



September 16, 2025

Joint Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries
24 Beacon Street
Rooms 519 and 473
Boston MA 02133

RE: H.112 / S.55 An Act Fostering Agricultural Resilience in Massachusetts,
H.121 / S.61 An Act Relative to Urban Farmland,
H.109 / S.56 An Act Protecting our Soils and Farms from PFAS contamination

Dear Chairs Blais and Fernandes, and Members of the Committee:

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this written testimony in support of several bills heard before the Committee. The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative was established to promote, monitor, and facilitate implementation of the [*Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan*](#), accepted by the state in 2015. 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. We offer this testimony in support of the above bills.

H.112 / S.55 An Act Fostering Agricultural Resilience in Massachusetts

This bill offers vital support to Massachusetts farmers, addressing pressing issues around land access and protection, farm viability, food security, and state agency coordination and represents significant steps toward a more sustainable, equitable and resilient food system.

Land Access and Protection

SECTION 4: Massachusetts' Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program has permanently protected more than 75,000 acres of land, ensuring that this land will stay in agricultural production in perpetuity. This section will provide for more equitable compensation for farmers who choose to sell agricultural easements to enroll in the program, by allowing for infrastructure and easements to be included in the appraisal. Doing so will encourage more farmers to participate in the program, allowing the state to protect more farmland, as housing security is a concern for farmers and farm workers, as it is across the state.

SECTION 5: Directs the Agricultural Lands Preservation Committee to set annual and long-term goals for enrolling land in the APR program. This would help to implement the many goals of the 2023 Farmland Action Plan, in coordination with MDAR staff, and we would hope that it shouldn't slow down the work of the ALPC to assess farms moving throughout the APR process.



SECTION 13: 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 a right of first refusal, positioned behind a municipality's, for the purpose of protecting land for agricultural and horticultural use. This right of first refusal would help to fully implement MDAR's new buy-protect-sell authority, along with authorizing funds for this purpose and additional staff capacity to respond rapidly when land comes up for sale.

SECTION 14: The state does not have a current map of where all parcels enrolled in MGL Chapter 61 are located, and this hinders work to protect parcels of less than five acres, and makes it more difficult for prospective farmers to identify potential farm business sites. This section directs the Department of Revenue to create and maintain a registry of all agricultural and horticultural land in MA, including a publicly accessible map. Other New England states already require state agencies to maintain such registries, such as Maine and Vermont.

Farm Viability

SECTION 7: According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, Massachusetts farmers have the highest average age in the US; 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 and community-based organizations 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 8: This section would increase the price preference of governmental bodies that vote to establish a preference for products of agriculture, so they must purchase agricultural products grown or produced in the Commonwealth unless the price of goods exceeds 20% of the price of agricultural products grown outside the Commonwealth, up from 10%. This section should also include state agencies. Increasing this price preference would help Massachusetts become more resilient and help with reaching the New England Feeding New England goal of 30% local food produced and consumed in New England by 2030. Further, this increase would support a greater number of local agencies including local products in their procurement practices, building on the success of the federally funded Northeast Food for Schools program.

SECTION 9 - 11 and 16: Agritourism is a fast-growing sector of Massachusetts agriculture, according to recent USDA Census of Agriculture reports. These sections would define agritourism in MGL, provide that zoning ordinances cannot unreasonably regulate agritourism, and maintain that land whose primary purpose is agriculture remains in active production.



SECTION 17: Directs the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to conduct a study on social safety net programs availability to farmers. Farmers often struggle to access health insurance as business owners due to their variable incomes; one year they are eligible for MassHealth, and the next they may face a health insurance bill in the tens of thousands of dollars range for a family of four. Instead of being eligible on and off for state coverage, many farmers choose to invest in their business and remain in poverty to maintain health insurance coverage, a perverse incentive that is not sustainable for long-term farm viability. This report would assist in establishing what barriers exist and what potential next steps should be taken to ensure health care coverage for all food system workers. Unfortunately, due to the impacts of the OBBB being passed into law, the costs of health insurance are expected to rise in the next year and this issue is even more critical.

Food Security

SECTION 3: Some state programs, such as the Healthy Incentives Program, already completely support local food production, as the program is only available with farm-direct vendors. We would want to ensure that this maximization of local food is done in a way to ensure that adequate food is still making its way through the programs to meet the needs of food insecure residents. This information should also be used for MDAR's contribution to the Local Food Counts project.

SECTION 6: Codifies the Food Security Infrastructure Grant program into law. FSIG has awarded more than \$125 million in grants to farms, fishermen, school districts, food pantries, and other food security efforts since the program began as a pandemic response program in 2020. The program faces continued oversubscription, with each round of awards receiving many more applications than can be met with existing funds. This section also allows for the purchase of used equipment, which will save taxpayer dollars, and potentially make it easier for farms to get some equipment that is already in-state.

State Coordination and Preparedness

SECTION 1: As the Commonwealth learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, being prepared to feed its residents 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 Baker-Polito Administration'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 in order to coordinate and inventory food programs, and develop and track metrics related to food system goals.

