

Western Massachusetts Ag Commission Newsletter / January 2010

Welcome to the first Western Mass AgCom Newsletter. We will send these newsletters out several times a year 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. If you have ideas or projects that could be included in future AgCom newsletters, please contact Pete Westover (westovero3@comcast.net or 413-665-4077).

WINTER CONFERENCE DRAWS AGCOMS FROM WESTERN MASS

More than 40 attendees from at least 21 towns attended the December 12 Ag Commission Gathering, generously hosted by the Deerfield AgCom and the Town of Deerfield. The Mass Tree Farm Committee joined many other sponsors in supporting the conference.

Sponsors of the gathering included MDAR, TTOR/Highland Communities Initiative, Berkshire Grown, CISA, Berkshire-Pioneer RC&D, Conservation Districts, Mass Farm Bureau, American Farmland Trust, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, Sheffield Land Trust, Franklin Land Trust, Franklin Council of Governments, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, Berkshire Natural Resources Council, Williamstown Rural Lands Foundation, Deerfield Agricultural Commission, Hancock Agricultural Commission, Pittsfield Agricultural Commission, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

HANCOCK SHAKER VILLAGE GATHERING COMING UP ON JANUARY 9

The next conference is being offered again in just a few weeks - Saturday, January 9, 2010, 8:30 to 3:00, at Hancock Shaker Village on Route 20 near the Pittsfield-Hancock town line. If you haven't yet registered, please contact Ann Gibson, Berkshire-Pioneer RC&D, Amherst, agibson@berkshirerpcrd.org, or 413-256-1607 x 2.

AGCOM REPORTS FROM THE ROUNDTABLE DECEMBER 12 DEERFIELD GATHERING

- **Montgomery**
 - Successfully got a Right to Farm Bylaw passed.
 - Placed six welcome signs at the major highway entrances to town with funds from an anonymous donor. The signs show a tractor at the center and read "Welcome to a Right to Farm Community – Montgomery, MA." One sign has been stolen but the AgCom has a backup replacement.
- **Ludlow**
 - Is involved in the town Master Plan process and has gotten a Right to Farm Bylaw passed.
- **Granby**
 - Created a farmstand pamphlet for the town and is wrestling with a proposed Right to Farm Bylaw.

- **Heath**
 - Is making a special effort to contact realtors about the Heath Right to Farm Bylaw, and has had discussions about the definition of a farm (see “Defining a Farm” below).
- **Belchertown**
 - Sponsored a series of agricultural forums to educate the public on growing methods for chickens, apples, herbs, and other crops, with hopes for events concentrating on productive forest management and connecting farmers and foresters to available lands.
 - Is helping new farmers keep their Chapter 61A status.
 - Recently produced a Farm and Farmstand Map which was distributed at the Town Fair, has purchased books for the Town library that covered the subjects brought up at the educational forums, and has had a plot at the Community Garden to show kids fun ideas for gardening.
 - Has a page on the Belchertown website and is waiting for a software upgrade to make editing easier.
- **Greenfield**
 - Finished a pamphlet with a farmstand map
 - Recently drafted a Right to Farm Bylaw.
 - Is working on items mentioned in the Town’s *2009 Heritage Landscape Report Recommendations* as AgCom and Town responsibilities:
 - Consider adopting an Agricultural Protection Overlay District that would encompass farmland within the Upper and Lower Meadows area.
 - Help the town adopt a proposed Right to Farm ordinance.
 - Provide resources to landowners for land protection
 - Inform farmers about benefits and funding available through the state’s Farm Viability Enhancement Program
 - Help promote local farms and goods at Fairs and other events, expand farmer’s markets, and sponsor bike tours to Meadows farmstands.
- **Gill**
 - Sponsored a recent cheese night with cheeses from Gill farms.
 - Is planning a winter sweets night featuring Gill maple sugar, honey, jams, and other sugary items.
 - Produced a farmstand map and pamphlet.
 - Created a virtual photographic farm tour on the town website.
 - Takes what member Steve Damon calls “a subtle, in-your-face approach” to alerting local boards about local food by providing fresh farm-grown snacks for SelectBoard and other meetings.
- **Westhampton**
 - Succeeded in getting Town Meeting to pass an article excluding farm equipment and animals from local excise tax assessment.
 - Is involved with a committee focusing on the Northampton Farmers Market.
- **New Salem**
 - Wrote a Right to Farm Bylaw to bring to Town Meeting.
 - Collected information for an upcoming farmstand guide.
- **Ashfield**
 - Created a “Grievance Resolution Protocol” and an APR Fund.
 - Has an AgCom page on the Town website.
 - Is working on matching landowners and available land.
 - Got a farm excise tax exemption passed.
 - Is intentionally asking for “no budget” with the possibility that a request for Town funds sometime down the road could be helped by pointing to the many years the AgCom has asked for nothing.

