



Monday, March 30, 2020

## **Farm and Fishery Policy Recommendations in Response to COVID-19**

On Friday, March 27, the MA Food System Collaborative facilitated a telephone meeting with representatives of several groups representing local food producers from around the Commonwealth, and the co-chairs of the legislature's Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture, Senator Anne Gobi and Representative Smitty Pignatelli. The conversation was an opportunity for the co-chairs to hear concerns from these producers, particularly as those concerns relate to the need for supportive policy and investment during the current public health crisis.

Due to an abrupt decrease in sales for many as a result of the response to the COVID-19 outbreak, food producers are in financial crisis. With the closing of restaurants, schools, farmers markets, and institutions that were reliable purchasers of their products, the majority of producers have lost critical markets, and a number of segments have lost 100% of their markets. This leaves these producers with product they have no way of selling, and an inability to plan for future production, given the uncertainty of the duration of the measures that have been taken to ensure public health and safety. Since these businesses remain a critical part of Massachusetts' response to the crisis, and will play a vital role in the Commonwealth's recovery, a range of supports are needed to ensure their viability.

In recent years the Commonwealth has developed and promoted a vibrant local agricultural economy, one that is well-suited to playing an integral role in feeding Massachusetts during a crisis. Farmers and fishers are stepping up, investing their own resources in preparing for the coming seasons to ensure that they will have products for their customers. But they are doing so in a climate of uncertainty, not knowing what markets will be open to them and through what channels they may be able to sell their products.

What food producers need most right now is stable, clear, consistent, and fair rules, regulations, and supports to guide their production, their workforce management, their safety practices, and their investments of capital. We urge policymakers to involve regulated and impacted stakeholders in developing laws and guidance, to ensure that new issuances are clear, actionable, feasible, and reasonable. The Collaborative will continue to help facilitate communication between policymakers and stakeholders, and will urge stakeholders to engage directly as well.

The following recommendations were prioritized during the March 27 conversation.

### **Financial needs**

First and foremost, food businesses need funding. Financial support should first be in the form of grants, as food businesses tend to operate on little to no margin. Acquiring debt to cover lost

sales places their viability in jeopardy. If loans are made available they should be at zero interest and offer long terms for payment. The application process for any grants or loans for food producers should not be burdensome, and quick turnaround of response and payment should be a top priority. This funding should be available to farmers and fishers of all sizes, particularly small-scale producers.

Deadlines and requirements for existing loans and grants from the state should be eased.

## **Workforce issues**

The crisis is affecting farms' and fishers' ability to maintain a stable workforce. Uncertainty around the ability of H-2A workers to travel leaves many farms short handed at a critical time of the growing season, and there are concerns about potential shortages due to health outbreaks sidelining workers. Mass Hire should prioritize training farmworkers, perhaps targeting opportunities to recently displaced restaurant workers.

Any individuals requiring work visas seeking on-farm employment should be eligible for H-2A program enrollment or comparable agricultural visa for farms in Massachusetts.

Farmers and fishers need ongoing technical assistance, but have lost a key resource as UMass Extension staff are currently prohibited from visiting farms or working on the state research farms. These restrictions should be lifted by classifying these professionals as essential workers.

Farmers and fishers need clear information about their obligations under changing workforce requirements, such as the need to offer workers paid sick leave and the implementation of new food safety measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Targeted resources must be developed to ensure that food producers understand these new rules, and financial supports must be offered to help them comply.

In order to ensure a consistent and safe food chain, priority should be given to food system workers for free testing for COVID-19 exposure and antibodies.

## **Regulations and guidance**

As farmers markets, farmstands, and other direct-to-consumer points of sale have been declared 'essential' in the same category as traditional grocery stores, regulations for these vendors should not be more restrictive than those for the brick-and-mortar retailers, particularly around how food is displayed and handled during sale. Such restrictions place unnecessary and inequitable burdens on small producers, and project the false impression that local food is less safe than other produce. Clarity on these regulations needs to be resolved soon, before the traditional farmers market season begins in early spring.

Clear guidance needs to be developed on how to transfer food safely throughout the food chain, while reducing human-to-human contact. Clear and consistent guidance concerning the powers of local boards of health and how that relates to state priorities as expressed by executive orders and emergency legislation must also be provided.

The list of essential businesses should be updated to include community gardens, which are often a primary source of fresh healthy food in communities underserved by traditional retailers and with a population that is particularly vulnerable to dietary related disease, and to garden centers and nurseries, which provide needed supplies to farmers, especially during the planting season.

Availability of local foods purchased using SNAP and HIP must be expanded to include online ordering for delivery and pickup.

State programs and institutions that purchase food, including the emergency food system, must prioritize the purchase of products produced by Massachusetts farmers and fishers.

### **Additional supports**

As direct-to-consumer vendors innovate to implement new methods of distribution, state support should include technical assistance and guidance related to keeping food and employees safe when developing online ordering and delivery services. In instances where farms need to pivot from direct-to-consumer models to wholesale sales, the state should offer technical assistance in the form of aggregation and distribution services.

More local food producers, including those who are selling through delivery, should be able to receive SNAP payments and offer HIP incentives, particularly as unemployment rises and household SNAP enrollment increases.

Funding should be made available for farmers markets to cover costs of infrastructure - such as hand-washing stations - needed to ensure public safety under distancing guidelines, along with the cost of additional staff to help monitor and enforce safe behavior.

The state should prioritize keeping a current, accessible list of where and how to purchase food directly from local producers, and should communicate availability of that list through a public marketing campaign. That communication should also reinforce the message that the local food system is safe.

The state should offer support for processing infrastructure to facilitate preserving and storing locally produced food that is temporarily unable to be sold fresh due to loss of markets.

The state must monitor and maintain markets to ensure that local producers are not negatively impacted by price-gouging and unfair marketing practices.

*Groups that presented on the March 27 call included: New England Vegetable and Berry Growers, Massachusetts Fruit Growers Association, Central Mass Grown, Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA), Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership (SEMAP), World Farmers, Massachusetts Aquaculture Association, Massachusetts Lobstermen's Association, and Massachusetts Farmers Markets.*