

The Massachusetts Model

Supporting Farms at the State Level

IN MASSACHUSETTS, GOVERNOR DEVAL PATRICK has undertaken an ambitious agenda to save the commonwealth's farmland and support the business of farming.

Across the country, states are exploring ways to protect farmland, expand market opportunities for farmers, and meet growing demand for local food. Massachusetts is one state leading the way. Under the leadership of Governor Deval Patrick, the commonwealth enacted key initiatives to support farms and farmland last year, including increased funding for farmland protection, an economic safety net for dairy farmers, and new initiatives to spur on-farm energy conservation and reinvestment in farm infrastructure. In January, Patrick signed new conservation tax credit legislation into law, providing a valuable new land protection tool. *American Farmland* interviewed Governor Patrick about the commonwealth's ground-breaking efforts to protect farmland and support farm profitability.

Q. *You have shown a remarkable commitment to agriculture, forestry and working lands in the first two years of your administration, making significant investments in programs that protect working lands and expand economic opportunities for farms and forest-based businesses. What fuels your strong interest in these resource-based industries and the lands they rely on?*

A. My interest is both institutional and personal. I spend a lot of time in the western part of the state, and I am keenly aware of our state's rich farming tradition and the tenacity with which Massachusetts farmers have held onto that tradition over the centuries. Even today—in the face of enormous economic pressure on farmers to sell or develop their land—we still have nearly 7,700 farms supporting more than 500,000 acres of working landscape across the commonwealth. Not only as governor, but as



Gov. Patrick with farmers at Hager Farm in Colrain, Mass.

a citizen who enjoys the bounty of our lands, I appreciate the vital role farms play in contributing to healthier lifestyles and preserving our beautiful landscape.

Q. *At the Farm Aid concert in Mansfield last fall, you mentioned the record number of new farm stands in Massachusetts and said, "Locally grown has become part of the culture in the commonwealth." Your administration has supported a number of initiatives to identify and encourage the purchase and production of Massachusetts-grown food and farm products. What more do you think state government can do to increase the availability and consumption of locally grown foods?*

A. Massachusetts is seeing a groundswell of interest in locally grown produce. Twenty-three new farmers markets were added last year—the largest increase in a single year ever—and as the 2009 growing season kicks off, we are expecting even more. The increase in farmers markets reflects growth in the Massachusetts agricultural sector overall, as well as the growing taste for local food on the part of consumers. The Massachusetts agricultural industry grew by more than 25 percent from 2002 to 2007, both in crop and livestock sales and in the total number of farms. We are doing a lot to keep this momentum going, from investing in the protection of farmland to helping farmers thrive and compete, to helping farmers gain control of their energy costs through efficiency and renewable energy investments.

Q. *In August of 2007, you made a historic commitment to land preservation, pledging to invest at least \$50 million annually—a 65 percent increase over yearly land protection spending during the previous four years (adjusted for inflation). How do you plan to build on this success and continue to protect the commonwealth's farm and forest lands for the future?*

A. I am doing my best, under increasingly difficult circumstances, to maintain the most ambitious land

conservation agenda in the commonwealth's history. We met this benchmark for land protection in 2008 and our agencies are well on their way to another successful year, leveraging additional investment in land protection by private land trusts and municipalities, as well as individual landowners.

Q. *Recent census data tells us that over 60 percent of the land in farms in Massachusetts is managed by farmers over the age of 55. While there is growing interest among young people in farming, access to affordable farmland is one of the biggest barriers to starting or expanding a farm business. Do you see a role for state government in helping young and beginning farmers get started?*

A. Yes, I do see a role for government in preserving agriculture in Massachusetts for generations to come. My Department of Agricultural Resources offers courses such as "Tilling the Soil of Opportunity," to help existing farms enhance their operations, and "Exploring Your Small Farm Dream," to help young people who want to go into farming get started. And our Agricultural Preservation Restriction program gives financial support to farmers who keep their land in farming now and for future generations, rather than give in to the enticements of developers.

Q. *Massachusetts farmers provide a number of "ecosystem services" for the public, including air cleansing, water filtration, reduction of runoff and sedimentation and carbon sequestration. Would you consider establishing a program that offers payments to farmers in exchange for following conservation practices that provide environmental benefits and address environmental concerns?*

A. We already reward Massachusetts farmers who make a commitment to environmental leadership through our Agricultural Environmental Enhancement

Program, which funds farm projects such as improved irrigation systems, solar-powered pumps, animal waste system upgrades, and better pesticide storage facilities that improve water quality, conserve water and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Since 1999, Massachusetts growers and producers have received over \$2 million to help them address environmental concerns on farms across the state.

Q. *Thanks to your leadership and the hard work by members of the Dairy Revitalization Task Force, Massachusetts enacted the Dairy Farm Preservation Act just in time to provide crucial relief to dairy farmers as milk prices plummeted this year. Your administration has also made energy efficiency and renewable energy opportunities for farms a priority. Do you have a vision for the role the commonwealth's forests and farms can play in "greening" the Massachusetts economy?*

A. As people who work the land, farmers and foresters have always had a deep appreciation for the value of conserving natural resources. There is a green revolution going on in Massachusetts right now, as the commonwealth takes its rightful place as a hub of clean energy innovation. Our natural resource-based businesses, including farms and forests, have a unique role to play as we as a society make choices and investments that lead to a green economy. I am especially encouraged by the role they can play in the development of an advanced biofuels industry, which could put to work Massachusetts-grown cellulosic feedstocks, such as woody residues and agricultural wastes, as well as energy crops like switchgrass and crambe. Both of those are being studied by researchers at the University of Massachusetts.

Q. *Massachusetts has been at the forefront of many groundbreaking efforts to save farmland and support the business of farming, from the Agricultural Preservation Restriction and Farm Viability programs to the Community Preservation Act. What lessons can Massachusetts offer to other states?*

A. When it comes to measuring success as a society, I am fond of saying that what we preserve is just as important as what we build. The last time I checked, we still weren't able to manufacture new land. So, whether it's farms and forests in the countryside or plots of land for urban parks, I believe government has an obligation to set land aside for the use and enjoyment of future generations. In Massachusetts, we have found great success in partnerships as a way to achieve land conservation goals. I would encourage other states to adopt this strategy: teaming up with municipalities, non-profit environmental groups and land trusts to get the most 'bang' for the conservation buck. We all come out winners in the end.



Governor Patrick swears in new Massachusetts Commissioner of Agriculture Scott Soares in April.

ANNA WACLAWICZEK