutory changes to meet the goals in the other aforementioned report. The committee must annually submit a copy of the report to both House and Senate Clerks, House and Senate Ways and Means Committee, the Joint Committee on Agriculture and

the Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources. The report will be posted on MDAR's website.

Section 6 codifies the Food Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) program. The program grants financial assistance to food producers, processors, distributors, community and food organizations, school meal programs, urban farms, community gardens, and nonprofit food security organizations. This section allows grantees to purchase new or used equipment, cover labor costs in order to implement projects, and cover costs associated with planning and design directly related to projects that will help strengthen and improve the resiliency of the local food system.

Section 7 establishes the Next Generation Farmers Fund administered by the secretary of Labor & Workforce Development, in consultation with the secretary of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and the Secretary of Education. The fund gives grants to institutions of higher education, vocational technical schools, or community-based organizations that have existing workforce training programs for first time farmers or have the capacity to create such programs.

The fund will be credited with \$3,000,000 annually from the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund. Priority consideration will be given to programs that serve a high percentage of historically underserved or low-income students, including students with disabilities. Priority consideration will also be given to programs that include hands-on training and training in agricultural practices that protect the environment and mitigate climate change.

No less than \$3,000,000 annually will go to programs that provide training in agriculture and no more than \$1,000,000 shall be granted annually to programs providing training in the growing and harvesting of forest products.

Section 8 requires that Massachusetts governmental bodies must purchase agricultural products grown or produced in the Commonwealth unless the price of the agricultural goods exceeds 20 percent of the price of agricultural products grown or produced outside of the Commonwealth. This provision increases the percentage in the original law from 10 percent to 20 percent.

Section 9 provides that zoning ordinances and by-laws cannot prohibit or unreasonably regulate agritourism.

Section 10 inserts the word agritourism into this section and clarifies the term should be used as defined in Section 1B of chapter 128.

Section 11 allows for agritourism activities to take place on land not zoned for agritourism as long as the land's primary purpose is for the use of commercial agriculture, aquaculture, silviculture, horticulture, floriculture, or viticulture.

Section 12 defines the term "farmland" and "farm viability." The bill requires MDAR, in consultation with the Department of Energy Resources (DOER), to review the restrictions on the amount of renewable energy allowed to be generated on farmland at least every 10 years and its relation to farm viability. Farm viability is defined as the financial and environmental ability of a farm to remain in operation and produce crops over the short- and long-term. The review would consider any amendment to statutory, regulatory, and deed-based restrictions that may be needed concerning the amount of renewable energy allowed to be generated on farmland. MDAR will consider if alternatives such as modernized farm management practices could achieve the same or similar improvements in farm viability in their considerations. MDAR will also consider the promotion of healthy soils, biodiversity,

environmental sustainability, and the Commonwealth's renewable energy goals. MDAR must issue recommendations for any amendments to said restrictions, this includes land under chapter 61A and land in the APR program.

Section 13 allows MDAR the right of first refusal for purchasing agricultural and horticultural land, should a city or town not exercise its option. MDAR will have the option to purchase land at the full and fair market value as determined by a certified appraiser. Land purchased by MDAR will maintain at least 70% of the land as forest, agricultural, horticultural, or recreational land.

Section 14 directs the Department of Revenue (DOR), in consultation with MDAR, to establish and maintain a registry of all agricultural and horticultural land in the Commonwealth. DOR will ensure the data from the central registry will annually be integrated into a publicly accessible, interactive map.

The registry will include in total and in each municipality the number of parcels and acres of agricultural and horticultural land, the number of parcels and acres of agricultural and horticultural land enrolled in Chapter 61A and taxed at the reduced rate outlined in that chapter, the number of parcels of agricultural and horticultural land that are enrolled or unenrolled from Chapter 61A that year and the percentage of all cropland, as reported in the most recent United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Census of Agriculture, that is enrolled in Chapter 61A.

DOR and MDAR will integrate the data from the central registry into a publicly accessible and interactive map. The map will have the data at the individual parcel and municipal level. The map will be able to be overlaid with existing maps of soil conditions and types.

Section 15 adds members to the UMass Extension Board of Public Overseers. These additions will be two members from the Senate (one majority and one minority), two members from the House of Representatives (one majority and one minority), one member of a Buy Local organization, one member from the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative, one member from an urban farming organization, and two members from organizations that support historically marginalized or new entry farmers and food producers. 10 members of the board will have to be present to form a quorum. Appointed members will serve a term of 5 years. A member appointed to fill vacancy will serve for the expired term. On behalf of the board, UMass may receive, manage, and disburse grants and donations for the purpose of funding UMass Extension and agricultural research programs.

Section 16 adds the definition of "agritourism." It allows agritourism to be conducted on land primarily used for agriculture, aquaculture, silviculture, horticulture, floriculture, or viticulture. It allows agritourism activities to be conducted on land not primarily used for these purposes as long as 75% of land acreage is dedicated to agriculture, 50% of the agricultural product produced on that land is utilized in agritourism activities, 25% of gross annual income results from the sale of products due to agritourism activities, at least an additional 50% of gross annual income come from products produced on the land or on land in Massachusetts which is primarily used for these purposes.

Section 17 directs the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), in consultation with the Division of Insurance and MDAR, to conduct a study to gather information on state social safety net programs available to farmers. The study will identify challenges that farmers face when applying for, qualifying for and maintaining coverage and make recommendations for how the state can amend current programs or create new programs to support farmers. Recommendations from the study will include solutions/strategies for increasing access to MassHealth coverage for farmers, increasing access to premium assistance payments or point-of-service cost-sharing subsidies for farmers through the

Commonwealth health insurance connector authority, mitigating the MassHealth cliff effect for farmers, providing pension or state retirement coverage to farmers and meeting the differing needs of farmer populations, including urban farmers, rural farmers and farmers from historically underserved communities.

Section 18 requires the emergency preparedness plan to support agriculture in Section 1 be completed no later than one year after the effective date of this act.

Section 19 requires MDAR to implement the change in the FSIG program provision in Section 6 no later than 120 days after the effective date of this act

Section 20 requires the first report regarding the amount of renewable energy allowed on farmland executed by MDAR in Section 12 of this act shall be complete and submitted no later than 6 months after the effective date of this act.

Section 21 requires that the registry and map in Section 14 will be posted on the Department of Revenue's website no later than 9 months after the effective date of this act.