



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE REGIONAL MEMBER (FARM) POLICY COMMITTEE

MEETING SUMMARY (DRAFT)

JUNE 9, 2023

The agenda and panelists bios from the meeting can be found at:

<https://www.mwcog.org/events/2023/6/9/food-and-agriculture-regional-member-farm-ad-hoc-advisory-committee/>

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

- City of Fairfax Councilmember Jon Stehle, FARM Chair, called the meeting to order at 10:03 am and asked participants to introduce themselves in the chat.
- Approval of the April meeting minutes will be held during the August FARM meeting.
- Chair Stehle shared that, as a token of the FARM Committee's gratitude for their service, he provided past FARM Chair Mary Cheh and Craig Rice tomato planter boxes made from wood sourced from trees native to Northern Virginia.

MEMBER REFLECTIONS ON LOUDOUN FARM TOUR

- Chair Stehle shared that over 40 FARM members from across the region attended the FARM tour. They were joined by staff from USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service Division and the MWCOG Chesapeake Bay Water Resources Policy Committee. Attendees visited multiple farms in Western Loudoun County and had the opportunity to learn firsthand about the obstacles and struggles that our local farmers encounter. The tour included stops at:
 - Long Stone Farm, a grass-based diversified agriculture operation;
 - George's Mill Farm, a dairy with goats;
 - Potomac Vegetable Farms, a specialty crop operation that has been established for over 50 years; and
 - Wheatland Springs Farm and Brewery, a brewery that grows its grain on site.
- Member reflections on the tour included:
 - One participant remarked on the barriers that farmers face to basic needs like healthcare access and that addressing these challenges would require a consortium of folks from across the region.
 - Kim Haun from Arlington County commented on the overwhelming volume of local, state, and federal permits, regulations, and policies that farmers have to be aware of. She encouraged the group to find a way to streamline these. Randy Gibson and Colby Ferguson share related thoughts.
 - Elisabet Eppes from Maryland Hunger Solutions shared that it was important to hear from farmers about the economic impracticality of launching and running a small farm; especially in Loudoun County where land and housing prices are astronomically high.

- Sara Hoverter from Georgetown Law School encouraged consideration on how can zoning policies can be leveraged to preserve prime agricultural soil for agriculture.
- Future farm tour location and theme suggestions included a focus on controlled environment agriculture, urban farming, and aquaculture and providing opportunities for cross-jurisdictional learning and best practice adoption related to agriculture focused economic development. Members were also interested in learning from local food buyers, including restaurants, schools, distributors, and food hubs.

MAJOR ISSUES SHAPING THE FARM BILL

- Kathleen Merrigan, Executive Director, Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems, Arizona State University, and former U.S. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture provided an overview of her recent article: [“These four challenges will shape the next farm bill – and how the US eats.”](#) She also provided observations on other issues that elected leaders (local, state, federal) and advocates from Metropolitan Washington and the Chesapeake Bay states may want to consider focusing on.
- Dr. Merrigan identified the following key issues advocates need to keep in mind:
 - The cost:
 - The Farm Bill is very expensive (1.5 trillion dollars) and there may not be an appetite for such an expensive bill after the debt ceiling bill and in light of pandemic spending. Congress will likely extend the current Farm Bill. It is possible it will not be taken on until 2025 because of the presidential election.
 - Nutrition Assistance accounts for most of FARM bill costs:
 - SNAP work requirements will be on the table.
 - Increases and new provisions were implemented in SNAP during the pandemic, advocates would like to see these made permanent.
 - Thrifty Food Plan costs have been recalculated: an additional \$.40/meal was added. The anti-hunger community is preparing to fight on these not being rolled back.
 - The Child Nutrition Act Reauthorization is way overdue (it’s been 10 years); some program changes could be wedged into a Farm bill.
 - Climate:
 - The Inflation Reduction Act allocated 19.5 billion dollars to USDA and Secretary Vilsack also allocated funding through a USDA mechanism.
 - The science isn’t clear about how to measure soil carbon (i.e. how long it stays sequestered and how it impacts climate change).
 - Ag leaders are interested in cutting down the costs of the bills so they may take funding out of this area.
 - Inexperienced Legislators:
 - 1/3 of Congress are newly elected and haven’t worked on a Farm Bill.
 - This is exciting because of new ideas and priorities; however, often new congress people follow leadership’s cues on the Farm Bill due to its complexity.
 - Given all this, Dr. Merrigan doesn’t see the potential for significant change from 2018. However, she encouraged members to keep an eye on new organic innovations, urban agriculture, and food security.
- Questions:

