

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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Board of Agriculture

2012 Board of Agriculture Report

The Board of Agriculture was formed in 1997 by the Legislature as a result of cumulative budget cuts in the early and mid-1990 resulting in the concern within the Agricultural Community that the University of Maine was not supporting agricultural research to the level that it should. The Legislature created the Board to advise the Chancellor of the University of Maine System and President of the University of Maine on the operation and management of agricultural research conducted by the Maine Agricultural and Forest Experiment Station (MAFES) and university farm- based programs including those of the University of Maine Cooperative Extension. The Board is also charged in assisting the Chancellor and the President in articulating the mission of MAFES as it relates to agriculture. The role of the Board is to assist in the coordination of commodity groups' support of University research and Extension.

The Board met three times in 2012, once in January, March and November. The focus of the first two meetings was to finish the matrix of research and Extension priorities of the diverse agricultural groups in Maine. The Board and the University reached out multiple times to all identified agricultural groups in Maine requesting their research and Extension needs and priorities. Attached is a summary table of input received. A strength of Maine agriculture is its diversity; however, it is this diversity that makes it a challenge for entities like the University to support the breath of the needs across Maine agriculture especially across multiple decades of contracting resources.

Responses include both applied research and Extension (education) activities. Often University of Maine faculty have a research appointment in addition to teaching. Many Extension faculty conduct applied research in addition to educational activities and/or have joint research appointment and Extension appointment. Since its formation the Board has supported joint research and Extension appointments as it is a model that tightly links research and economic development. One of the key strengths of the Land Grant System (University of Maine is Maine's land grant institution) is that applied research is quickly transferred to farmers. However, most members of the agricultural community do not distinguish between Extension and Experiment Station faculty. They just view the technical assistance as coming from the University of Maine.

Some of the themes that emerged from the Board's research and Extension needs and priorities:

- Where possible, Maine agriculture looks for research it can apply from other states such as New York and Pennsylvania in the case of apples and dairy. However, through applied research, practices are verified and adapted to Maine conditions by University faculty.
- Farmers are more aware and are in need of food safety information.
- The University is moving toward more of a systems approach, including organic, to agricultural research and Extension.

- Maine specific applied research such as variety trials, cold hardiness, native ornamental trials and selection, and organic grains are very important to farmers.
- Some crops such as cold water marine aquaculture and wild blueberries are dependent on a robust cropping system approach to producer information as the information is not available from other areas of the country for adaptation to Maine.
- For many livestock producers, such as equine producers, disease management is a priority.
- Optimum nutrition, disease and insect management are priority areas for Christmas tree growers and other farmers.

The Board reviewed a matrix of research and extension needs as well as an assessment of University capacity (attached). Key points from the discussion included:

- Some crops have limited research and Extension support such as Christmas tree growers.
- In contrast cold water aquaculture support has grown considerably which has 19 investigators, graduate students and students working on 23 research projects.
- Both the Maine Landscape and Nursery and Maine Organic Farmers and Garden's Associations noted that Extension is at capacity. Both also receive research support.
- The potato industry's priorities continue to be insect and disease management as well as energy use reduction.
- Diseases and insects, including new diseases and invasive insects are top of mind for vegetable and small fruit growers.
- The research and Extension needs of the apple and equine industries are currently well met. An industry problem is unwanted horses.
- Most integrated crop management (ICM) disciplines; including disease, insect, and weed integrated pest management (IPM) are well covered for wild blueberry growers. The one exception is nutrition and nutrient cycling.

Administrators from the University College of Natural Sciences, Forestry, and Agriculture, the Maine Agricultural and Forest Experiment Station, and Cooperative Extension acknowledged that having a list of priority needs and an assessment of resources for the breath of Maine agriculture helps them to identify priorities for research and Extension moving forward. While current budget challenges is resulting in faculty losses, administrators are using this information from the Board to make strategic faculty hires for positions that they are allowed to fill.

In recent years the Board of Agriculture supported the merger of the Departments of Plant, Soils, and Environmental Sciences; Animal Science; and Food Science and Human Nutrition into the School of Food and Agriculture. The Board believes this merger will support a "systems approach" to food production, handling and processing from "farm to fork" that will ultimately benefit Maine agriculture, Maine consumers, and our economy. Internally, the School will provide a critical mass of agriculture, food and nutrition expertise within the University while reinforcing collaboration among faculty and systems thinking. The Board is pleased this merger is going forward.

The Board of Agriculture strongly supported the Diagnostic Lab Bond initiative as that facility is a critical piece of infrastructure necessary to protect and grow Maine agriculture, aquaculture, as well as protecting Maine's fisheries and wildlife. The facility will also play a key role in protecting public health. The Board has had an open discussion with Chancellor Page and President Ferguson on reasons why the bond initiative failed. The agricultural community maintains a high interest in future efforts to develop this key piece of infrastructure.