

Proposal to Set Up the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Commission

This is a draft outline of a proposal to set up the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Commission, a standing advisory committee made up of local farmers and agricultural advocates. It would have no permitting or regulatory authority.

Introduction

An inventory prepared by the Martha's Vineyard Commission, the Ag Society and IGI indicates that there are now 26 food-producing farms and 30 other farms of 5 acres or more on the Island, to say nothing of a large number of smaller, backyard farms. There is considerable interest in preserving and enlarging the role of farming on the Island. The Vineyard is fortunate to have several organizations that work directly or indirectly to preserve and promote agriculture (see Table 1).

However, each of these organizations has a specific and limited mandate or role. Representatives of these groups met several times over the past year to examine the possibility of creating one or more Ag Coms here, and concluded that it is desirable to set up the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Commission to help coordinate ongoing efforts and to take on new responsibilities. Given the relatively limited size of the agricultural community on the Vineyard, it makes the most sense to create a single Commission for the whole Island.

Table 1: Island Organizations Involved with Farming

- **The Agricultural Society** runs the annual Fair and other events throughout the year, hosts a variety of agricultural competitions, and has an agricultural grant program.
- **The Island Grown Initiative** works to support the local agricultural community by raising consumer awareness about the importance of buying locally grown food; it is actively pursuing ways to increase local meat and poultry production on Island.
- **The Farm Institute** is a non-profit institution that is responsible for implementing education and outreach programs to Island students, residents, and visitors of the Island.
- **The Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group** produces and distributes millions of quahog, scallop, and soft shell clam seedlings to the towns, and is responsible for educational and outreach programs promoting the well-being of Island shellfish and water quality in coastal ponds.
- **The Martha's Vineyard Conservation Partnership** includes several non-profit organizations that have worked to promote conservation of farmland.
- **The Dukes County Commission** has a representative to the USDA Pilgrim Resource Conservation & Development Area Council in addition to implementing the island's 4H program. Under the County, the Island did have an agricultural agent through the UMASS Extension Service.
- **The Martha's Vineyard Commission** has been involved in farm protection for decades, and has recently hosted a series of activities promoting coordination among Island agricultural stakeholders. The MVC interfaces with state and federal agencies such as the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, the USDA Pilgrim RC&D, and the Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership.

Overall Purposes

Support agriculture and aquaculture on Martha's Vineyard.

- Advise boards of selectmen and other town entities about agricultural (and aquaculture) issues.
- Advocate for the local agricultural community.
- Encourage the pursuit of agriculture.
- Promote agriculture/aquaculture-based economic opportunities.
- Preserve, revitalize, and sustain agricultural businesses and land.
- Developing trust and a working relationship among farmers, residents, town boards, and other institutions.

Composition

The Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Commission would be composed of residents of Martha's Vineyard substantially engaged in farming (including aquaculture), or supportive of these activities on the Vineyard.

- One member and one alternate from each town on Martha's Vineyard, to be appointed by the Board of Selectmen,
- One member and one alternate appointed by the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society, the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group, the Farm Institute, the Island Grown Initiative, and the Conservation Partnership.

The Commission would be created by a resolution of the County of Dukes County Commission. The Commission would not have a staff or budget at this time; limited support services would be supplied by the Martha's Vineyard Commission. The Commission would meet at least four times per year. The Commission could seek broader community involvement through a Circle of Friends.

Specific Roles

Agricultural Commissions have great flexibility to pursue a wide variety of programs or projects (see the examples in Table 2 on the next page). The following could be initial roles for the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Commission.

1. Coordination of Ongoing Efforts: Provide a forum for the Agricultural Society, the County, the Martha's Vineyard Commission, town boards, the Island Grown Initiative, the Conservation Partnership, and other organizations and individuals to coordinate their efforts supporting agriculture and aquaculture on Martha's Vineyard.
2. Providing Advice to Public Entities: Advise towns (Town Meetings, Boards of Selectmen, Planning Boards, Boards of Assessors, Boards of Appeals, Conservation Commissions, Boards of Health, Historical Commissions, Open Space Committees), and other town and regional boards and committees on issues involving agriculture and aquaculture], especially how agriculture relates to town plans (e.g. Master Plans, Open Space Plans),

land use development, state and local regulations (e.g. Right-to-Farm By-Laws), zoning and other issues that come before town boards.

