



July 6, 2021

Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture
24 Beacon St.
Room 218 and Room 473F
Boston, MA 02133

RE: S539/H858 An Act regarding a farmland protection and viability action plan

Dear Chairs Rauch and Dykema, and members of the committee:

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this testimony in support of S539/H858 An Act regarding a farmland protection and viability action plan.

For generations, concerns about the loss of farmland in Massachusetts and its impact on residents' food security and food costs have prompted numerous legislative initiatives seeking to slow or prevent the conversion of farmland to other uses. These initiatives resulted in creating the Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program, the Chapter 61A program and, for a time, the Department of Land Management within the MA Department of Food and Agriculture, now MDAR, along with other grant programs and supportive regulations.

While these programs have helped slow the conversion of farmland, the Commonwealth has still lost 110,000 acres since 1974, fully 18% of Massachusetts' farmland. Between 2012 and 2017 an average of 122 acres a week, or about two farms of the state's average farm size were lost. Farmers consistently report that limited availability of and access to land is one of the key barriers to their success.

Despite having aggregate numbers for Massachusetts as a whole from USDA, a lack of reliable geo-located data regarding farmland trends prevents the development and tracking of meaningful targets around farmland retention, protection, and access. And while there are a number of laws, programs, and regulations intended to help maintain our agricultural land base, these often do not coordinate with each other, leading to missed opportunities to leverage shared resources toward common goals.

Along with showing the vulnerabilities and inequities of our food system, the COVID pandemic has increased outmigration from cities to rural areas, putting even greater pressure on farmland. The state's Rural Policy Plan predicts an additional threat to farmland as the result of population migration due to climate change. And farmland continues to be converted to solar arrays across the state as part of meeting the Commonwealth's goals on greenhouse gas emission reductions and other curbs to climate change.

These trends and projections are evidence of the need for a comprehensive farmland plan that accounts for competing uses and priorities for farmland in order to maximize the benefits to the state's residents of some of the state's most precious and limited resources: farmland and the food it produces. A plan is needed to help set goals for how the state will protect farmland and help keep it available to farmers, to develop policy recommendations for achieving those goals, and to set benchmarks and develop metrics to track progress toward those goals.

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 development of a farmland action plan was first proposed by the Local Food Action Plan, a recommendation reinforced in 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 MA Food System Collaborative urges passage of S539/H858, and recommends that the Committee consider this as emergency legislation given the dramatic impacts of the recent pandemic.

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 line extending to the right.

Winton Pitcoff
Director