

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE REGIONAL MEMBER AD-HOC COMMITTEE (FARM)

MEETING SUMMARY (DRAFT)

APRIL 9, 2021

LINK TO ALL MEETING PRESENTATIONS AND MATERIALS:

<https://www.mwcog.org/events/2021/4/9/food-and-agriculture-regional-member-farm-ad-hoc-advisory-committee/>

DECISIONS AND ACTIONS:

- Short Term
 - Send a letter of support to the National Association of Counties (NACo) in support of its *Resolution to Guarantee Access to Federal Child Nutrition Programs*.
 - COG will develop a schedule of Metro DC food access and food security calls to share with FARM members. Please contact Lindsay Smith at lsmith@mwcog.org for more information.
 - Councilmember Cheh urged members to visit a farmers market that offers matching incentive programs to low-income shoppers to see these holistic programs at work.
- Medium and Long Term
 - Look at Zoning Ordinance regulations for barriers to farming and gardening.
 - Food system resilience is critical. It should be transformative and include the restoration of land to BIPOC farmers.
 - Protect farmland from development for the values it provides for local food production, food security, and the environment. Facilitate land access.

1. WELCOME, CALL TO ORDER, AND ROLL CALL

Councilmember Mary Cheh, FARM's Chair, called the meeting to order at 11:02 am.

2. RECAP OF PREVIOUS MEETING, MEETING SUMMARY APPROVAL, AND OTHER COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Chair Cheh reviewed key issues from the February meeting and action items. She proposed several deliverables for completion by October:

- Compendium of local policies promoting healthy food access, food security, and nutrition. Policies and programs that work at the nexus of addressing racial equity, historic patterns of disinvestment, environmental sustainability, and regional economic investment, are also of interest.
- Regional messaging social tool kit to reinforce the importance of school meals.
- Continued Metro DC food security and food access calls, held on Thursday afternoons. COG will develop a schedule to share with FARM members.
 - One call should discuss the importance of SNAP recertification.

Councilmember Craig Rice, FARM Vice Chair, provided an overview of the National Association of Counties (NACo) *Resolution to Guarantee Access to Federal Child Nutrition Programs*. Food insecurity has been one of the biggest issues of concern during the Covid-19 crisis. More must be done, including ensuring that students can go to school without worrying about meals or feeling stigmatized. Vice Chair Rice asked for

FARM's support for the resolution. Several members reiterated the importance of ensuring that children are not hungry but have the food they need to thrive.

Members approved the summary of the February 2021 FARM meeting. They also voted to send a letter to NACo to request that it make the *Resolution to Guarantee Access to Federal Child Nutrition Programs* a full resolution at its summer meeting.

3. FOOD SECURITY: COMMUNITY VOICE

Dr. Aminta H. Breaux, the President of Bowie State University (BSU) briefed FARM on BSU's approach to supporting food security on campus. BSU is Maryland's first historically, Black college and university. Part of the University of Maryland system and located in Prince George's County, BSU was founded in 1865 to train teachers as slavery was ending.

BSU's student body is becoming more diverse but about 49 percent of students qualify for Pell Grants and come from families with the highest level of need. There's an increasing need to help them afford education and the nourishment they require to succeed. A national survey has shown that significant numbers of college students struggle with food insecurity. BSU's own student survey has indicated this is an issue, including for some student athletes.

BSU approaches student wellness in a holistic manner and in a way that destigmatizes support. Working with dining services and Food Lion, BSU opened a Food and Nutrition Lounge where students can hang out, talk, and pick up food and other necessities. Capital Area Food Bank and BSU's sororities have been other partners. The lounge does accept donations.

Dr Breaux talked about some of BSU's nutrition and wellness programming carried out with the campus's food services company, Aladdin, as well as faculty research on food security and student engagement. BSU recently signed an agreement with the City of Bowie to expand its outdoor research labs, including in hydroponics.

Dr. Breaux welcomes the opportunity to explore partnership opportunities.

