

Western Massachusetts Ag Commission Newsletter / January 2011

Welcome to the second Western Mass AgCom Newsletter. We will send these newsletters out frequently 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) or Kathy Orlando (shefland@bcn.net).

1. Upcoming Western Mass AgCom Conferences

On Saturday, February 5, 2011, Hancock Shaker Village (Route 20, Hancock) and the Hancock and Pittsfield Ag Commissions will host the 8th gathering for western Mass Agricultural Commission members, farmers and interested friends of agriculture.

On Saturday, March 5, 2011, the Deerfield Ag Commission will host the 9th gathering for western Mass Agricultural Commission members, farmers, and interested friends of agriculture at Deerfield Town Hall, 8 Conway Street, South Deerfield.

We will send out registration forms as soon as the agenda is finished. The fee for registration and lunch will be \$15 per person. We hope that every western Mass AgCom can be represented!

The new Mass Association of Agricultural Commissions joins with the Mass Department of Agricultural Resources and many other regional groups in sponsoring these gatherings.

2. Mass Association of Agricultural Commissions (MAAC) is up and running and asks that AgComs confirm their interest in joining MAAC

The following is an excerpt from a letter from Dick Ward, Carver AgCom and MAAC President:

The Massachusetts Association of Agricultural Commissions (MAAC) was organized this year to support Massachusetts' municipal Agricultural Commissions (AgComs). With your input, 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 in 2011. 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>. If you have questions please call Irene Winkler at (508) 295-1317 x 130 or email her at irene.winkler@ma.usda.gov.

Also, MAAC is in the process of planning regional workshops for AgComs and we want to know what topics you want to be addressed. If you have other suggestions about training and workshops we want to hear from you. Again please email irene.winkler@ma.usda.gov with any and all of your ideas.

MAAC was established to help you, AgComs, fulfill your potential as leaders in your communities and we look forward to hearing from you now and in the future.

I am also happy to answer any questions you may have about MAAC and can be reached at rjward7@verizon.net or by calling (781) 361-5425.

Sincerely,

RICHARD F. WARD
President

3. New Easthampton AgCommission – now 138 total statewide.

The Easthampton City Council, thanks to great organizing work by Councilor Andrea Burns and a wide-ranging group of Easthampton farmers, unanimously passed an Ordinance creating an Easthampton AgCommission. That brings the statewide total to 138 AgComs and 111 Right to Farm Bylaws.

New Ag Commissions in 2010

Easthampton – Hampshire County
Foxborough – Norfolk County
Hawley – Franklin County
Holden – Worcester County
Medway – Worcester County

Towns with New Right to Farm Bylaws in 2010:

Granby – Hampshire County
New Salem – Franklin County
Peru – Berkshire County
Rowe – Franklin County

4. Easthampton City Council Resolution

Easthampton City Council recently passed the following resolution:

“Regarding the use of local agricultural produce in school lunches”

September 15th, 2010, Submitted by Councilor Burns

WHEREAS: The City of Easthampton recognizes the importance of fruits and vegetables as part of a nutritional diet for the health of our residents, especially our children, and

WHEREAS: We understand the importance of healthy food in reducing the occurrence of childhood obesity and associated health concerns, and

WHEREAS: We support our farms in Easthampton and neighboring communities for the preservation of our cultural heritage and for the economic benefit and,

WHEREAS: We support legislation, in both the Federal and State legislatures that promote the “Farm to School” project, be it

RESOLVED: That we the City Council of Easthampton, MA, hereby recognize the commitment of our city’s food service contractor (Chartwells) to use fruit and vegetables from small and medium sized farms in school lunches year-round and that we make it a priority to favor companies in the future that follow a policy of purchasing local agricultural products.

5. Gill warrant article to exempt farms from excise tax on animals, machinery, and equipment

Gill Town Meeting recently passed the following article:

“Shall the Town of Gill cease assessing the excise imposed under General Laws Chapter 59, Section 8A on certain animals, machinery and equipment owned by individuals and non-corporate entities principally engaged in agriculture?”

