



May 13, 2025

Joint Committee on Agriculture
24 Beacon St.
Rooms 473F and 70
Boston, MA 02133

RE: H.111/S.53 An Act promoting equity in agriculture,
H.120 An Act supporting the Commonwealth's food system,
H.130/S.52 An Act relative to membership updates for the Massachusetts Food Policy Council
H.119/S.60, An Act to address the impact of climate change on farms and fisheries

Dear Chair Blais, Chair Fernandes and Members of the Joint Committee on Agriculture,

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this testimony in support of 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 80% of Massachusetts consisted of farmland; today Massachusetts is about 9% farmland. Between 2012 and 2022 we converted an average of 16 acres of farmland per day to other uses, totaling 59,000 acres of land that will never grow food again. This not only weakens our food security, it also makes our food system more fragile and the remaining farmland becomes more expensive – Massachusetts farmland averages \$15,000 per acre, with a 11% increase in price between 2021 and 2022 alone¹.

For the farms that remain, economic sustainability is tenuous, at best. Massachusetts farmers earn 96 cents for every dollar they spend on producing food²; the costs of land, of energy, and of other inputs are higher here than anywhere else in the country. Farmers cannot just adjust their prices to account for higher land and energy costs because as a whole, Massachusetts does not 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.

Massachusetts is also a case study of the impacts of climate change on agriculture. In the last decade, 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

¹ https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Todays_Reports/reports/land0822.pdf

² https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Census_by_State/Massachusetts/index.php

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.

Finally, 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 32% of the state's population, but are represented on only 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.

H.111/S.53 An Act promoting equity in agriculture

People of color make up 32% 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 is especially timely as federal funding for programs that center equity are being under attack, in agriculture and across grant programs.

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. We appreciate the Committee's favorable report of this bill in the 2023-24 session, and the House's passage of this Commission as part of H.4745. The Collaborative's Agricultural Equity Network will be submitting more detailed testimony in support of this bill.

H.120 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, as the Council currently only counts on ¼ of a MDAR staff member's time.

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.130/S.52 An Act relative to membership updates for 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 213,000 workers in Massachusetts, and has an economic impact of more than \$8 billion each year³. 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, even though the Department of Fish and Game's Division of Marine Fisheries staff have long participated in meetings and given presentations on the sector and the important work the Division does to the Council. This bill would remedy this situation by adding a seat to the Council for the Department of Fish and Game.

At the same time, the University of Massachusetts Center for Agriculture, Food, and the Environment (CAFE) provides many valuable services via Extension services for farmers and SNAP-Ed nutrition classes, the soil testing lab, and the Cranberry Station and Amherst experiment station. Adding CAFE to the MA FPC would elevate this important resource for many farmers, low-income families, and food system stakeholders across the Commonwealth.

H.119/S.60, An Act to address the impact of climate change on farms and fisheries

The impacts of climate change are being felt across our food system; for the past decade, every year is either a drought or a flood year, leading to major crop losses, and fisheries stocks are

³ <https://spo.nmfs.noaa.gov/sites/default/files/TMSPO248.pdf>

migrating north out of Massachusetts' waters, as the Gulf of Maine is one of the fastest-warming bodies of water on Earth⁴.

As major federal funding for climate change adaptation and mitigation work, such as the Partnership for Climate Smart Commodities Program, which would have brought at least \$5 million to the Commonwealth, is cancelled⁵ by the federal administration, the state must continue to lead in this area. Securing increased funding for the Climate Smart Agriculture Program suite is one of the Collaborative's priorities for the upcoming environmental bond bill. We also appreciate Chair Blais' and Vice-Chair Comerford's leadership in this area in establishing the Disaster Relief Fund after the deep freeze, late frost, and flooding of 2023 devastated agriculture in western Massachusetts.

The Collaborative leads collective action towards a sustainable, equitable, resilient local food system through advocacy campaigns and networks. We work with hundreds of food system partners across the Commonwealth who help us identify our legislative priorities, including furthering equity and collaboration in the food system.

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. We appreciate the Committee taking up these issues, and urge you to report these bills out favorably. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Miller, Policy Director

⁴ <https://www.gmri.org/stories/gulf-of-maine-explained-causes-impacts-of-rapid-warming/>

⁵ <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2025/04/14/usda-cancels-biden-era-climate-slush-fund-reprioritizes-existing-funding-farmers>