3. Public Awareness About Agriculture: Facilitate public awareness efforts about the importance of agriculture on the Vineyard, preserving agricultural lands, the importance of tolerating perceived negative impacts from farming. Coordinate grassroots advocacy that improves the visibility of farming within the community
4. Preservation of Agricultural Land: Help coordinate efforts by town boards and non-profit organizations to on to include the protection of agricultural lands, preservation rural character, and provide viable options for retaining the use of the land for agricultural purposes. Participate in town planning processes in order to retain agricultural land and agricultural-related businesses.
5. Agriculture-Related Mediation: Provide services for mediation to resolve conflicts between operators of working lands and other residents.
6. Technical Assistance to Farmers: Facilitate provision of information and access to technical services available from the Commonwealth and other sources, to larger and small-scale farmers. Pursue initiatives appropriate to creating sustainable land use practices and sustainable agricultural and aquacultural communities
7. Other Activities: Identifies what other measures would be useful to promote agriculture on Martha's Vineyard. Identify what entities could take them on or, if appropriate, have the Commission take them on.

Next Steps

1. Ensure that the Island's agriculture-related stakeholders and farmers support this proposal.
2. The Island's agriculture-related stakeholders present the proposal to planning boards and conservation commissions to seek their support.
3. Present the proposal to the All-Island Selectmen's Association to seek their support.
4. Inform the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources.
5. Draft a resolution,
6. County drafts and adopts resolution (seeking input from town boards, counsels, other organizations, and farmers).
7. Boards of Selectmen and organizations solicit applicants and appoint members.
8. The Commission begins to meet, sets up its internal operating procedures, identifies needs and priorities, develops a work plan, etc.

Table 2: Examples of Accomplishments of Agricultural Commissions

Agricultural Commissions can be used for a wide range of purposes, as illustrated by these examples of accomplishments by other Agricultural Commissions throughout the Commonwealth. Many of these would be useful here.

- Identify prime agricultural soils in addition to creating an agricultural inventory of farmers, farms, farm products, and farmland.
- Develop a clearinghouse to connect farmers with available land by helping both the landowner and farmer promote sustainable land use practices,
- Serve as an information clearinghouse and forum for farm-town relations such as holding public discussions on how agricultural issues relate to town plans, land use development, regulations, zoning, and other issues that come before local permitting boards.
- Provide technical, educational, business, and regulatory assistance needed to farmers.
- Provide platform to establish a Buy Local Campaign.
- Circulate educational materials about local farms, reach local schools, newspapers, radio programs with features about farmers, farm products, and farm events.
- Facilitate access to conflict resolution and mediation services to resolve complaints or disputes between farmers and neighbors (free assistance from the Massachusetts Office of Dispute Resolution).
- Recommend actions on land use programs that would benefit agriculture including Chapter 61, tax valuation, Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR), and other preservation programs.
- Advise town on farmland protection measures.
- Sponsor right-to-farm zoning by laws and making farming practices known to new neighbors moving to town.
- Host community agricultural events.
- Assist Boards of Health in preparing Food Security Plan for the island by identifying island sources of food, storage capacity and backup supplies.
- Work with other agricultural groups to advocate for a mobile or permanent slaughter facility.
- Work with other groups to advocate for year-round and seasonal housing for farm workers.
- Work with other agricultural groups to advocate at the state and federal levels for support of community-identified agricultural needs.
- Seek financial, professional, or technical assistance from the MADAR and USDA.
- Seek out information and educational resources relevant to farms and farm communities.
- Work with other Agricultural Commissions statewide on issues of common concern.