- **Wendell**
 - Spent considerable time this year on a Right to Farm Bylaw that passed unanimously.
 - Created an Agricultural Resource Directory that lists farm support and farm-related services.
 - Has an upcoming educational series.
 - Is looking for funds to apply to the purchase of Right to Farm signs.
- **Plainfield**
 - Has had long discussions with other boards about substituting “shall” for “may” refer agriculturally-related disputes to the AgCom
 - Has a presence on the Town website.
 - Recently finished a farm brochure.
 - Has a small budget from Town funds.
 - Has a dispute-resolution process.
 - Is working on connecting young farmers and available land.
- **Whately**
 - Is concentrating on developing an Agricultural Overlay Zoning District.
 - Supported three recent APRs.
 - Has dealt with at least two grievances.
- **Northfield**
 - Recently compiled an inventory of local farms.
 - Northfield’s Nathan L’Etoile is now Assistant Commissioner at MDAR.
- **Leyden**
 - Succeeded in getting a Right to Farm Bylaw voted in.
 - Has gotten help from the local tech school with Right to Farm signs.
 - Held a Blueberry Pancake Breakfast with berries from Leyden’s Highland Farm to raise funds for the town fair (featuring antique tractors, draft horses, and related events).
 - Got the town to waive farm animal and equipment excise taxes.
 - Is working to get realtors to respect the Right to Farm Bylaw.
- **South Hadley**
 - Recently formed its new AgCom, which was voted in earlier this year.
- **Hatfield**
 - Sponsored its Third Harvest Festival last fall.
 - Will conduct another in a series of open agricultural forums in January, this one on horses and manure management.
 - Has gotten the town to institute a lower water rate for farmers.
 - Is implementing Farm to School legislation.
- **Northampton**
 - Is getting involved in a city-wide debate about the probable purchase and future uses for a local property, the Bean farm, as ag land and/or recreational fields.
- **Deerfield**
 - Hosted the December 12 Western Mass AgCom Gathering.
 - Hopes to become involved in the Town’s master plan process.
- **Southwick**
 - Sought (but has been denied) small budget amounts from other boards (asking .01 percent from each).
 - Finished its Right to Farm Bylaw and a farm map and brochure.
 - Is working to help a local farmer who has been bucking multiple state agencies and conflicting regulations in attempting both to improve his land as wildlife habitat and to get the land under an APR.

DEFINING AGRICULTURE

Commissioner Scott Soares reported at the Deerfield gathering that MDAR is working on consolidating the definition of farming so there is more consistency, since at present there are quite a few different versions in state law.

He said, “While we certainly defer to the 128 1A definition (below), we have encouraged Ag Coms to think in the broadest terms when defining farming in their communities. I don’t want anyone to get the impression that we’re changing the definition of Ag in any way, rather that the department recognizes the great and increasing diversity of Massachusetts Agriculture and remains committed to our ability to represent the commonwealth’s ag industry in the broadest terms.”

(Chapter 128, Section 1A reads as follows:

“Farming” or “agriculture” shall include farming in all of its branches and the cultivation and tillage of the soil, dairying, the production, cultivation, growing and harvesting of any agricultural, aquacultural, floricultural or horticultural commodities, the growing and harvesting of forest products upon forest land, the raising of livestock including horses, the keeping of horses as a commercial enterprise, the keeping and raising of poultry, swine, cattle and other domesticated animals used for food purposes, bees, fur-bearing animals, and any forestry or lumbering operations, performed by a farmer, who is hereby defined as one engaged in agriculture or farming as herein defined, or on a farm as an incident to or in conjunction with such farming operations, including preparations for market, delivery to storage or to market or to carriers for transportation to market.)

MOVING TOWARD A STATEWIDE AGCOM ASSOCIATION

A 20-member statewide AgCom steering committee has been meeting regularly under the guidance of Irene Winkler of Pilgrim RC&D, with help from Attorney Frank DiLuna. The strong consensus of those AgComs who responded to this year’s questionnaire was that it would make sense to form a statewide association as long as it didn’t cost AgComs money. The group hopes to find sources of funds to cover staffing and associated costs of such an association. Details will follow.

HILLTOWN FARMERS BIODIESEL COOPERATIVE

Heath AgCom member Dave Freeman is one of five Franklin and Berkshire County farmers who have set up the Hilltown Farmers Biodiesel Cooperative. Dave reported on the group’s progress to the AgCom gathering in Deerfield, mentioning that so far they have been able to press about 2 quarts of oil from each 10 lbs of sunflower seed, and a total of more than 100 gallons of oil per acre of sunflowers.

The purpose of the cooperative is to demonstrate that farmers can produce biodiesel fuel cooperatively, locally, affordably, and environmentally sustainably in quantities that meet the needs of New England’s small farms. They have worked with Field to Table, an agricultural consulting company that helped the group secure a \$108,000 state Agricultural Innovation Center Grant for the project. The group now owns a seed press and mobile biodiesel processor and by next spring the members hope that part of the fuel that runs their tractors will come from sunflower, canola and crambe grown on their own fields.

The group also includes Tedd White and Lisa Turner of Hawley, Doug Mason of Heath, Michael Balawender of Cheshire (AgCom member), and Gary Alibozek of Adams (also an AgCom member). According to Dave Freeman, as of late December Gary Alibozek was hoping the weather would warm enough to process biodiesel fuel and Michael Balawender had just finished harvesting about 35 acres of sunflowers.

NEW AGAWAM AG COMMISSION – 130 TOTAL STATEWIDE

The Mayor's office in Agawam reports that appointments to the new Ag Commission in Agawam are in progress and that the Commission should be up and running soon. There are now 130 AgComs statewide and 100 towns with Right to Farm Bylaws. New Ag Commissions this year include these:

- Agawam
- Ashburnham
- Chelmsford
- Millis
- Phillipston
- Pittsfield
- Plymouth
- Richmond
- Shutesbury
- South Hadley
- Stockbridge
- West Boylston