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Legislature's Food System Caucus Works to Combat Food Insecurity and Support the Massachusetts' Food System During Pandemic

BOSTON- The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on food security and infrastructure in the Commonwealth. Demand at food banks has skyrocketed and local producers, who once relied on the restaurant industry, struggle to find buyers. As a member of the [Food System Caucus](#) (FSC), **Senator Anne Gobi (D-Spencer)** has been working hard to combat food insecurity and fortify the Commonwealth's food infrastructure during this time of hardship.

The FSC focuses on three primary areas identified as priorities in the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan accepted by the Massachusetts Food Policy Council in 2015:

- **Food access/insecurity** – reducing waste, hunger, and food insecurity while making available more fresh healthy food to everyone who lives in the Commonwealth.
- **Farmland** – protecting the land and resources necessary to produce food, while maximizing the environmental benefits of agriculture and fishing, and the preservation of agricultural land.
- **Economic development** – recognizing the significant impact to local, regional, and state economies, supporting the increase of production, sales, and consumption of Massachusetts grown food, and creating jobs and improving wages in food and farming.

The FSC has 136 members and is the second-largest Caucus in the Legislature following the Democratic Caucus. Reps. Dan Donahue, Hannah Kane, Paul Schmid, and Sens. Jo Comerford, Anne Gobi, and Eric Lesser serve as Co-Chairs. This summer, four new legislators joined the FSC, Reps. Doherty, Lipper-Garabedian, Sena, and Sen. Moran.

With the support of Senator Gobi, the FSC has been successful in the advancement of several priority and endorsed pieces of legislation this spring and summer. House Bill 4218, *An Act regarding breakfast after the bell*, was approved by the House and Senate on July 28th and is now on Governor Baker's desk awaiting his signature. H4218 will provide expanded school breakfast options to Massachusetts students in low-income communities. FSC members Rep. Vargas, Rep. Vega, and Sen. DiDomenico co-sponsored the legislation.

FSC member Rep. Livingstone was able to secure FSC-endorsed bill S678/H1173, *An Act improving public health through a common core application for core food, health, and safety-net programs*, as an amendment to the IT Bond Bill H4733. The amendment would create a common application portal where individuals could provide their data once and apply simultaneously for several benefits, including SNAP. The common app created by this amendment would work to close the SNAP Gap. A conference committee was formed to reconcile the differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill, and the amendment language was included in the final bill produced by the conference committee, H4932. It is now on Governor Baker's desk awaiting his signature.

FSC member Rep. Hogan filed FSC-endorsed bill H802, *An act establishing a special commission to ensure the resiliency of family farms in the 21st century*, as an amendment to the Economic Development Bill H4879, *An Act enabling partnerships for growth*. The amendment was adopted in the House version of the bill on July 28th. FSC Co-Chair Sen. Comerford was able to secure an additional FSC-priority bill, S438/H873 *An Act to promote healthy soils and agricultural innovation in the Commonwealth*, as an amendment to the Senate version of the Economic Development Bill. Both of these amendments would work to support Commonwealth farms, which have been hard-hit by the pandemic, and create a more resilient infrastructure.

FSC Co-Chair Rep. Donahue filed and secured \$1M for the [Massachusetts Food Trust Program](#) as an amendment to the House's Economic Development Bill H4879. The Mass Food Trust provides critical loans and grants to small businesses and increases access to healthy foods in low-income neighborhoods. This \$1M investment will go a long way during the COVID-19 pandemic to support Commonwealth producers and food-insecure residents. It will also help from a public health standpoint, since nutrition-related chronic illnesses serve as comorbidities to COVID-19 and remain the largest cause of preventable death in the U.S.

In addition, FSC member Representative Cutler secured \$500,000 in an amendment to H4879 for the Office of Travel and Tourism to expand and promote agriculture tourism in the aquaculture and cranberry industries. FSC member Senator Hinds also secured amendment language to the Senate version of the bill, S2842, that is based on FSC-endorsed bill S1129, *An Act relative to the growth of hemp*. The Hinds amendment would put hemp in the category of land used for horticultural. The House and Senate Economic Development bills are now in conference committee and we are hopeful a final negotiated bill will incorporate these important amendments.

Advancing the recommendations of the COVID-19 Command Center's Food Security Task Force has been another priority of the FSC over the past several months. FSC Co-Chairs Rep. Kane and Sen. Comerford serve as Legislative Delegates on the Task Force, which released a report detailing initial recommendations to the Baker-Polito Administration in May. \$56M in funding has resulted from the recommendations made by the Task Force.

A key initiative to come out of the work of the Task Force, which the FSC has worked hard to advance, is an emphasis on the [Healthy Incentives Program](#) (HIP). HIP is administered through the MA Department of Transitional Assistance and combats food insecurity and supports local farms by providing one dollar back on SNAP EBT cards for each dollar spent on eligible

produce. Thanks to the strong advocacy from organizations like the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative, the Food Banks, and the Massachusetts Public Health Association, as well as broad, bipartisan, and consistent support from the Legislature, we are very pleased the Administration is expanding the program to new HIP vendors. The first round of new HIP vendors was announced in late July, and in selecting the 39 new vendors, the Administration focused on low-access areas, paying particular attention to communities of color and older adults- two groups that have been especially impacted by the pandemic. \$5M in additional funds has been allocated to support the program's continued expansion.

The [Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program](#) (FSIG) was also created out of the Task Force and is backed by the FSC. The first round of FSIG awards was recently announced, including \$3M in grant money distributed to various projects that will reduce food insecurity and fortify the Commonwealth's food infrastructure. The \$3M is the first round of funding to come out of the total \$36M program. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis until September 15th.

The FSC is also hyper-focused on helping the seafood industry, which has been hit extra hard by the pandemic due to its reliance on restaurant buyers. With restaurants closed or operating at limited capacity, the Commonwealth's seafood industry has lost a significant portion of its business. FSC Co-Chairs Representative Kane and Senator Comerford and FSC members Senator Bruce Tarr and Representative Ann-Margaret Ferrante have worked closely with Lieutenant Governor Polito and the Administration over the past few months to remedy this issue. The soon-to-launch MDAR MassGrown Exchange Platform is currently being developed and will serve as a connection between local producers/suppliers such as fisheries and buyers, including food banks. The [Seafood Marketing Program](#) has also been launched and supports local projects that raise demand for local seafood by administering grants.

The FSC has hosted multiple briefings over the course of the past several months to update the Legislature on the above developments, which have also served as a way to collaborate on solutions to food insecurity and infrastructure issues that are felt across the entire Commonwealth. Officials from the Administration, such as DTA Commissioner Amy Kershaw and EOEEA Secretary Kathleen Theoharides, have also provided updates on the briefings.

Follow the Food System Caucus on Twitter at [@MAafoodcaucus](#) and visit the official website at <https://www.mafoodsystemcaucus.com/>.

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