- Councilmember Stehle and Zachari Curtis at Dreaming Out Loud (DOL) plan to follow up with Derrick Cooley at BSU for subsequent discussion.
- Ms. Curtis shared DOL's mission and highlighted its Black Farmer CSA as one example of its programming to address racial injustice, food security, and community empowerment.
- Michael J Wilson referenced the recently passed Hunger Free Campus Grant Program legislation in the MD General Assembly.
- Councilmember Rice emphasized the importance of continuing to incorporate the perspectives of communities of color in FARM's work.

4. REGIONAL FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD ACCESS: REGIONAL DATA AND UPDATE ON THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN

Lindsay Smith, Regional Food Systems Planner at COG, provided an overview of food insufficiency and SNAP enrollment in the region. In summary:

- SNAP enrollment in COG region, measured in households and individuals, grew by 40 percent between January of 2020 and January 2021.
- February data indicates continued growth.
- COG can provide enrollment breakdowns by jurisdiction.
- There has been an increase in the amount of benefits that households receive during the pandemic.
- SNAP does not cover all monthly food needs but is first line of defense against hunger.
- Enrolling those eligible is critical, as is ensuring participants can maintain enrollment for as long as they need it.

- The VA General Assembly and Governor Northam have taken action expand eligibility for SNAP in the Commonwealth, effective July 1.
- SNAP enrollment will remain high for the foreseeable future.

COG has also analyzed data from the U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey from July 2020 to March 2021. Households with children are reporting higher rates of food insufficiency and there are disproportionate impacts to Hispanic or Latino and Black households, with and without children.

Crystal FitzSimons, the Director of School and Out-of-School Time Programs and the Food Research Action Center (FRAC), provided an overview of key provisions of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) which will benefit children and families. In summary:

Child Tax Credit is expected to cut child poverty in half.

- We've had a child tax credit for awhile but it was a lower value and not fully refundable.
- ARPA increases the value for families – if you have a child who's younger than 6, you will get \$3600 and for older kids, \$3000.
- Payments will be provided throughout the year, starting in July instead of a lump sum at the end of the year.
- Outreach and education will be needed. An online portal is going to be created for the program.
- The tax credit will not impact SNAP eligibility.

Pandemic EBT or P-EBT

- P-EBT provides nutrition resources to households who rely on free and reduced-price school meals when schools are closed.
- It is tied to meal eligibility and available to all students that qualify - provides the daily value of the free breakfast, lunch and snacks that the child would have received at school.
- The value of P-EBT has increased and there is accounting for virtual versus in-person learning.
- States are beginning to get their plans approved to release these funds, including funds from last fall.
- P-EBT was also extended to kids under 6 in SNAP households.
- Pandemic has been “summer on steroids” and what happens every summer to families when they lose access to school meals. Food insecurity goes up and kids experience a significant amount of learning loss, particularly low-income children.
- FRAC is focused on ensuring that P-EBT becomes permanent as a program for the summer and for winter and spring breaks.

School meal waivers

- The current USDA waivers for free meals expire at the end of September. FRAC and others are asking that USDA use its authority to extend these through the 2021-2022 school year.
- This will be critical for kids and families and for schools which lost a lot of revenue during Covid-19 due to lower participation and in some cases, increased distribution and other costs.

Note: On April 20th, the [USDA announced it would extend universal free meals through the 2021-2022 school year.](#)

5. FUTURE OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE IN THE REGION: FARMER ROUNDTABLE

Chris Van Vlack, Loudoun Soil and Water Conservation District and Loudoun Farm Bureau

A video of the farmer roundtable is available at this link: <https://www.mwcog.org/events/2021/4/9/food-and-agriculture-regional-member-farm-ad-hoc-advisory-committee/>

Prominent themes included: land preservation and access for farming, centering the needs of farmers, especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) farmers in building a resilient food system, providing resources to directly to farmers, and soil health.

