



June 15, 2026

Speaker of the House, Ronald Mariano
24 Beacon St.
Room 356
Boston, MA 02133

RE: H.4854, An Act Fostering Agricultural Resilience in Massachusetts

Dear Speaker Mariano,

In partnership with the below forty nonprofit organizations, farms, and food system businesses from across the Commonwealth, the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative respectfully submits this testimony in support of H.4854, *An Act Fostering Agricultural Resilience in Massachusetts, colloquially known as the FARM bill*.

The FARM bill offers vital support to Massachusetts farmers, addressing pressing concerns around land access and protection, farm viability, food security, and state agency coordination. It also represents a significant step toward a more sustainable, equitable and resilient food system.

The policies outlined in the FARM bill are urgently needed, as the Commonwealth's farms are in crisis;

- The state lost 27,000 acres of farmland between 2017 and 2022¹, and is projected to lose between 50,000 - 90,000 additional acres in the coming years if current trends are not stopped.
- Farmers make \$0.95 for every \$1 they invest in their business, according to the most recent USDA Census of Agriculture², an economically impossible proposition.
- Further, the average age of a farmer in Massachusetts is 58, and many farmers are forced to sell their land, their only asset, to afford retirement.
- Because of this, and other economic factors, more than 30% of farms are expected to change hands in the coming decade, according to research from American Farmland Trust³.
- Food insecurity, hitting a record high of 40% in 2025, according to the Greater Boston Food Bank⁴, will remain high as cuts to the SNAP program from OB3 come into effect this year.

¹ nass.usda.gov/Census_by_State/Massachusetts/

² See above.

³ <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/farms-under-threat-2040/>

⁴ <https://foodaccessreport.gbfb.org/>



- And we must shore up our local food system to be more resilient in response to global warming, which has led to late frosts, flooding, and droughts, all impacting the amount of food produced in the state.

At the same time, our partners are working to help farms stay viable, keep land in farming, reduce food insecurity, and address climate change's impacts. Together, we have made significant strides, and we need this bill to help us take the next steps.

The FARM bill specifically has the following vital policies:

Land Access and Protection

SECTION 7: Massachusetts' Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program has permanently protected more than 75,000 acres of land in more than 1,000 farm properties, 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 8: Directs the Agricultural Lands Preservation Committee (ALPC) 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 it should not slow down the work of the ALPC to assess farms moving throughout the APR process.

SECTION 12: We are pleased to see this section focused on revitalizing urban areas in the redrafted omnibus. Section 12 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. We appreciate the Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries' addition of a definition of environmental justice populations.

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 cities.⁵ A smaller percentage of these are likely 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 on the grassroots work of the Dudley Square Neighborhood Initiative in Boston. This work resulted in the Dudley Square Greenhouse and Farm, managed by The Food Project,⁶ which

⁵ See page 25 <https://www.mass.gov/doc/the-resilient-lands-initiative-2023/download>

⁶ <https://thefoodproject.org/farms/west-cottage-farm-and-langdon-street-farm/>



produces and sells 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, including [All Farmers](#) in the Springfield area and the [Regional Environmental Council](#) in Worcester. The Collaborative sees the FARM bill as a means 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 farmers - the average cost of farm real estate per acre is \$14,900, according to the 2025 USDA NASS Land Values report.⁷ At the same time, 27,000 acres of farmland were lost to abandonment and development from 2017 to 2022. This double squeeze of expensive available land and a rapidly shrinking land base puts agriculture out of reach for many that are interested in commercial agriculture. 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.

SECTION 17: When farms become available for purchase, the seller often wants to move quickly; those quick transactions can lead to the loss of productive farmland, as developers are often in the strongest position to be able to purchase the property quickly. Section 17 gives 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. The undersigned concerned that MDAR would be allowed to assign its option to the Department of Conservation and Recreation under this section, and suggest replacing this with a requirement to license or sell the land, with an Agricultural Preservation Restriction, to a farmer. While MDAR successfully manages a growing portfolio of land for other state agencies that is leased to farmers, DCR has a different organizational mission and the goal of conserving farmland is to keep it in active agricultural production, not only conservation for conservation's sake. Additionally, as the 120-day notice runs equally to both the town and state, the opportunity for the state to exercise could be constrained if the town is slow to make up its mind. We would suggest adding language requiring the town to have to give notice to the state within 90 days of its intent to exercise or not; this would ensure that the clock would not run out before the state could move.

⁷ https://www.nass.usda.gov/Charts_and_Maps/Land_Values/farm_value_map.php



SECTION 18: The state does not have a current map of where all parcels enrolled in Massachusetts General Law (MGL) Chapter 61A are located; the lack of a map hinders the 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 Massachusetts, including a publicly accessible map. Other New England states already require state agencies to maintain such registries.

Farm Viability

SECTIONS 2, 13 and 14: This section would increase the price preference of governmental bodies such as a city, town, district, regional school district, county, or agency, board, commission, authority, department or instrumentality of a city, town, district, regional school district or county, that vote to establish a preference for products of agriculture. This price preference would allow the state to purchase agricultural products grown or produced in the Commonwealth if the price of goods exceeds up to 20% of the price of agricultural products grown outside the Commonwealth, an increase from a 10% differential. Increasing this price preference would help Massachusetts work towards greater resiliency and help with reaching the New England Feeding New England's (NEFNE) 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 Schools⁸ program. We would suggest adding state agencies to this section. The campaign outlined in section 14 will be crucial to this policy's implementation, as it is our understanding that this price differential option is not widely understood or used.

