

Western Massachusetts Ag Commission Newsletter #3 / July 2011

Welcome to the third Western Mass AgCom Newsletter. We will send these newsletters out periodically to keep AgComs up-to-date on current AgCom issues, upcoming events, ideas and projects of AgComs in western Mass, grant programs and deadlines, and other related items. Please let us know (at westover03@comcast.net) if your email address has changed or if you can provide email addresses for others on your AgCom. Thanks!

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1. New Agricultural Commissions, Right to Farm Bylaws, and Farm Excise Tax Exemptions

Recent additions to the list of western Mass towns with AgComs include Athol, Easthampton, Hawley, Montague, and Peru. In late June, Royalston Town Meeting voted 20-3 to establish an AgCom, making Royalston the 144th town with an Ag Commission.

Western Mass towns that have recently approved Right to Farm Bylaws are New Salem, Peru, Rowe, and Sandisfield. There are now 116 towns with Right to Farm Bylaws in the Commonwealth.

Many towns have voted or otherwise decided, on the recommendation of their AgCom, to abolish or not to collect the excise tax on farm animals and equipment. Among them are:

Ashfield, Belchertown, Blandford, Gill, Granville, Hatfield, Lee, Ludlow, Northfield, Shelburne, and Westhampton. Other towns are considering doing the same.

2. Now is the time to join the Mass Association of Ag Commissions (MAAC)!

Wendell, Easthampton, and Montague are the latest to join the Mass Association of Agricultural Commissions (MAAC).

The MAAC was organized last year to support Massachusetts' municipal Agricultural Commissions (AgComs). With help from local AgComs, the MAAC will strive to provide AgComs with the necessary services and education to bolster and advance their agricultural support work at the local level. MAAC will build support for agriculture in communities through effective relations with federal and state agencies, elected and appointed officials, private and nonprofit organizations and the public.

All Massachusetts AgComs may become members of MAAC and no dues payment will be requested. Please take the time to discuss MAAC membership at your next meeting and vote on whether you choose to be a member. For more information on MAAC, Bylaws, and Board of Directors please visit <http://www.massagcom.org/about/maac.html> or contact Dick Ward at rjward7@verizon.net or (781) 361-5425.

MAAC Board members representing Western Mass Counties are:
Steve Damon, Gill AgCom, Franklin County
Mike Hogan, Ludlow AgCom, Hampden County
Jamie Wagner, Amherst AgCom, Hampshire County
Kathy Orlando, Sheffield AgCom, Berkshire County

For more information on MAAC, Bylaws, and Board of Directors please visit:
<http://www.massagcom.org/about/maac.html>.

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Membership application on next page

MAAC Membership Application

The Massachusetts Association of Agricultural Commissions, Inc. (MAAC) was organized in 2010 to support local AgComs. With your input MAAC will strive to provide you with the necessary services and education to bolster and advance your work at the local level. All MA AgComs may become members of MAAC and no dues payment will be requested in 2011. Please take the time to discuss MAAC membership at your next meeting and vote on whether you choose to be a member. We look forward to your response.

On _____ the _____ Agricultural Commission voted:
(date) (town/city)

___ In favor of becoming a MAAC member ___ Not in favor of becoming a MAAC member

To help MAAC plan workshops, outreach and education, and training please check topics most important to your AgCom.

- ___ Laws affecting agriculture
- ___ "Backyard" farming issues
- ___ Agriculture & wetlands
- ___ Energy conservation & renewables
- ___ Ag & Boards of Health
- ___ Farmland Protection tools
- ___ Conflict management
- ___ Ag excise tax exemptions
- ___ Composting regulations
- ___ Funding AgCom activities
- ___ Network opportunities

Other: _____

Email Dick Ward at rjward7@verizon.net with any questions or other topics of importance to you.

Please drop this application in the mail after your vote: Dick Ward, PO Box 74, Carver, MA 02330. Thank you!

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3. Berkshire Keep Farming Initiative

The following is a letter from Amy Kacala, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, to invite Ag Commissions to participate in a new initiative to develop local farmland action plans, regional strategies, and farmland data useful to local communities. For more information, be in touch with Amy at BRPC, (413) 442-1521, akacala@berkshireplanning.org.

I am writing to inform you of an exciting regional initiative getting underway which will develop strategies to support local food and farming in the Berkshires. Agriculture is an invaluable asset to the region in terms of access to local food, community interaction, economic activity, heritage, and scenery. Local farms, however, are facing a number of challenges to continued operation including succession planning, gaps in processing and distribution infrastructure, and lack of supportive land use tools.