Mr. Van Vlack reviewed trends in our region's agricultural economy. He noted that:

- The number of farms and land in farms continue to decline. There's been some growth in small farms.
- Over time, the amount of food the region produces has declined.
- There are also challenges to ensuring that farmers get an adequate price.
- COVID-19 has shown that our national food supply chain has been taken for granted. There is also new appreciation for local food.
- Important to have local production for these and other emergencies and land available to produce it.
- We're seeing some growth in direct market sales - whether it's meat, produce, grains, etc. This helps the farmer get a little return on their product rather than being a "price taker."
- The majority of the region's farmers farm part-time, sometimes this is related to health insurance.
- We need to increase diversity in conservation and agriculture to be representative of the people we're feeding.
- There's an increasing interest in healthy soils for carbon sequestration and we need to protect high quality, Class I and II agricultural soils as a foundation.
- The region has dropped below the goal for maintaining a certain amount of land in farms.
- There are many tools available to preserve farmland. It is essential to do so given that land the basis of so much.
- There's also a need for appropriately scaled infrastructure for processing and aggregation of meat, produce, and grains.

Hiu Newcomb and Stephen Bradford, Potomac Vegetable Farms

Hiu Newcomb is one of the founders and owners of Potomac Vegetable Farms in Fairfax and Loudoun Counties. Stephen Bradford is the third generation.

PVF's Fairfax County farm is four miles west of Tyson's Corner and was started in the 1960's. Ms. Newcomb remembers that there was a lot of good cattle in the area at the time, including red cattle lounging under apple and peach trees. They did not own land but were renting from people who were going out of farming – some were getting big checks from developers. By the mid-1970s, PVF saw that they were going to lose a lot of this rented land and found a 400 acre property in Loudoun County. They couldn't afford it, so they found other farmers who bought parts of it.

Ms. Newcomb shared that local farmers are happy to do their part to help feed the region and fill in gaps, including when there are supply chain problems. PVF saw enormous growth in its Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program last year and worked to provide surpluses to food assistance organizations. Ms. Newcomb's daughter Hana runs PVF.

Stephen Bradford started by expressing his gratitude and appreciation for his grandmother's accomplishments and work. Mr. Bradford said the conversation on farming and food system resilience is premature without the acknowledgement of the systemic racism that the system is built on – there needs to be a full redefinition of the food system.

He sees PVF as a cautionary tale and an example of the extreme limitations of the opportunities that exist in the present food system. PVF was founded when there was still a possibility of gaining access to land. The growing local food movement has overwhelmingly represented a continuing consolidation of power within the white community. Customers tend to all be middle or upper middle class and overwhelmingly white.

Mr. Bradford urged the committee to be transformative in its work as it thinks about access to land and BIPOC communities. He is hopeful that as a country and region, with the leadership of farmers of color, we're going to come to understand more about what land-based reparations should look like.

Ms. Newcomb and Mr. Bradford were asked to sum up their remarks by sharing what they're proudest of, what keeps them up at night, and what policymakers should know. Ms. Newcomb:

- Is most proud of is all the people who have come to work for PVF in the last five decades and all of the people that have come to PVF to visit and learn about farming.
- When they first started, there was nobody to help but now there's so many resources, like Future Harvest and its important Beginning Farmer Training Program.
- Farmers' training is critical and but it has been a challenge to generate a lot of real long lasting farmers that can farm here because of land access.
- A word of advice to others is to never try to farm alone – if its just you, you'll burnout.

Stephen Bradford:

- Most proud of the community that's going around the farm and on the land - affordable housing is a crucial issue in that respect.
- Something that keeps him up at night are the barriers to even access the barriers to farming and building coalitions.
- He's inspired by the leadership of farmers who are offering a truly new vision for what resilient community-based food systems could look like, including justice for Black farmers as envisioned by farmers like Chris Newman at Sylvanaqua Farms.