- Q: How can a regional group like ours successfully lobby on the Farm Bill?
 - A: Build a coalition of environmental, nutrition, and sustainable ag groups. Work your delegation and figure out crosswalks to other delegations to understand who has similar interests to yours. For instance, who in Arkansas (ranking member is from Arkansas)? Go out of your area for your agenda to find like-minded powerful and well positioned legislators that can move it forward.
- Q: I like the coalition idea, particularly folks in DC who do not have representation. Do you have tips for DC?
 - A: Every group has their wish list– think about how you populate your ideas on their wish list. Know which groups are the most powerful and focus on them. If your ideas cost money, you need to be prepared to suggest cuts or items to defund.
- Q: The issues we’re concerned about on nutrition programs will/have come up in debt ceiling debate, farm bills, and appropriations. There have been efforts by advocates focused on sustainable ag to get more of their programs into mandatory programs. USDA’s discretionary budget is very small, 28 billion dollars or so. The mandatory programs are the lion share of the budget. Can the appropriations committee make cut into these programs?
 - A: You do need to keep an eye on the membership of the appropriations committee - but it’s likely the members will be supportive of the FARM Committee agenda. If they’re not, the language is only good for a year and they’re really not supposed to tinker with the rules process.

UPDATE FROM THE OFFICE OF REPRESENTATIVE ABIGAIL SPANBERGER

- Rebecca Eichmann, Legislative Director, Rep. Abigail Spanberger (VA-07) provided a brief update from Virginia Congresswoman Abigail Spanberger’s office on the Farm Bill, including outreach, priorities, and how reauthorization is proceeding. Representative Spanberger serves on the House Agriculture Committee (and is the ranking member of the Conservation, Research, and Biotechnology Subcommittee) and is the only member of the region’s Congressional delegation on a House or Senate agricultural committee.
- Rep Spanberger’s priorities include:
 - Reduce barriers for farmers to access USDA programs and funding, including those run by Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency
 - Through the Inflation Reduction Act, Congress made a 19.5 billion dollar investment in USDA conservation programs. USDA’s conservation programs encourage farmers to adopt conservation best management practices; they have benefits for farm enterprises and larger environmental benefits. These programs are voluntary and historically demand has far outweighed supply; this is in part due to the requirement to work with a Technical Service Provider (TSP) through NRCS before applying. There has been a shortage of TSPs and a backlog of applications which has meant farmers can’t access the funding or technical assistance they need.
 - Rep Spanberger is working on addressing challenges with accessing TSPs through several channels. She has introduced the Increase TSP Access Act to streamline certification requirements and ensure TSPs are paid a market rate. She is also working to strengthen the

Pathways internship program for TSPs and building up interest in TSP jobs through partnering with K-12 and higher learning education institutions.

- Reduce the barriers farmers face in purchasing land and equipment through the Farm Service Agency.
- Strengthen local and regional food supply chains through codifying programs like the USDA Regional Food Business Centers
- Defend SNAP and other nutrition section provisions including TEFAP and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program.
 - Rep Spanberger is a strong supporter of SNAP and has spoken in Congress on the importance of SNAP and here opposition to any cuts
 - She introduced the bipartisan Hot Foods Act which removes red tape to purchasing hot bar foods at the grocery store.
 - She is also supportive of expanding the commodity focused programs in Farm Bill like TEFAP (through which USDA provides foods from farmers to food banks) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (which provides food to low-income seniors)

INTERACTIVE ROUND TABLE ON THE FARM BILL

Each panelist provided remarks highlighting major issues and priorities they are tracking.