To help identify and address these gaps, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission has partnered with Glynwood to bring their Keep Farming® program to the Berkshires. Keep Farming® is a grassroots planning process developed by the Glynwood Center, a not-for-profit working farm in the Hudson Valley, in response to frequent requests from communities for guidance of how to plan for and support

agriculture. This will be the first time any food and farming-centered planning process has been conducted in the region and it couldn't be better timed.

This initiative is being met with great enthusiasm and many willing volunteers from local food-related businesses, farmers, foodies, academics, social non-profits, and land trusts. Once the 12-18 month process is complete, we will have:

- Local action plans with specific strategies to help support agriculture and local food production;
- Regional strategies incorporated into the goals, policies, and actions of the regional plan for the Berkshires just now getting underway;
- Enhanced community awareness of the presence, products, and families of the local farming community – and the many benefits to the region of having active agriculture; and
- Original data on the economics of food and farming in the region – including a clear understanding of where our food comes from, how much is produced locally, and the economics of the local food system.

We've already begun work with two of the five working groups across the region; these groupings are described in greater detail in the enclosed handout. Initial attendance at the southwest workshop was 140 people. We're preparing now to organize the remaining groups to kickoff their efforts this fall. An important component of the outreach for this initiative is obviously to the Agricultural Commissions of each community in the Berkshires. Those we've spoken to in the south have welcomed this initiative and the strategic direction it will provide both towns and the region in terms of how to support local agriculture.

Over the next few months we'll be working to get on the agendas of upcoming Agricultural Commission meetings to be able to describe the process in greater detail and answer any question you may have. Andrea Burns of Glynwood will be in touch to check schedules. We look forward to talking with you about this exciting effort!

Amy Kacala, Senior Planner and Sustainable Berkshires Project Manager

4. GIS Analysis of Possible Expansion of Agricultural Land in Groton, MA, by Becca Weaver, Farmland Matching Service Coordinator, New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, Lowell

Many towns are looking into the matter of getting more available or un-used farmland into production. The New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, based in Lowell, has prepared an available-farmland study for the Groton Agricultural Commission that could be a model for other towns. New Entry will be discussing the possibility of making the methodology available for AgComs around the state. For more information, call or email Becca Weaver at New Entry, 155 Merrimack Street, Lowell, MA 01852, phone 978-654-6745 x 5734, fax 866-305-3941, BWeaver@comteam.org<<mailto:BWeaver@comteam.org>>.

5. Regional Food Security Advisory Committee

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) in collaboration with Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) is currently facilitating a Food Security Plan for the Pioneer Valley Region. Over the next three years, PVPC and CISA will work with members of a regional Food Security Advisory Committee to research and identify issues affecting regional as well as individual household food security for the Valley, as well as identify and implement actions to address these issues. Members of the committee represent a broad range of public, private,

and non-profit entities that are currently involved in making our region and citizens more food secure. The regional food security plan will assess the food system as a whole, from farming to processing and finally food access, including the identification of “food deserts”. The plan is expected to be completed by December 2011. PVPC, CISA, and the Advisory Committee will then spend the next two years working to implement the key recommendations of the plan.

Products/Outcomes:

- 1) Advisory Committee that will guide the planning and implementation process.
- 2) Regional Food Security Plan comprised of a Regional Food Security Assessment and Regional Food Security Strategic Plan.
- 3) Three annual regional Food Security forums that bring together Food Security professionals, key stakeholders, and the public.
- 4) Outreach and education materials to enhance the level of understanding of Food Security.
- 5) Zoning regulations that facilitate greater Food Security.
- 6) Enhanced technical assistance to support policy writing and implementation efforts.

6. Mass Food Policy Council

The first meeting of the Massachusetts Food Policy Council will be held on Wednesday, July 27, 1 - 4 pm at the Charlton Public Library.

Meeting Agenda:

Overview of the Council

Introductions

Discussion regarding the Advisory Committee Establishing priorities and setting up meeting dates
Additional agenda items

The 17-member MFPC to date includes:

John Lee – Farmer

Manuel Costa – Food Processor and Distributor

Jeff Cole – Direct to Consumer

Valerie Bassett – Community based nutrition and public health expert

Frank Carlson – Food Processor and Handler

Vacant – Food Safety expert

Vacant – Local Health Department Representation

Commissioner Soares

Commissioner Kehoe

Secretary Bialecki

Commissioner Moran

Commissioner Auerbach

Commissioner of Education designee Katie Millet

Senator Fargo

Representative Ferguson

Representative Kulik

Senator Knapik

An advisory committee has not been appointed. The hope is that the outstanding slots on the MFPC will be filled prior to the July 27th meeting.

