



May 8, 2023

Joint Committee on Agriculture
Massachusetts State House, Room 413-A
24 Beacon Street
Boston MA 02133

RE:

S.42 / H.88 An Act strengthening local food systems
H.92 An act supporting the Commonwealth's food system
H.99 An Act relative to the Massachusetts Food Policy Council
S.41 / H.87 An Act promoting equity in agriculture

Dear Chairs Gobi and Schmid, and members of the Committee:

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this written testimony regarding the above bills.

Massachusetts farmers contribute to the Commonwealth's food security, to our local economy, to our goals of protecting natural resources and mitigating the impacts of climate change, and to our culture. They do so against remarkable challenges.

In a period roughly spanning the 20th century Massachusetts went from being 80% farmland, to about 10%. Between 2007 and 2017 we converted an average of more than four acres of farmland per day to other uses, totaling nearly 16,000 acres of land that will never grow food again. This weakens our food security, and makes the remaining farmland more expensive – Massachusetts farmland averages \$13,700 per acre, with a 21% increase in price between 2020 and 2021 alone.

For the farms that remain, economic sustainability is tenuous, at best. Massachusetts farmers earn 96 cents for every dollar they spend on producing food. That's because the costs of land, of energy, and of other inputs are higher here than anywhere else in the country. But farmers can't just adjust their prices to account for that because we don't produce enough in the state to feed ourselves, so our farmers have to compete with the lower prices in the supermarkets that are set by the global supply chain.

And Massachusetts is a case study of the impacts of climate change on agriculture. In just the last few years the growing seasons have alternated between drought and floods resulting in crop loss, deep freezes that have damaged many perennial crops, and warmer than average summers and winters that are changing our region's suitability for some of the crops most associated with Massachusetts. Farmers are experiencing new destructive invasive species and disease brought on by the changing climate as well.

And the inequities in farming – an industry that was built on the structure of slavery and dispossession – are still evident in Massachusetts. People of color make up 29% of the state’s population, but are represented on only 2.3% of the Commonwealth’s farms, and those farms tend to be the smallest and most vulnerable ones.

To help address these and other challenges, thoughtful policy is needed to address structural challenges facing the state’s food system. These bills do so in some very fundamental ways.

S.42 / H.88 An Act strengthening local food systems

This bill offers vital support to Massachusetts farmers, addressing issues exacerbated by the COVID crisis and representing significant steps toward a more secure and effective food supply through our local food system.

SECTION 1: As we learned during the COVID pandemic, being prepared to feed residents of the Commonwealth during emergencies 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, leveraging the assets of our local food producers.

SECTION 2: Many state agencies play roles in supporting and regulating the food system, but because of limited communication between them some of these efforts are duplicative, inefficient, or even contradictory. The establishment of the Governor’s Food Security Task Force during the pandemic, and the Massachusetts Food Policy Council more than 10 years ago, demonstrates a recognition of the need for coordination, and their successes point to the value of such work. This bill will establish a state food system coordinator position to serve in an advisory capacity to all agencies to coordinate and inventory food programs, and develop and track metrics related to food system goals.

SECTION 3: 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 4: Massachusetts’ Agricultural Preservation Restriction program has permanently protected more than 75,000 acres of land, ensuring that this land will stay in agricultural production in perpetuity. This bill will provide for more equitable compensation for farmers who choose to sell agricultural easements to enroll in the program, by allowing for improvements on the parcel to be valued at fair market value. Doing so will encourage more farmers to participate in the program, allowing the state to protect more farmland.

SECTION 5: When farms become available for purchase, the seller often wants to move quickly in disposing of their property. Those transactions can lead to the loss of productive farmland, as developers are often in the strongest position to move quickly to purchase the property. This section would give MDAR the authority to acquire and hold land for the purpose of protecting it for agricultural and horticultural use, an authority currently granted to other land-related agencies but not to MDAR.

SECTION 6: 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 critical for long-term food system resilience and food security. This section will provide grants to educational institutions to provide workforce development training to first time farmers, prioritizing programs that serve a high percentage of minority or low-income students or people with disabilities, as well as programs that teach climate-smart management practices.

SECTION 7: 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.

H.92 An act supporting the Commonwealth's food system

The Massachusetts Food Policy Council plays an important role in providing state agencies, legislators, and private sector food system stakeholders a forum to collectively discuss food system issues, explore opportunities for coordination and collaboration, and develop policy recommendations. Founded in 2010, the FPC's work has explored issues such as food waste, nutrition incentives programs, farmer education and training, and others. All members of the Council have benefitted from these discussions and many have forged relationships that have strengthened their work in their agencies or in their communities. At the same time it is clear that additional staff support is needed to ensure that the FPC can fully carry out its mission, particularly in helping to facilitate regular communication and coordination among state agencies.

This bill would address that issue by establishing a food system coordinator position to staff the FPC and work with all state agencies with programs or regulations that relate to the local food system. By adding this capacity, agencies will be better able to identify duplicative efforts, find opportunities to collaborate to support each other's missions related to the food system, and create new solutions to shared goals. This role would also be responsible for developing benchmarks and tracking metrics related to the state's food system goals, as a way to inform where investments of time and resources are effective and where more are needed.

Many of the state's strategies for addressing food system issues have acknowledged the need to implement cross-sectoral solutions that, for example, address both food security and agriculture in the case of the Healthy Incentives Program, or soil health and climate change in the case of the Commercial Food Material Disposal Ban. The Food Security Task Force, initiated to resolve food supply chain issues during the COVID crisis, demonstrated an acknowledgement that more collaboration is needed. Cross-sectoral programs are more sustainable, more efficient, and more impactful than those that focus more narrowly. The state's ability to launch and manage such efforts would be strengthened with the addition of a food policy coordinator position to help facilitate collaboration among agencies, as proposed by this bill.

H.99 An Act relative to the Massachusetts Food Policy Council

Massachusetts is among the top three states in the US for the value of its seafood landings. The seafood industry employs more than 100,000 workers in Massachusetts, and has an economic impact of more than \$8 billion each year. Yet this critical sector of the Commonwealth's food system has no voice on our Food Policy Council, where issues related to economics, public health, environmental impact, equitable access to food, and other important topics are discussed. This bill would remedy this situation by adding a seat to the Council for the Department of Fish and Game.

S.41 / H.87 An Act promoting equity in agriculture

People of color make up 29% of the population in Massachusetts yet BIPOC farmers represent less than 3% of farmers in the state, resulting in lost jobs, lower food security, and reduced local economic activity. Agricultural and related policies and laws have historically not considered equity, and many of those policies and laws are still having damaging impact generations later.

This bill will establish a commission to examine the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resource's (MDAR's) work and the opportunities that the agency has to address some of these inequities. The Collaborative's Ag Equity Network will be submitting more detailed testimony in support of this bill.

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 bills, as does the Collaborative's 2020 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,



Winton Pitcoff
Director