



## **Agricultural Advisory Board**

### **Remote Meeting Minutes**

**April 28, 2021**

**7:00 - 8:30 PM**

Attending: Ken Hartlage, Lucy McKain, David Sears, Sherrill Rosoff

Guests: Al Averill (NRCS), Ashley Davies (MDAR), Chris Chisholm (MDAR), Paula Terassi

Meeting came to order at 7:07 PM.

#### Announcements:

1. The Board of Health opted out of the State's mosquito spraying program.
2. June 3rd is Civic Engagement Night meeting. 15 articles on town warrant.
3. Select Board still has not received comments from Town Council about the warrant article language for the Agricultural Commission
4. Sherrill Rosoff will be attending a webinar about farm to school programs in the state
5. Sherrill Rosoff sent our annual report to the town clerk.
6. The Overshiners have a list of young farmer prospects and we should let our farming community know that as they may have land they would like to lease.
7. Reviewed Tom Vilsak, Secretary of Education, comments about what the Dept. of Agriculture is going to be doing over the next 4 years. Sherrill Rosoff will send the Board her notes from that meeting.

The remaining meeting was Al Averill's presentation regarding Farmland of Local Importance (FLI).

- A. Farmland of Local Importance is a collaboration between USDA (NRCS) and AFT to recognize potential for establishing an important farmland class in Massachusetts. NRCS is responsible for all mapping and classification of soils in the US; serves as an inventory of the nation's soils resources and as a land planning tool. Recognized potential for identification of additional farmlands that might be eligible for conservation preservation programs.
- B. Once these lands are identified, increases long term potential for eligibility for easement programs and enhances the potential for growing food. These include: USDA: Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and under that is the Agricultural Easement Program (ALE). ALE is a partnership program so the USDA partners with MDAR. USDA funding goes to MDAR to help support the APR program, If USDA funding is spent, then USDA requirements must be met which is where the 50% prime soils qualification comes from. MDAR has criteria rankings as well.
- C. Prime farmland deals with soils characteristics. Unique, Statewide Importance and now FLI. Discussed the soil characteristics of each category. APR program does not provide funding for

cranberry preservation. Farmland of Statewide Importance criteria is determined by MDAR; collaborated with NRCS regarding criteria, and increased 35,000 acres across the state under this soil classification.

- D. Can go online to the NRCS websoil survey and can run reports on soils classification in an area. Very useful tool.
- E. The FLI applies across the town; soils designations overlap land parcels. FLI has not yet been included in the websoil survey but will be included in the NRCS Technical Field Guide Eventually, once a spatial layer is designed on the website, the FLI identifications will be included. Is the land suited for crop production but not represented in the soil survey? Includes hay and orchard lands...
- F. So, what is the value of this? Trying to expand program eligibility by recognizing more important farmland FLI but its also an inventory of soil resources which may be useful for town planners. Remains to be seen if this increases the land eligible for the APR program.
- G. MDAR comment: could implement the APR program using only state funding but state funding has shrunk over the years and now working to expand it again. If they do a state-only track, would work on a separate in-take system. They probably would keep criteria similar to the NRCS/USDA for consistency, but the process would be simplified. 5 acre minimum for APR program, a criteria that comes from chapter 61A; they mimic that with the APR program.

Questions:

David Sears: How does grazing fit into the crop scenario? Some of his soils are pretty bad but he does pasture it. To him a crop is milk, meat, pork, eggs...

Averill: A forage crop counts for FLI. Way NRCS has interpreted it is that it's something that has to be harvestable by a human being. Understands that the animal is doing the harvesting. Tax dollars going in to these programs and thought it best spent on land that can produce a harvestable crop.

David Sears: The current interpretation undermines the regenerative agricultural movement.

Averill: Would be happy to take up the discussion again. The person ultimately responsible is the NRCS state conservationist for Massachusetts so Averill will talk with him and get back to us.

Ashley Davies: Perhaps the criteria that it produce a harvestable crop comes down to the question of preserving land that can produce the most food per acre as pasturing animals takes a lot more land with less output. Maybe that's the reason behind it.

David Sears: Would suggest that pastured operations probably produces a lot of protein per acre due to milk and meat - can produce more protein on marginal land and never kill it, never disturb the soil. Possible to produce more protein than anything you could harvest; and he's intending to start silvo-pasturing.

MDAR: USDA is thinking about larger farms in the MidWest and not thinking of small to mid-size farms like we have in this state. We need to come up with a more local perspective with its own set of criteria.

Ken Hartlage: what might the FLI lead to in terms of additional funding that might protect our farmland? Can we Infer that there may be a possibility of additional funding from the federal gov. to protect farmland designated FLI, as opposed to farmland that meets APR designation. But that's not the case?

Discussion about how MDAR reviews local lands for APR eligibility, including 'carve downs'. Noted that a farmer can go directly to USDA and use the ALE program and bypass APR if he or she wanted.

Ken Hartlage: So, FLI is not currently recognized in Massachusetts but if it were recognized then it could be used. So we should be moving as rapidly as we can to get that designation.

Averill: If we identify more FLI, then NRCS state coordinator can ask for more federal money to protect local farmlands in Massachusetts.

MDAR has pursued funding to create a statewide farmland protection plan; hopefully House Bill 858 will push this effort.

Meeting adjourned at 8:30 PM.