7. USDA Notice. The following notice comes courtesy of Aimee Thayer in the USDA Pittsfield office and Katie Cavanagh at SEMAP:

USDA Notice to Women and Hispanic Farmers and Ranchers: Compensation for Claims of Discrimination

USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) State Executive Director Richard Burke wants to remind farmers and landowners that as part of continued efforts to close the chapter on all allegations that discrimination occurred at USDA in past decades, a process has been established to resolve the claims of Hispanic and women farmers and ranchers who assert that they were discriminated against when seeking USDA farm loans.

The claims process offers a streamlined alternative to litigation and provides at least \$1.33 billion in compensation, plus up to \$160 million in farm debt relief, to eligible Hispanic and women farmers and ranchers.

The program provides up to \$50,000 for each Hispanic or woman farmer who can show that USDA denied them a loan or loan servicing for discriminatory reasons for certain time periods between 1981 and 2000. Hispanic or female farmers who provide additional proof and meet other requirements can receive a \$50,000 award. Successful claimants are also eligible for funds to pay the taxes on their awards and for forgiveness of certain existing USDA loans. No filing fee or other costs to claimants are required to participate in the program. Participation is voluntary, and individuals who opt not to participate are not precluded by the program from filing a complaint in court.

In conjunction with this announcement, USDA is launching an outreach effort to potential claimants that will include a call center for farmers and ranchers, a website, public service announcements, and in-person meetings around the country. Individuals interested in participating in the claims process may register to receive a claims package, or may obtain more information, by visiting www.farmerclaims.gov. Individuals can register to receive a claims package by calling the Farmer and Rancher Call Center at 1-888-508-4429. Persons seeking legal advice may contact a lawyer or other legal services provider.

If you are a female farmer or an Hispanic farmer and you believe that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) improperly denied farm loan benefits to you for certain time periods between 1981 and 2000 because you are a female, or because you are Hispanic, you may be eligible to apply for compensation, the USDA State Food & Agriculture Council (SFAC) in Massachusetts announced in a joint news release issued today.

You might be eligible if:

- You sought a farm loan or farm-loan servicing from USDA during that period; and
- The loan was denied, provided late, approved for a lesser amount than requested, approved with restrictive conditions, or USDA failed to provide an appropriate loan service; and
- You believe these actions occurred because you are female or Hispanic.

"We want all producers who may be eligible to be aware of this claims process for female and Hispanic farmers and growers, as well as the recent settlements with Native American and African American farmers, so they can come forward and participate in these processes," said Jay Healy, State Director of Rural Development (RD) in Massachusetts, who serves as this year's chair of the SFAC. The SFAC is comprised of State-level agency heads of the three USDA partner agencies - RD State Director, Jay Healy, Farm Service Agency (FSA) State

Executive Director Dick Burke and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) State Conservationist Christine Clarke - with membership from other USDA agencies in Massachusetts.

If you want to register your name to receive a claims package in the female and Hispanic farmers claims process, you can call the Farmer and Rancher Call Center at 1-888-508-4429 or access the Website: www.farmerclaims.gov.

In 2011, a Class Administrator will begin mailing claims packages to those who have requested one through the Call Center or Website. The claims package will have detailed information about the eligibility and claims process. In order to participate, you must submit a claim to the Claims Administrator by the end of the claims period.

The claims process offers a streamlined alternative to litigation and provides at least \$1.33 billion in compensation, plus up to \$160 million in farm debt relief, to eligible Hispanic and women farmers and growers.

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If you are currently represented by counsel regarding allegations of discrimination against USDA or in a lawsuit claiming discrimination by USDA, you should contact your counsel regarding your claims process. USDA cannot provide legal advice to you. You are not required to hire an attorney to file a claim, but you may contact a lawyer or other legal services provider in your community for additional guidance.

Audio and video public service announcements in English and Spanish from Secretary Vilsack and downloadable print and web banner ads on the Hispanic and women farmer claims process are available at: [http://www.usda.gov/PSAs Print and WebBanner Ads.xml](http://www.usda.gov/PSAs_Print_and_WebBanner_Ads.xml). For more information, contact the Farmer and Rancher Call Center at 1-888-508-4429 or access the following Website: www.farmerclaims.gov.