- Colby Ferguson, Government Relations Director, Maryland Farm Bureau (MDFB):
 - Title 1: Large component of the agriculture side of the farm bill. Crop insurance programs provide insurance for farmers who experience climate disasters. MDFB would like to see expanded specialty crop insurance; MD and VA rely on many of these crops that are not covered in Title One. The Dairy Margin Coverage program should be expanded – it is a lifesaver for the dairy industry.
 - Title 2: Streamline the NRCS conservation practice approval process. It can take 3 years to get approved for funding because the experts aren't in place to review plans. He would also like to see working lands conservation programs instead of land retirement (which takes farmland out of food production).
 - Title 11: Expand the insured commodities to include specialty crops. Develop better risk management tools for growers, including contract growers so producers like contract poultry farmers on the Eastern Shore of MD can receive support.
 - SNAP/Nutrition Provision: Consider the inclusion of block grant programs for food banks and food networks to purchase crops directly from specialty farmers in the SNAP program. Provide technical and monetary assistance to farmers to facilitate online SNAP sales, which are not currently possible.
- Hannah Quigley, Policy Specialist, National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition:
 - Sustain federal investments in infrastructure processing and market development for local producers. These are primarily captured under the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP) and some COVID-era programs.
 - Programs like the Regional Food Business Centers, Regional Food System Infrastructure, and Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreements opened doors to build local and regional food system economies. They could be complemented with tailored business technical assistance and other offerings to ensure access to federal grant programs and competitiveness in

the marketplace for new operations. Also, streamline applications and reduce cost-share for producers and growers. Tweak programs to allow grant funds to be spent on infrastructure like cold storage and vehicles to transport fresh produce.

- Meat-processing: improve processing capacity and choice for farmers and ranchers that have smaller herds and may be using specialty feeds. Fund workforce development and training for workers in plants and TA to plants for food safety planning. Support regional and interstate trade and market identification.
- NSAC is watching the Local Farms in Food act, Farmers Markets and Food Bank Revitalization act, Fresh Produce Procurement Reform act, and the Strengthening Local Processing act.
- Vanessa García Polanco, National Young Farmers Coalition
 - Land access is the top challenge for their members. They are outbid on farmland when it's for sale and it's rarely for sale. We don't have enough mechanisms and tools to increase land and credit access. They are asking USDA to do more research to address this.
 - Climate and conservation: NRCS's programs like EQIP and CRP need to work better for on-farm innovation. Many farms use high-tunnels and want more peer-to-peer teaching programs and research on sustainable farming.
 - Young farmers struggle with student loans, childcare access, and mental health. The coalition's Farm Stress Assistance Network grant is working to address this.
 - Credit access: they're not as competitive to apply for loans because of student debt and they're struggling to build relationships with USDA. There is a cultural mismatch as many USDA programs were created for monoculture farming and large operations; programs aren't being tailored for small sustainable farms.
 - Land Access Marketing and Capital Program—authorize and get it funded! This was a farm incubator pilot program launching by IRA funding.
 - Other priorities include: infrastructure programs related to market access; local food procurement; increasing SNAP incentives; and, enable farmers to gain full access to nutrition program funding (online SNAP sales).
- Michael J. Wilson, Director, Maryland Hunger Solutions
 - SNAP work requirements and time limits – the inclusion and focus on that in the debt ceiling debate was discouraging.
 - Lessons learned from policy changes during pandemic aren't being carried forward.
 - Congress hasn't done a CNR since 2010 – it's better to have what we have than have a reauthorization that is damaging.
 - Hot Meals – HR3519
 - Increase the utilization of restaurant meals program – no maker bill. Homeless and disabled SNAP recipients can use benefits at participating restaurants.
 - Closing the Meal Gap Act – SB 1336 HB 3037: Expand and enhance SNAP benefit level for participants. More enhanced meal plan for SNAP participants so that participants can have a healthier diet.
 - HR1510: End work requirements and time limits for all. SNAP is not an employment program, it's a nutrition program. Youth aging out of foster care, vets, and homeless time limits were ended during the debt ceiling debate.
 - Enhance Access to SNAP: reforms to allow more college students to participate.

