Farmland Preservation in Massachusetts

The APR Program
Massachusetts has lost thousands of acres of farmland to development. The Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program began in 1976 as a means to curb farmland loss. The APR program places permanent easements on farmland to keep it a part of the working landscape in perpetuity. Prospective parcels are assessed on a variety of criteria before they are accepted into the program (see program requirements).

The APR Program has preserved 725 farms and over 60,000 acres statewide.

Abstract
The Agriculture Preservation Restriction program has permanently preserved over 725 farms in Massachusetts, but there are areas of the commonwealth that have significantly lower rates of participation. This poster discusses trends in the physical characteristics of farms enrolled in the APR program and the price of purchasing easements. Both were found to affect the type and quantity of farmland preserved.

Soil
The FRPP program was overhauled during the 2002 farm bill to include stricter requirements on the types of land that could be considered for funding. Farmland must now contain at least 50 percent soil designated prime, unique, or of statewide importance. This has significantly altered the type of farmland admitted to the program. Prior to 2002 farmland was made up of only about 37% of prime or statewide important soil, but in 2002 and beyond it was 55.4%.

The spatial layout of protected prime soils is similar to the map of all Prime Soils above. However, there is no statistical significance between the amount of prime soils within a town and the acres of protected farmland (p=0.54).

This means that although the protection of prime soils is a stated program goal, towns with more prime farmland do not have higher rates of program participation.

Size
Farms must be at least 5 acres to be considered for the program. This analysis found that larger parcels were more likely to be a part of the program, and easements were worth more per acre (p<0.001).

Location
The APR program is intended to preserve farmland from the threat of development. One indicator for development pressure is the proximity to highway off ramps. There were more protected farms close to highway off ramps and these farms were larger in size than farmland further away (p<0.001). This indicates that the program is doing a good job protecting farmland that is most at risk.

Conclusion
As the two maps to the right show, APRs are not distributed equally across the Commonwealth. The discrepancy between the two maps do not indicate a failure of the program, however, for there are many factors that contribute to the purchase of conservation easements. As the rest of this poster has shown, the APR program is concentrated in areas where it is cheaper to purchase land, where parcels are larger, and where the development threat is most severe.

Paying for Easements
Funding for easement payments typically involves contributions from the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR), the federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP), local land trusts and the towns in which the farm exists. Sometimes landowners are take a “bargain sale,” in which they accept less than the property is worth in exchange for a tax deduction. FRPP reimburses up to 50 percent of the easement value. It is in the State’s best interest to protect land that meets FRPP criteria. Easement values have increased over the last 6 years, and tend to follow rises and falls in the economy.