

Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan

The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) has begun the process of developing a Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan to address the farmland needs and goals of the Commonwealth.

Farms are Critical for the Commonwealth's Future

To preserve the resilience of our agricultural economy and food system in a changing climate, there is a pressing need to expand the number of farms and farmland acres that are protected throughout the Commonwealth, not only through the state programs but also by municipalities, non-profits, and federal agencies. It is also critically important to ensure that farm businesses operating on protected farmland are viable and are provided with the greatest chance of success at producing food both in difficult economic times and in the face of a changing climate.

Challenges to Protecting Farmland

Strong development pressure and high land values are challenges to protecting farmland. Climate change; soil degradation; a shortage of land for all farmers including for new, historically underserved, beginning farmers, and urban farmers; aging farm operators without identified successors; management transitions; market changes; land access and affordability for beginning farmers; and high production costs, are all challenges to farm viability.

Need for a Plan

Recent significant statewide planning efforts point to the need for a broader approach to farmland protection that increases the pace of farmland protection, focuses on priorities to ensure productive land stays in agriculture, ensures an economically and biologically viable farming sector that is accessible to new farmers, is socially just, and is resilient in the face of climate change.

Building upon the goals and recommendations of recent plans, we can produce a unified vision and plan for farmland protection that complements and enhances the food security, climate resiliency, and environmental justice efforts that are already underway.

Goals of the MA Farmland Action Plan

The Plan will outline key goals and recommendations, and provide a roadmap to overcome challenges and increase farmland protection, farmland access, food security, and the long-term economic and environmental viability of farms across all regions of the state. The plan will:

- identify a multi-year strategy until 2050
- set measurable goals related to farmland protection, farmland viability, and social justice for all populations including historically underserved or disenfranchised populations in the agricultural sector
- recommend strategies and state spending and resources need to meet those goals.
- create measurement tools by which progress will be monitored according to project goals

How will the Plan be Developed?

This planning process will include research on current conditions and trends, current support programs and policies, and a summary of recent relevant recommendations of statewide plans. A multi-faceted stakeholder engagement process will focus on engaging farmers, food producers, advocates, investors, landowners, land trusts, agricultural technical assistance providers, scientists, public officials, policy makers, and agricultural

stakeholders and others positioned to lead farmland protection changes to inform development of the plan. Subject Matter Experts will be engaged to provide feedback and advise on the planning and development process.

MDAR has contracted with the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) to conduct and manage the research and facilitate a public input and planning process to develop the Plan. UMDI is partnering with the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative and American Farmland Trust New England Team in this effort. UMDI and Massachusetts Food System Collaborative each played key roles in leading and managing two recent statewide plans upon which this effort is built - the Resilient Lands Initiative and the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan. American Farmland Trust published the landmark *Farms Under Threat: A New England Perspective*. All three will conduct research and engage stakeholders across the state to develop the plan, as follows:

Phase I. Project Kick-off and Convene Subject Matter Expert Advisory Group

- Task 1. Identify and convene Subject Matter Experts.

Phase II. Review & Research Existing Statewide Plans, Work and Policies, Trends

- Task 2. Develop current conditions reports on MA trends in farmland.
- Task 3. Develop and compile maps and analyze data on historic trends in Massachusetts farmland and agricultural production.
- Task 4. Develop overview of state policies, agricultural support programs, and investments, including their impacts
- Task 5. Review, summarize, and synthesize goals and recommendations made in recent statewide plans and initiatives.

Phase III. Cross-sector Stakeholder Engagement

- Task 6. Conduct Listening Sessions, Focus Groups and In-depth Interviews, Summarize
- Task 7. Host Action Planning Summit to develop elements of the Strategic Action Plan

Phase IV: Development of Strategic Action Plan

- Task 8. Draft, gather feedback on, and finalize the Farmland Action Plan

Phase V: Development of Plan to Support Monitor & Implementation

- Task 9. Determine private and state resources and spending levels needed to implement the plan and meet the plan's goals.
- Task 10. Develop a plan to support and monitor implementation through 2050.

Timeline: Research, listening sessions, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews will be conducted during the winter of 2021-22, with an anticipated plan completion in June, 2022.

Subject Matter Advisory Group

A group of subject matter experts and key informants representing a broad cross-section of engaged farmland stakeholders will be engaged as an advisory group.

These individuals will:

- Review list of datasets, map, plans and past recommendations and suggest anything missing
- Identify individuals and organizations to be included in stakeholder engagement
- Help to develop key questions to pose to participants during the engagement process

For questions or additional information, please contact Sonia Bouvier, Project Manager with UMDI at sbouvier@donahue.umass.edu or Gerard Kennedy, MDAR's Director for the Division of Agricultural Conservation and Technical Assistance at gerard.kennedy@mass.gov.