

Are Farms an important part of your community?

Would you like farming and farmland to remain a vital part of your community? If so your town may benefit from forming an agricultural commission.

What is an Agricultural Commission?

A town agricultural commission (ag comm) is a standing committee of town government, created through a vote of Town Meeting and appointed by the Board of Selectmen or governing body of the town. Ag comms represent the farming community, encourage the pursuit of agriculture, promote agricultural economic development and protect farmlands and farm businesses, and preserve, revitalize and sustain agricultural businesses and land. In some communities they focus on farmland preservation efforts, while in others they review regulatory proposals developed by other town boards (planning board, board of health, conservation commission, etc), or provide marketing coordination to assist all farms in town. Others have played key roles in mediating farmer/neighbor disputes, or simply providing referrals for farmers needing better information. By working within town government through an ag comm, farmers enhance their credibility, and are viewed as part of the problem-solving team.

What Towns have Agricultural Commissions?

Ag comms are active in several communities within the Commonwealth including: Amherst, **Dartmouth**, Deerfield, Hadley, **Harwich**, Hatfield, **Middleboro**, Montague, **Plympton**, **Rehoboth**, Rowley, Sterling, **Westport**, and Whately. The Dartmouth ag comm has been in existence since 1988; others have established as recently as the fall of 2004. In the Pilgrim RC&D Area, efforts are underway in Carver and Falmouth to establish ag comms in 2005 through spring town meeting vote.

By establishing an ag comm through a Town Meeting vote, the town is on record as supportive of retaining farming as a viable business in town.

How Pilgrim RC&D Can Help Your Community

Pilgrim RC&D provides assistance to communities in Bristol, Plymouth, Barnstable, Dukes, and Nantucket Counties.

Services include:

- Educating farmers, residents and local officials about why ag comms are organizing, what they are doing and the benefits ag comms are providing to the community.
- Providing organizational services to local leaders in the following areas:
 - Organizing community focused agricultural commission informational meetings,
 - Coordinating ag comm steering committees to prepare for town meeting i.e., preparing ag comm warrant articles, and planning promotion campaigns.

Upon the ag comm articles passage at town meeting:

- Advising the ag comm. steering committees with regard to member solicitation and selection.

Upon formation of an ag comm:

- Guiding the development of an achievable work plan through priority, goal and action setting.

In addition the Pilgrim RC&D Area Council has developed a CD-ROM containing documents that can be used to organize an informational meeting, plan and conduct steering committee meetings. It contains samples of existing ag comm by laws, promotional flyers, ag comm. work plans, and a powerpoint presentation about the why and where ag comms are forming and what they are doing.

The Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD) is partnering with Pilgrim RC&D and providing assistance to communities that would be best serviced by a multi-town ag comm.. Bill Napolitano, Environmental Planner is developing a model that can be adopted by towns if the “regional approach” will serve the community

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What’s Happening Around the Commonwealth?

In 2004, the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) became active in promoting the organization of ag comms. MDAR believes that ag comms are essential if viable farm businesses are to continue in most towns. Thus, they have made a commitment of staff and resources to assist farmers' efforts to establish ag comms in many Massachusetts communities during the next year or so.

In 2004 Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) has become active in promoting ag comms in western Massachusetts. They to have committed resources and staff to providing assistance to communities as they consider and become active in organizing ag comms.