- Responding to Colby and MDFB: MDHS would not support a block grant program in the SNAP program – or taking money out of SNAP program to fund it. SNAP participants need more options; online purchases for farmers is great. Online SNAP sales at grocery stores was a lifesaver for seniors during the pandemic.
- The Lift the Bar Act provides access for lawfully present immigrants and removing the five-year waiting period to access SNAP.

FARM COMMITTEE BUSINESS

- Jon Stehle, FARM Chair: We will hold a short virtual business meeting on August 11th to approve minutes from this meeting and the April meeting then.
- Update from the Catalytic Opportunities Work Group (Victoria Treski): The workgroup issued an RFP for consultants to document the conditions faced by Black farmers and identify opportunities for institutional food procurement sales with the goal of driving equitable policy change. They have paused that work to obtain feedback from stakeholders. They are in the final stages of a contract with Onward, a consultant group that specializes in design thinking and DEI, to host a listening session this fall and rethink the workgroup's RFP and scope.

ADJOURN

Jon Stehle, FARM Chair adjourned the meeting at 11:59 am.

The next regularly scheduled FARM Policy Committee meeting is Friday, April 14th at 10:00 am.

ATTENDANCE

Jon Stehle, Chair, City of Fairfax
 Kate Kennedy, Vice Chair, City of College Park
 Yesy Amaya, City of Manassas Park
 Heather Bruskin, Montgomery County Office of Food System Resilience
 Tara Clemons Johnson, Montgomery County (alternate)
 Andrew Friedson, Montgomery County
 Amy Jackson, City of Alexandria
 Rachel Jones, Maryland Department of Agriculture
 Libby Garvey, Arlington County
 Penny Gross, Fairfax County
 Carol McBryde, City of Bladensburg
 Randy Gibson, City of Takoma Park
 Kate Lee, DC Department of Energy and the Environment
 Sara Pollock Hoverter, Georgetown University
 Victoria Treski, Bainum Family Foundation
 Chris Van Vlack, Loudoun Soil and Water Conservation District
 Bridget Warren, Prince George's County Office of Food Security
 Kyra Cooke, Prince George's County Office of Food Security (alternate)
 Michael J Wilson, Maryland Hunger Solutions
 Julia Gross, Maryland Hunger Solutions (alternate)

Cindy Gibson, Office of Councilmember Friedson
Elizabeth Eppes, Maryland Hunger Solutions
Brittany Cook, Maryland Food System Resiliency Council
Ashley Sharp, Resurgence Consulting
Stephanie Hopkins, Arlington County
Caroline Howe, DC Department of Small and Local Business Development
Alice Chalmers, Sun Bird Farm and Senior Advisor to 4P Foods
Amanda Brewster, Caroline County Public Schools
Steve McHenry, MARBIDCO
Nancy Nunn, Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology
Stacey Evers, Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District
Mike Thielke, Executive Director at Eastern Shore Entrepreneurship Center
Beverly Bolster
Cassie Edner, Virginia Poverty Law Center and VA Hunger Solutions
Deborah Adeniji
Jack Ewart, MoCo Food Council
LaMonika Jones, DC Hunger Solutions
Marisa Koontz
Max Broad, DC Voters for Animals
Olivia Scuderi
Rachele Franceschi
Ramona Carroll, Fairfax County Neighborhood and Community Services
Unique Brooks, MD Hunger Solutions
Two call in numbers

Speakers

Dr. Kathleen Merrigan, Executive Director, Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems, Arizona State University
Rebecca Eichmann, Legislative Director, Rep. Abigail Spanberger (VA-07)
Hannah Quigley, National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Connor Kippe, NSAC
Colby Ferguson, MD FARM Bureau
Vanessa García Polanco, National Young Farmers Coalition
Michael J Wilson, MD Hunger Solutions

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