



July 1, 2021

Joint Committee on Revenue  
Massachusetts State House  
24 Beacon Street  
Rooms 109E & 34  
Boston MA 02133

RE:

- H2810: An Act relative to non-contiguous farm land
- H3059: An Act relative to expanding agricultural land

Dear Chairs Hinds and Cusack, and members of the Committee:

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this written testimony in support of modifying Chapter 61A in order to accommodate changes in farming that have taken place in the 50 years since its enactment. Development pressures, advances in technology, and other factors have resulted in an increase in the number of farmers stewarding small parcels of land in the Commonwealth, and these farms are a critical element of our local food system, the state's local economy, our collective goals to improve public health, and our environment and natural resources. These bills represent positive steps to support small parcel farming.

These bills also represent a step toward addressing racial equity in our local food system. As a result of systemic discrimination, most Black, indigenous, and other historically disadvantaged farmers have more limited resources than their white counterparts, and so are financially only able to farm smaller parcels of land. Providing access to the tax reductions now afforded the 98% of the state's farmers who are white to farmers of color is essential.

While H3059 provides a solution for farms that own multiple parcels that total more than five acres, we support the removal of the language requiring that these parcels be dedicated to a "unified operation," as it may be interpreted to exclude owners who rent a portion of their land to other farmers from eligibility. Renting land to other farmers is a common part of farm operations. It is a practice that allows BIPOC and young and beginning farmers to begin farming and to develop food access programs in underserved communities. The "unified operation" language could place these farmers at a disadvantage by limiting access to rental farmland.

While the individual impact of this legislation on the owner of farmland that is under 5 acres will be significant and supportive, the total tax revenue generated by a municipality would not decline as a result of the land's enrollment in 61A since the overall levy would not change. In addition, studies of farmland taxes versus the costs of services provided by municipalities

consistently demonstrate that the net revenue to a municipality from farmland is greater than that from developed land, and as such can help stabilize municipal finances in the long term.

The Collaborative is a network of Massachusetts food system organizations, working to promote, monitor, and facilitate implementation of the 2015 Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan. The Plan was developed for and accepted by the Massachusetts Food Policy Council, a 17-member entity comprising state agency, legislative, and industry representatives, established by the Legislature and Governor to develop recommendations, including legislative and regulatory changes, to promote sustainability, equity, and resilience in the Commonwealth's food system.

The Plan includes the recommendation: "Enact legislation to expand Chapter 61A eligibility to parcels smaller than 5 acres. Consider requiring an increase in the value of production threshold on smaller parcels to ensure that those parcels are being actively used for commercial agriculture." Five years later, the Collaborative's report *Massachusetts' Local Food System: Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery*, based on input from hundreds of organizations and farmers throughout the Commonwealth, reinforced the Plan's recommendation. These bills, with the above-suggested change in H3059, explicitly addresses this goal, and we urge its passage.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Winton Pitcoff', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Winton Pitcoff  
Director