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Agricultural commissions a growing trend in Bay State towns

CD-ROM toolkit available for prospective organizers

WEST WAREHAM, MASS. -- Four Southeastern Massachusetts towns have established agricultural commissions to maintain farms and farming in their community. Now the concept is spreading to other parts of the Commonwealth. The Pilgrim Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Area Council, which has been instrumental in the formation of agricultural commissions in this area, has developed a unique resource to help others.

"A Toolkit for Organizing a Town Agricultural Commission" is a package of materials on CD-ROM that will guide the user through the process of organizing an agricultural commission. It contains 17 sample documents that can be customized by the user, plus a brochure and PowerPoint presentation. The CD-ROM is available for \$10 from the Pilgrim RC&D Area Council. Contact the Pilgrim RC&D Office at 508-295-1317, x131, to request a copy.

Town agricultural commissions are appointed town standing committees that encourage the pursuit of agriculture, and sustain the community's farm businesses and farmlands. Ag commissions are addressing local priorities such as agricultural business development, leadership development, increasing public awareness of the benefits of agriculture, increasing the visibility of farms as businesses, and farmland protection. Ag commissions also help farmers network with service providers, resolve potential problems in the early stages, and encourage political activity.

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The CD-ROM toolkit was developed with financial support from the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture.

Organizers of existing town agricultural commissions from the towns of Dartmouth, Middleborough, Rehoboth and Westport, and the state Department of Agricultural Resources, have joined the Pilgrim RC&D Area Council in spreading the word about the success of these ag commissions to other towns.

“This partnership is empowering farmers and town residents to organize town agricultural commissions by providing them with much needed coordination assistance, information and planning tools,” said Pilgrim RC&D President Bill Napolitano.

Documents on the CD-ROM include preparations for exploratory meetings, agendas, talking points, town meeting warrant articles, meeting guidelines, support flyers, agricultural commission work plans and a brochure. The CD also contains a narrated PowerPoint presentation that can be used when presenting the agricultural commission concept to local groups.

The RC&D program is administered by the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service and promotes conservation, development, and wise use of natural resources to improve economic activity, and to enhance the environment and standard of living in communities. The program is based on the assumption that local citizens, working through non-profit RC&D Councils, and with help provided by the USDA, can develop a plan for the economic, social and environmental enrichment of their communities.

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