Amanda Cather, Plow and Stars Farm, Montgomery County Agricultural Advisory Committee, and Million Acre Challenge

Amanda Cather co-owns and operates a pasture-raised livestock farm on leased-land in Montgomery County. They're fortunate to have their farm in the Agricultural Reserve where farmland has been preserved, however, land access still remains an issue. She is also the Project Director for the Million Acre Challenge (MAC): a collaborative effort to improve soil health across the state of Maryland through the promotion of regenerative agriculture on one million acres of MD farmland by 2030.

Ms. Cather has been farming since 1996 and was a diversified vegetable farmer for 20 years. Plow and Stars Farm has been operating since 2014. They run about 100 sheep on about 40 acres. They practice intensive rotational grading are working hard to regenerate their land. They raise pastured poultry and have raised other pastured livestock and sell direct to consumers.

MAC defines regenerative agriculture as a way of farming that replenishes the functional capacities of the land. This kind of farming can help with environmental benefits, farm profitability, food security, and ultimately restoring agricultural communities, contributing to equity and public health. MAC doesn't have a model that it thinks can be imposed on farms. It wants to see money go to farmers to help them create models of regenerative farming that come from them, and to create systems that make sense for that farm in that place for that farmer.

Ms. Cather shared what she's most proud of, what keeps her up at night, and what policymakers should do. Ms. Cather:

- Is most proud of turning sunlight into protein by intensively managed, rotational grazing of their sheep and the opportunity to be part of the solution to climate change through careful land stewardship.

- The thing that keeps her up at night is the welfare of their animals and ensuring that everything possible is being done to ensure they're well cared for, that they're making the best use of their land, and that they're raising meat that's sustainable and affordable and accessible as possible.
- Three policy recommendations:
 - Protect prime farmland from development and improve land access.
 - Support the development or redevelopment of regional infrastructure and markets.
 - Support farmer's efforts to build healthy soils.

Gale Livingstone, Deep Roots Farm

Gale Livingstone is the owner of Deep Roots Farm (DRF), a 53 acre property acquired at the height of the pandemic. DRF is a diversified vegetable operation with chickens - layers for eggs and broilers. They're planning on expanding production this year with adding some ducks and starting other animal operations,

This is Ms. Livingstone's 10th year raising food after farming for years on rented land in various locations - sometimes in multiple locations. She does not come from a farming background and began by gardening in community garden plots in Montgomery County.

Ms. Livingstone purchased her farm through USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). However, purchasing land is just one cost involved in starting a farm.

Her transition to Prince Georges County was primarily driven by the need to be closer to her market outlets - all are located in the DC metro area. DRF sells at farmers markets and has a CSA. The goal is to have a full life cycle CSA that can support customer needs.

Ms. Livingstone pointed out that we saw during the pandemic how fragile our food system is for families in general. Having your children understand how it works and where food comes from is very important.

Purchasing her farm took longer due to the pandemic. After being denied a loan from a conventional lender, she went to FSA but had to redo the studies on costs to set up the farm. She did see some price gouging but additionally, there were some things she wasn't aware of when she started the process such as the lengthy engineering process to build a home on the farm. Even as an experienced project manager, it's difficult to anticipate all of the costs and there's no one place you can go to find these.

Ms. Livingstone spoke to a range of other requirements related to septic field location, road construction, metering for electricity on the property, erosion control, etc. These requirements and costs add up. When you farm for a living - Ms. Livingstone works 15 hour days - you don't have the funds for this if you're not sitting on some large retirement or other income.

Ms. Livingstone believes that more money from USDA needs to go directly to farmers to help offset costs like these. She's an experienced grower and more money for organizations to do education and training is not what is going to help her operation.

Ms. Livingstone shared what she's most proud of, what keeps her up at night, and what policymakers should do. Ms. Livingstone:

- Is most proud of the work they're doing on the farm and in Prince George's county to expand opportunities for beginning farmers and small farms.
- Things that keep her up at night are not having the things they need as small farmers, the infrastructure requirements, being able to have sufficient resources available to get those in place,
- Legislators must speak with people "with the boots on the ground" when making policy.