SECTION 12: According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, Massachusetts farmers have the highest average age in the United States. 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.

SECTIONS 15 and 20: 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.

⁸ <https://www.massfarmtoschool.org/ne-food-schools/>



SECTION 16: Requires MDAR, in consultation with DOER, to review once every ten years whether any amendments to statutory, regulatory and deed-based restrictions should be considered on the amount of renewable energy allowed to be generated on farmland, and produce a report with recommendations. Currently, farms are only permitted to generate the amount of renewable energy their farm consumes under some state grant programs, limiting the amount of renewable energy they could produce and sell to the grid on non-productive agricultural land.

SECTION 22: Directs the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to conduct a study on social safety net programs availability to farmers and farmworkers. 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. Instead of the uncertainty surrounding the state coverage, many farmers choose to invest in their business and remain in poverty to maintain public 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 OB3 being passed into law, the costs of health insurance are expected to rise in the next year making this issue even more critical.

Food Security

SECTION 3: requires the creation of an annual report, to be delivered to the legislature, on the prevalence of local food in food distribution programs like the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP), the Healthy Incentives Program, universal school meals, the hunger-free campus initiative, the farm to school FRESH grant program, senior nutrition program, Meals on Wheels, the senior farm share program, and more. Some of this information is already published by our partners, such as the annual MEFAP report,⁹ this DESE report¹⁰ on the state of local sourcing in universal school meals, and DTA's HIP vendor map.¹¹ The additional information required by this section would be valuable to establish a baseline of where the other programs are sourcing food from. If more local food is going to be sold to the emergency food system, investment in these programs will need to increase to continue to support both the volume of food required to meet the needs of food insecure residents and the costs of local food.

SECTION 9: Codifies the Food Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) 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

⁹ https://www.gbfb.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/GBFB_MEFAPFY24_V2a_040825_Final_Spreads.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/nutrition-standards/default.html>

¹¹ <https://dtafinder.dtadash.ehs.mass.gov/>



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.

Finally, we request that the language of H.222 be added to this omnibus, as it is also currently with House Ways and Means. This bill would codify the Healthy Incentives Program in statute, create a HIP Fund to be administered by DTA, and require DTA to submit an annual report to the legislature on the state of the program. Codifying HIP is important to ensure the program's long-term sustainability. If the language is included, we would suggest updating the second sentence in section 1 to read "The program shall provide that **recipients** actively receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, established pursuant to the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, 7 U.S.C. section 2011 hereinafter referred to as SNAP, **shall be entitled to an additional benefit** via their electronic benefit transfer card **redeemable for eligible fruit and vegetable purchases at participating vendors**, within limits to be established by the department." This reflects the program's updated technical operations as of September 2025.

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.

SECTIONS 4 and 5: The state Food Policy Council was established in 2013 and meets quarterly across secretariates and external stakeholders to share updates on ongoing work and collaborate on projects. This language would add the Division of Marine Fisheries and the University of Massachusetts Extension Service as official members of the FPC. Their expertise from their work serving fishermen and farmers is needed on the Council, and is a missing piece that would complete the Council's view of the entire food system.

We respectfully urge you to bring this omnibus legislation forward to be passed into law this session, as it is urgently needed.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Miller, Policy Director

On behalf of:



Organizations

American Farmland Trust, New England
Berkshire Grown, Great Barrington
Berkshire Agricultural Ventures, Great Barrington
Berkshire Bounty, Great Barrington
Boston Area Gleaners, Acton
Boston Food Access Council, Boston
Central Massachusetts Grown, Rutland
Commonwealth Kitchen, Boston
Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA), South Deerfield
The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, Chicopee
Food For Free, Somerville
FoodLink, Arlington
Franklin County Community Development Corporation, Greenfield
The Franklin Regional Council of Governments, Greenfield
Gardening The Community, Springfield
The Greater Boston Food Bank, Boston
Growing Places, Leominster
Land For Good, statewide
Local Enterprise Assistance Fund, statewide
The Marion Institute, Marion
Massachusetts Farm to School, statewide
Massachusetts Farmers' Markets, statewide
Massachusetts Food Policy Council Advocacy Committee, statewide
Massachusetts Councils On Aging, statewide
Metrowest Food Collaborative, Hudson
New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, Beverly
New England Vegetable and Berry Growers Association, statewide
NOFA/Massachusetts, statewide
Second Chance Composting LLC, Adams
Southcoast Food Policy Council, Marion
Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership, Bristol / Norfolk / Plymouth Counties
Springfield Food Policy Council, Springfield
Sustainable Business Network, Cambridge
Sustainable Nantucket, Nantucket
Worcester County Food Bank, Shrewsbury
World Farmers, Lancaster



Farms and Farmers' Markets

40 Acres and a Mule Farms, Agawam

Acton-Boxborough Farmers Market, Acton

Boston Public Market, Boston

Friends of Holly Hill Farm, Cohasset