This announcement follows the Obama Administration's settlement of litigation brought by Native American farmers and ranchers and African American farmers. Any Native American farmer or rancher who was denied a Farm Loan or Loan Servicing by the USDA between Jan. 1, 1981 and Nov. 24, 1999, may be eligible for benefits from a Class Action Settlement. To request a Claims Package or for more information, call 1-888-233-5506 or visit www.IndianFarmClass.com. African-American farmers who submitted a request to file a late claim on or between October 13, 1999 and June 18, 2008 under the 1999 settlement in the earlier class action known as Pigford v. Glickman ("Pigford") and who did not receive a merits determination of their discrimination claim should call 1-866-950-5547 or 1-866-472-7826 or visit www.blackfarmercase.com.

8. What Western Mass AgComs are doing

EXAMPLES OF AGRICULTURAL COMMISSION PROJECTS 2009-2011

The 144 Ag Commissions around the state have undertaken a wide variety of projects in recent years. The list below includes most of them as suggestions for possible future projects.

Organizational Items

1. Join the Mass Association of Ag Commissions (MAAC)
2. Create a 1, 2, or 3-year AgCom work plan
3. Work with AgComs in adjacent towns to coordinate efforts
4. Help nearby towns without AgComs to start their own AgComs

Local Regulations, Zoning Restrictions, and Taxation

5. Work with Board of Health and Health Agent to clarify farm and regulatory practices and clear up possible misunderstandings
6. Work with Conservation Commission and other boards on matters of mutual interest
7. Sponsor Right to Farm Bylaw at Town Meeting
8. Review town zoning and other regulations to be sure they do not inadvertently or intentionally penalize farmers
9. Sponsor an exemption to farm equipment and animal excise tax at Town Meeting
10. Promote a backyard poultry ordinance

Increasing Public Awareness of Farms in Town

11. Compile an inventory and map of town farms and farmers
12. Publish a brochure of farms and farm retail outlets
13. Install "Entering Right to Farm Town" signs at entrances to town
14. Install "Protected Farmland" signs (with owners' permission) at APR farms (through the Forever Farmland program)
15. Sponsor a town-wide forum on farm issues
16. Sponsor a series of information gatherings on items like estate planning, farm safety, Chapter 61A, APR program, best farming practices, ...
17. Sponsor a town farm festival, open houses, tasting events
18. Publicize "farm of the month" and other articles and features on local cable TV and printed news outlets
19. Submit a report on AgCom-related matters for the town Annual Report
20. Develop and maintain an AgCom page on the town website

Locating and Supporting Young Farmers

21. Develop a scholarship fund for student farmers
22. Help attract new and young farmers to available farmland in town and help develop links between non-farm landowners and possible farmers
23. Work with local schools to acquaint students and teachers with local farms and farm opportunities

Focusing on Food Security

24. Help develop a Food Security Plan for the town and region
25. Support local farmers markets
26. Sponsor or support community gardens
27. Encourage town and local land trust(s) to lease land out for food production
28. Identify farmers with oral leases and help convert to written leases
29. Pass resolution urging local schools to buy from local farms
30. Connect farm owners, farm managers, and gardeners with available farm lands
31. Bridge urban, suburban and rural food producers and consumers

Farmland Protection and Planning

32. Help the town vote to pass Community Preservation Act (for local APR match and other farmland protection measures)
33. Work with town boards and local land trusts to develop a farmland preservation fund
34. Help develop a policy for Chapter 61A-withdrawal first refusals
35. Participate in town-wide long-range planning, including development of Open Space and Recreation Plans, to be sure farming and farmland protection are adequately represented
36. Work with Planning Board to develop Natural Resource or Farmland Protection Overlay Zoning Districts
37. Work with Glynwood Institute's "Keep Farming" program and with regional planning agencies to develop a long-term farm plan for the town

Marketing Support

38. Help develop a farm marketing plan for the town
39. Compile figures showing the economic importance of farming in town (produce quantities, farm-related jobs, acres in production, dollars put into the economy by farms)
40. Support mobile slaughtering facilities
41. Advertise local food availability when it comes into season

Dispute Resolution

42. Develop a protocol for handling farm-related disputes
43. Work with other boards to head off or deal with possible or actual complaints

The Statewide Picture

44. Support proposed state legislation that will benefit farms and farmers
45. Participate in statewide and regional AgCom conferences

Making Farm Information Available Locally

46. Forward to local farmers and others the Farm and Market Report, other MDAR bulletins, and info from Mass Farm Bureau, CISA, Berkshire Grown, SEMAP, American Farmland Trust, FSA, and other farm-related organizations