Mr. Van Vlack summed up discussion by emphasizing that there is great need for farmland and development is not the only market for it – this panel shows that there are plenty of farmers who want and need land to be part of our region’s agricultural economy.

Discussion

Chair Cheh emphasized a point made by Stephen Bradford: it's not just about resilience, we also have to think about being transformative. We have to think about the land that was stolen or taken from our BIPOC communities. How are we going to restore this as a matter of justice?

Zachari Curtis at Dreaming Out Loud shared her family’s journey to illustrate several key points for FARM. Ms. Curtis is a fourth-generation descendant of American chattel slavery. Her great great great grandmother’s farm is still in the family in North Carolina. Her family is in D.C. because of the 1898 Wilmington Massacre and Black people trying to access a vote.

Ms. Curtis urged FARM to move from a conversation about diversity to one about the legal/policy and historical lineage that is not necessarily based on the color of one’s skin alone, but on the policy legacy that some families experienced. While being an ally with all farmers of color and recent immigrants is important, it is also important to distinguish that certain people were intentionally dispossessed of resources and driven off of land through violence and policy. It’s essential to ensure this nuance is part of the conversation about reparations – this is about the legacy of slavery, who experienced that, who experienced the Jim Crow economy.

Chair Cheh thanked Ms. Curtis for her comments. As an immediate next step she asked staff to consider if this could be part of the policy compendium. She also noted that FARM is working with the Chesapeake Bay and Water Resources Policy Committee (CBPC) to schedule a meeting on BIPOC farmers and land access.

Supervisor Gross remarked on the long-time service that Potomac Vegetable Farm has provided to Fairfax County – PVF is an integral part of their community. The farmer panel indicated to her that as policymakers, there could be things as basic as Zoning that are working against us. We may want to looking at Zoning Ordinance requirements in our communities for everything from farming to gardening.

6. DISCUSSION AND FARM COMMITTEE MEMBER UPDATES

In the interest of time, Chair Cheh asked members to send any updates to COG staff to share subsequently.

7. REVIEW ACTION ITEMS AND ADJOURN

Chair Cheh thanked everyone for their participation. **The next virtual meeting is on Friday, June 11th at 11:00 am.**

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 1:00 pm.

ATTENDANCE:

Mary Cheh, Chair, District of Columbia
Jon Stehle, Vice Chair, City of Fairfax
Craig Rice, Vice Chair, Montgomery County
Libby Garvey, Arlington County
Penny Gross, Fairfax County
Ann B. Wheeler, Prince William County
Amy Jackson, City of Alexandria
Tom Ross, City of Fairfax (alternate)
Ona Balkus, District of Columbia Food Policy Council

Heather Bruskin, Montgomery County Food Council
Jeremy V. Criss, Office of Agriculture, Montgomery County
Meredith Ledlie Johnson, Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) (alternate)
Kate Lee, Office of Urban Agriculture, District of Columbia
Victoria Treski, Bainum Family Foundation
Chris Van Vlack, Loudoun Soil and Water Conservation District
Michael J Wilson, Maryland Hunger Solutions
Rachel Clark, Office of Councilmember Cheh (alternate)
Nick Stavely, FRESHFARM (alternate)

Other Participants

Arlee Harris, Office of Supervisor Kershner
Kristin Tribble, Office of Councilmember Rice
Derrick Cooley, Bowie State University
Zachari Curtis, Dreaming Out Loud
Rebecca Gates, Prince William Food Rescue/GPW Food Council
Max Broad
Kirsten Kelley, VCE
French Price, VCE
Kim Rush Lynch, Prince George's Soil Conservation District
Sydney Daigle, Prince George's Food Equity Council
Evan Dupree, West Virginia State University
Kimberly Hoffman
Crystal FitzSimons, FRAC
Gale Livingstone, Deep Roots Farm
Amanda Cather, Plow and Stars Farm
Hiu Newcomb, Potomac Vegetable Farms
Stephen Bradford, Potomac Vegetable Farms
Stephanie Hopkins, Arlington County Department of Human Services

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