H.121 / S.61 An Act Relative to Urban Farmland

This bill would establish a fund to support the conversion of vacant lots and underutilized spaces in urban environmental justice communities into production farms, community gardens, and other agricultural enterprises.

According to the 2023 Resilient Lands Initiative (RLI) report, there are 28,000 vacant lots, equating to 34,000 acres of unused land, in environmental justice census tracts within the state's forty-five cities¹. A likely smaller percentage of these are suitable for urban agriculture, as many could be used for housing and to comply with the MBTA Communities Act. Converting vacant lots and underutilized spaces into agricultural enterprises, as described in the RLI report is based off the grassroots work of the Dudley Square Neighborhood Initiative in Boston, whose work resulted in the Dudley Square Greenhouse and Farm, managed by The Food Project² to produce and sell food to the neighborhood, including fruit and vegetable starts every spring and leasing space to residents in the Greenhouse for their own household-level food production.

MDAR's eleven-year old Urban Agriculture Grant Program has made two awards to support land purchases; All Farmers in the Springfield area and the Regional Environmental Council in Worcester. The Collaborative sees this bill as a means to expand on this work, and to continue to weave connections between urban, suburban, and rural agriculture. This bill also builds upon existing work at the municipal level, as several municipalities across the state, including Boston and New Bedford, have used federal Community Development Block Grant funds to support the creation of community gardens from vacant lots.

Land access is a continuing struggle for Massachusetts - the average cost of farm real estate per acre is \$14,900, according to the 2025 USDA NASS Land Values report³. At the same time, 27,000 acres of farmland were lost to abandonment and development from 2017 to 2022, according to the USDA Census of Agriculture. This double squeeze of expensive available land and a rapidly shrinking land base puts agriculture out of reach for many that are interested. This bill would also benefit municipal budgets, as vacant lots do not bring in tax revenue, often generate code violations, and create costs for the local department of public works with mowing and removing trash.

Finally, this bill has the potential to strengthen connections to food literacy in K-12 education, by creating a pathway from programs at vocational technical schools, to post-secondary education

¹ See page 25 <https://www.mass.gov/doc/the-resilient-lands-initiative-2023/download>

² <https://thefoodproject.org/farms/west-cottage-farm-and-langdon-street-farm/>

³ https://www.nass.usda.gov/Charts_and_Maps/Land_Values/farm_value_map.php



careers in food production using vacant lots in urban areas. Supporting increased food production in environmental justice communities benefits local food security, economic development, reduces the urban heat island effect, and has the potential to improve social cohesion.

H.109 / S.56 An Act Protecting Our Soils and Farms from PFAS contamination

Massachusetts farmers have a strong history of adapting their management practices as science-informed education and regulations update to protect the environment, public health, and sustainable production. While that doesn't make farmers immune to problems, it does mean that it is critical that farmers are given the information and resources they need to adjust to any potential regulatory changes. If changing regulations mean that farmers need to alter their management practices – change the products they use, or test soil, water, or food products – they need to be supported in doing so.

There is not yet a complete picture of the scale of any potential PFAS contamination for farmers in Massachusetts; there is no record of where biosolids were spread, limited information on where firefighting foam spread via groundwater near military bases, and information about other sources of contamination. As regulatory changes are under discussion at Massachusetts' Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), any such changes must ensure that farmers are not at risk of losing their farms and livelihoods due to practices employed on their land that were historically standard management practices. Any changes to the regulatory system must not put our food security at risk, and we must ensure that farmers are part of the conversation when regulations are developed and resources are allocated to address PFAS.

This bill offers several solutions to address PFAS contamination:

- Ban the land application of municipal biosolids on land.
- Grant immunity to farmers from lawsuits and civil liability for PFAS contamination and
- Establish an Agricultural PFAS Relief Fund to provide resources for education, technical assistance, testing, remediation, and other needs when they arise, so that farmers don't bear burdensome costs of changing management practices.
- Establish an Agricultural Fertilizer Purchasing Fund to provide resources for fertilizer for farmers that are transitioning to safe products
- Exempt landowners from conveyance and roll-back taxes if their land is no longer actively used due to PFAS contamination.
- Restrict the sale of fertilizers containing any measurable PFAS, mandates PFAS testing of fertilizer by manufacturers, and requires public reporting of results.
- Require DEP to complete a comprehensive statewide sludge management plan by December 31, 2026. The completion of this plan is necessary to plan for a ban on land application of sludge, which some estimates are 40% of the sludge is land applied.



The continued allowance of land application of biosolids will increase long-term adverse health effects for those most exposed to the chemicals including farmers, their families, and farm workers, and healthcare costs borne by taxpayers higher. The state must set up these funds, appropriate resources to them, and support additional staff capacity at MDAR to ensure that farmers are supported to test their soil and respond to this issue.

These bills seek to help farmers remain sustainable, further public health, equity and the resilience of our food system. We urge the Committee to report them out favorably.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Miller, Policy Director