



July 9, 2021

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

RE: S1822 An Act supporting the Commonwealth's Farmers

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

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this written testimony regarding S1822 An Act supporting the Commonwealth's Farmers

This bill offers vital support to Massachusetts farmers, who the USDA reports earn 96 cents for every dollar they spend in producing food. The bill addresses issues that were exacerbated by the COVID crisis and would represent significant steps toward a more secure and effective food supply through our local food system.

In particular, we offer support for the following sections:

SECTION 1: Establishing a circuit rider position within MDAR would provide added capacity for the state to educate and help local producers navigate increasingly complex state programs and regulations. Critically, our farmers' role in addressing climate change is significant and multifaceted, and extensive education and guidance navigating and supporting the state's efforts is needed. This staff resource has been identified as a critical gap since conversations about establishing a state food policy council began some 15 years ago, and was a recommendation in the 2015 Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan.

SECTION 3: The Plan also identified establishing an agricultural workforce development program as a top priority. Doing so is critical to recovery from the COVID crisis and to long-term food system resilience and food security. Massachusetts farmers have the highest average age in the US, and training the next generation of farmers to be responsible stewards of the land and environment, while at the same time ensuring they have the skills they need to operate economically sustainable operations, is vital.

SECTION 4: Many farms are diversifying into producing value-added products from their crops to meet consumer demand and generate additional revenue. Still more are selling crops and value-added products directly to consumers at on-farm farmstands. This section clarifies the

language of Chapter 61A to allow land devoted to such enterprises to be taxed at agricultural rates, reducing costs and helping sustain farms.

SECTIONS 5 and 6: Development pressures, advances in technology, and other forces 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. This section supports small farms by extending eligibility for Chapter 61A to those that manage multiple parcels that total five acres or more. We support the removal of the language related to a "unified purpose" in order to allow land owners to rent parcels to other farmers, often a critical element of farm sustainability for both the owner and tenant.

SECTION 7: As we learned during the COVID pandemic, being prepared to feed residents of the Commonwealth in times of crisis is critical. This means not only having plans to distribute food, but also considering how to best utilize the state's food production capacity. This language will help ensure food security in the Commonwealth in future crises.

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 supports the above sections of this legislation, as does the Collaborative's report *Massachusetts' Local Food System: Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery*, published during the COVID crisis and based on input from hundreds of organizations and farmers throughout the Commonwealth.

The Collaborative is available to provide additional information and connections to practitioners and advocates who can offer specific insights on this legislation, at the pleasure of the Committee.

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 stroke extending to the right.

Winton Pitcoff
Director