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PRESS RELEASE

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SENATE PASSES COMPREHENSIVE AGRICULTURAL BILL

Provides significant boost to Massachusetts farmers, greater access to locally grown foods

BOSTON – Today, the Massachusetts Senate approved a comprehensive, omnibus agricultural package. The bill, *An Act to promote agriculture in the Commonwealth*, sponsored by Senator Ann Gobi (D-Spencer) provides opportunities and protections to current and prospective farmers throughout Massachusetts, increases access and availability of locally grown food products, and invests in educational and agricultural programs to further grow the industry.

There are 7,755 farms in Massachusetts working on over 523,000 acres to produce \$492 million in agricultural products. Massachusetts farms provide employment to nearly 28,000 workers in the Commonwealth. 80% of Massachusetts farms are family owned. 95% fit the category of “small farms” according to the USDA definition of sales below \$250,000. Massachusetts ranks 6th in the nation for number of farms with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA); a 95% increase since 2007. Over this same time period the state saw growth in agri-tourism sales of 127%. At nearly \$48 million, the state ranks 5th in the nation for direct market sales and 3rd in the nation for direct market sales per operation. Direct market sales account for 10% of the state’s total sales of agricultural products.

“Maintaining a robust agricultural economy is the right thing to do, for our farmers, communities and the Commonwealth,” said **Senator Anne M. Gobi, Chair of the Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture**. “We are fortunate to have so many people willing to spend their time and finances to make sure the rest of us enjoy a wide array of agricultural products. This bill is a step in recognizing their efforts and to support them moving forward.”

“Farming is more than just an industry-for our small, family-owned farms across the Commonwealth it’s a way of life. Farms also enhance the protection of open space and add to our robust tourism industry,” said

Senate President Stan Rosenberg (D-Amherst). “This bill expands opportunities for the thousands of agricultural workers who call Massachusetts home, and increases access to healthy, locally sourced food. I thank Senator Gobi for her hard work on this important piece of legislation.”

“Our local farmers have a large impact on the Massachusetts economy,” said **Senator Karen E. Spilka, Chair of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means.** “This comprehensive bill encourages locally grown products and food sources, increases opportunities for community gardens and farmers markets and enhances farmland sustainability, among many other provisions to make sure our agriculture industry continues to thrive.”

“From the earliest day of the Commonwealth, agriculture has been vitally important to our health, wellbeing and economy,” said **Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr (R- Gloucester).** “This bill strengthens the infrastructure and systems that support farmers and growers, those who wish to preserve agricultural lands, those employed in agriculture, and consumers.”

The legislation reflects recommendations from the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan, finalized in December 2015. The legislation utilizes state-owned land for non-commercial community gardens and farmers markets, while also allowing farmer brewers and distillers to sell products at farmers markets.

To incentivize farmers and drive local food production, the bill eases regulatory restrictions that may currently inhibit agricultural modernization by establishing commissions to assess the management of state protected farmland and the agricultural plumbing code. Other changes include extending the license durations for foresting and timber harvesting and integrating rain sensor devices into the state building code.

Providing a boost to Massachusetts Dairies, the bill establishes a regulatory framework for the allowance of off-premise raw milk distribution, including through CSA agreements. Massachusetts will join sixteen other states to allow raw milk distribution including Connecticut, Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire.

To promote job growth and support Massachusetts veterans, the bill creates the Massachusetts Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture Program Fund. The fund’s purpose is to integrate veterans into the field of agriculture and support veterans currently working in the industry. The fund will provide loans and grants to public, private and charitable entities to finance projects that work towards this purpose.

A retained revenue account for the Department of Agricultural Resources, in conjunction with the Agricultural Resolve and Security Fund, will contribute to the funding of various educational and innovative initiatives to promote food growth and security. Aiming to protect crops, the bill also establishes liability of up to three times the assessed value to any individual who causes damage or destruction to crops or agricultural property.

The bill passed on a 36-1 vote and will now head to the House for consideration.

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