6. Support information for AgComs interested in proposing to exempt farms from the excise tax on animals, machinery, and equipment

Cheryl Lekstrom, MDAR Contractor, has kindly provided the following information and suggestions:

Waiver of Animal Excise Tax

Towns that have waived animal excise and farm equipment excise tax:

Berlin (May 11, 2009, vote was 150-40), Stow (passed May 12, 2009), Rowley, Oakham (Passed May 18, 2009), Cambridge, Hatfield

(Note: we would like to hear from other AgComs whose towns have proposed or passed farm excise tax exemptions.)

Section 2 of the Dairy Farm Stabilization Act, Chapter 310 of the Acts of 2008, provides: “Section 8A of chapter 59 of the General Laws, as so appearing, is hereby amended by adding the following paragraph: ‘The local appropriating authority, as defined in section 21C, may, by a two-thirds vote, seek voter approval to not impose the excise established by this section.’”

Here is the link: <http://www.mass.gov/legis/laws/seslaw08/slo80310.htm>

When requesting a waiver of farm animal and equipment excise tax, AgComs might want to consider these talking points:

1. Many of the excise tax bills are for less than the cost of collection.
2. The creation of the bills makes for complicated valuation decisions.
3. Go back to the fairness principle applied to the Cost of Community Services from The

nationwide American Farmland Trust study): The REAL property tax contribution of privately owned working lands subsidizes residential land uses that do not cover their own costs. Is it fair that farm properties which generate more public revenues than they receive back in public services continue to be taxed?

4. You can waive it - by law. If you (as an AgCom) didn't at least request it, then you wouldn't be looking out for your community of farmers.

5. Many towns have never charged an animal or equipment excise tax and many towns that used to discontinued doing so three or four years ago due to #1 and #2 above.

Berlin's speaking points, generously shared by the Berlin AgCom, are as follows:

The DOR issued a ruling in February 2009 that a vote to eliminate the Farm Tax had to be done by referendum at a Town Election and not at a Town Meeting. So, at the Ag Com's request, the Select Board unanimously voted to put our referendum on the May 11, 2009, ballot.

The AgCom then went to the local newspaper and had an article written on the subject just before election day. The main points in the article were:

The Commonwealth's Dairy Preservation Act 310 of 2008 allows towns to cease assessing farm excise tax on farm animals, machinery and equipment for ALL FARMERS.

- **At present, farms in Berlin pay an average of \$232.18 (FY05-FY09) in Farm Excise Tax.**
- **On some farms, the equipment and machinery being taxed is 40+ years old!**
- **Studies have shown that farms contribute more to town treasuries than they receive in services (It costs the towns less to have farms than it does to have more homes or malls).**
- **A YES VOTE will eliminate the administrative tasks for both the Assessors' and the Tax Collector's offices by not collecting the Farm Excise Tax.**
- **A YES VOTE will have minimal fiscal impact on taxpayers and the town while helping to sustain the farming activities that currently exist in Berlin and preserve our quality of life.**

7. Winter Amherst Farmers Market

The following is a message from Michael Docter, a member of the Hadley AgCom and formerly manager of the Western Mass Food Bank Farm.

I don't know if you have heard, but there is an exciting new Winter Farmers Market at the Amherst Middle School. There will be an unbelievable selection of delicious local food. Over 25 farmers and food producers have joined together to offer everything from beautiful baby salad greens and bok choy to artisanal cheese, sweet and crunchy carrots, grass fed lamb, pork and beef. The list is too big to fit on this page--Apex Orchard's famous apples (have you tried their Honey Crisp?!?), Sidehill Farm's luscious yogurt, El Jardin's sour dough breads fresh out of the oven.

Atlas Farm, Stone Soup Farm, Red Fire Farm and Simple Gifts will have their wonderful veggie selections. Winter Moon Roots with their carrots, beets, and psychedelic watermelon radishes. Bug Hill Farm's Black Currant Cordials.....And if it gets cold, Bally Farm has hats, gloves and mittens knitted from their own sheep wool!

Because local food is always a cause for celebration, we are making it a festive event with free music from Darlingside. There will be prepared local delicacies served by The Turkish Kitchen, Tom Hidas' Curried Veggies (formerly of Amber Waves Restaurant) and the Black Sheep Deli. Live music too. Don't miss it!!!

Who: 25 local farmers and producers.

Where: Amherst Middle School, 170 Chestnut St., Amherst MA

What: A Brand New Winter Farmers Market

When: Every Saturday from 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM (Starts December 4th)*

Why: Because the market will be warm and cozy and have lots of great food!

**** I am writing to you because these Farmers Need Your Help!!! Please help spread the word. Please forward this email to your friends and neighbors and post on your face book accounts ...

Thanks for joining us at the Amherst Winter Market...and for eating local all year round!

- Michael Docter

8. New “PVGrows Loan Fund” for food and agricultural infrastructure businesses

Larry Dixon of the South Hadley AgCom provided the following information:

The PVGrows Loan Fund (<http://www.buylocalfood.org/page.php?id=283>) offers low-interest loans to businesses that fill key gaps in the infrastructure of the Pioneer Valley local food system. PVGrows is looking for committed entrepreneurs with well-researched plans to develop facilities or activities which expand the market for Pioneer Valley-grown agricultural products, such as post-harvest handling, processing, marketing or distribution.

Now accepting new applications. Next Deadlines: December 15, 2010 & February 15, 2011.

* Are you handling, processing, marketing, or distributing local agricultural products? * Does your business activity improve sales for Pioneer Valley farms? * Are you looking for financing? Find out more at www.pvgrows.org.

9. Mass Agriculture in the Classroom upcoming events

Debi Hogan of Mass Ag in the Classroom has kindly provided the following information:

- **2011 Winter Conference:** We are now making plans for our 2011 Winter Agriculture in the Classroom Conference. Mark your calendar for **Saturday, March 12, 2011** and plan to join us at the Paul R. **Baird Middle School in Ludlow**. A choice of six workshops will run concurrently through the day during each of the four workshop sessions. We are also now looking for presenters and workshop ideas for this annual conference. If you have an idea for a workshop that you would like to offer, please let us know. If there is a workshop that you would like to attend, let us know you interest and we will do our best to find a presenter.

- **The 2011 Massachusetts Agriculture Calendar makes a terrific holiday gift** that will help your friends and family celebrate the seasons of agriculture in Massachusetts. Published annually by Massachusetts Agriculture in the Classroom in cooperation with the **Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources** and the **U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service**, each calendar month features a photograph spotlighting the diversity of agriculture in Massachusetts along with agricultural and conservation facts, teacher tips, events, websites and a seasonal crop list. All calendar sales benefit Massachusetts Agriculture in the Classroom. **To order a calendar:** send \$10 to Massachusetts Agriculture in the Classroom, P. O. Box 345, Seekonk, MA 02771. A discount price of \$5 each is being offered for orders of five or more (i.e. 5 calendars for \$25; 6 calendar for \$30, etc.)
- **Remember Massachusetts Agriculture in the Classroom in the season of giving with a donation.** We are a very small non-profit with a big impact. All donations support our education programs and mini-grants and will be acknowledged in our 2010 Annual Report. Thank you.

Debi Hogan, Massachusetts Agriculture in the Classroom, P.O. Box 345
 Seekonk, MA 02771, 508-336-4426, massaginclassroom@earthlink.net,
www.aginclassroom.org

10. Microloan Fund for New England Farmers – Jan 28 Deadline

The Carrot Project is pleased to announce that the Strolling of the Heifers Microloan Fund for New England Farmers and the MassDevelopment/Strolling of the Heifers Small Farm Loan Program serving residents of **Massachusetts** will be accepting **prequalified applications for our Winter deadline through January 28, 2011 for loans of \$15,000 or less.** There is an additional deadline in March of 2011. For more information, please go to www.thecarrotproject.org/farm_financing or contact Dorothy Suput at 617-666-9637 or at dsuput@thecarrotproject.org.