Our stewardship team is gearing up for a monitoring season that may be unlike any in MFT’s history. As an organization, we are paying close attention to information coming from Augusta and are working to identifying resources to support farms across the state, which are listed on the back of this newsletter. As stewards, we are focused on the safety of each of you and our staff, and are looking for creative ways to be available throughout the year even if we can’t rely on our usual format.

At this time, the Land Trust Alliance still requires that we monitor each farm annually. If the State allows us to continue with stewardship visits this year, we may need to walk your farm without meeting you in person. We will also use aerial monitoring (not drones) on as many farms as possible. Both of these options mean that we’ll be relying on each of you to reach out by phone or email when you have questions, and to keep an open line of communication outside of our usual in-person visits.

We’re also in the midst of hiring for a new Land Steward to replace Kyle Warren in Portland. We have extended our application deadline and hope to interview candidates in May, but we recognize that COVID-19 might further complicate and delay the process. In the meantime, I will gladly serve as the primary contact for the southern/western Maine territory. The maps on the back of this newsletter show both the current stewardship territories and the shift that will take place once we hire the new Land Steward. We’ll let you know when this change officially takes place, but wanted you all to have a sense of upcoming changes in staff contacts. Hopefully we’ll have someone on staff before we need to monitor this year, but if not, April and I will coordinate to visit all farms as needed.

Thanks in advance to each of you for your patience as we navigate this new process, and for your role in supporting and feeding our communities.

Best wishes,

Lyndsey Marston
Stewardship Program Director

Since the beginning of the year MFT has received many requests from farmers who want to install commercial solar arrays on their farms. In the past, the vast majority of requests that we received were for installations of solar panels on the roofs of existing buildings, or for small-scale arrays whose energy production would be for on-farm use. With the regulations for solar energy production changing at the state level, many solar companies are reaching out to landowners with propositions for solar development on agricultural fields. MFT has made a sincere effort to keep up with these changes by developing an Energy Structure Siting and Approvals Policy to guide our decision making and approval of commercial-scale solar arrays. We understand that commercial solar development can provide a significant source of income to support farm businesses and, for landowners who are interested in having commercial solar arrays on protected properties, we consider each request thoughtfully before we respond.

As you may know, most of our new conservation easements allow for solar development outside of building areas only “upon approval” of MFT, and many of our earlier easements don’t specifically address renewable energy at all. Our policy deals with all types of easements, and includes guidance on whether the use is on-farm or commercial/off-farm. In all circumstances, solar installations cannot diminish or impair the agricultural uses of a property, and commercial uses must be ancillary to and compatible with the use of the property for agriculture.

The policy includes a size limit for development of 5% of the total acreage of your open fields plus the agricultural soils in wooded areas. You can think of your open fields and agricultural soils in wooded areas as the most valuable parts of your land that MFT conservation easements aim to protect. Therefore, utilizing more than 5% of these valuable areas (even for one or two lease terms) could diminish the actual agricultural use of the area. MFT favors siting solar development on parts of your property that are “marginal” for agricultural uses, such as brushy areas that are neither field nor forest, roadsides, parts of building envelopes, areas that have been gravel pits or have had topsoil stripped, on top of existing buildings, etc.

Many solar companies will propose acreages for development that are far beyond the 5% limit outlined in our policy. Based on our policy, MFT can approve installations covering more than 5% only if the proposed site has no or negligible agricultural utility or other conservation values. MFT is always open to having a conversation with both landowners and solar companies and encourages landowners to request that solar companies be open to developing smaller acreages. For a copy of our policy, please contact your Steward. We also offer more information on our website at www.mainefarmlandtrust.org/farm-viability/farmland-and-solar-development/. If you would like a paper copy of any of these we would be happy to send one to you.
COVID-19 Farmer Resources

Public Policy
MFT has been working with farmers and partners across the state, Maine’s congres- sional delegation, and the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forest- try to ensure that funding is available for the producers in Maine who need it, and that there is support for Maine farmers and food businesses to address market disruptions, labor issues, safety needs, local food access for low-income community members, and all of the other issues that have resulted from this pandemic. Things are moving quick- ly on the policy front. For the most up to date information, visit mainefarmland- trust.org

Our Website
www.mainefarmlandtrust.org/covid19-farmer-resources/
For regularly updated resources, including financial assistance programs for farmers, information on farm safety practices, and more, visit our website. You’ll find links to the comprehensive Beginning Farmer Resource Network’s list of COVID-19 re- sources, a survey for Maine farmers, the UMaine Farm Product & Pickup Directory and other places to list your farm products, policy updates, and more!

Our Staff
If you have questions or don’t know where to start, just call us! We can help direct you to the information you need.

Maintaining Fields and Making New Fields
MFT doesn’t mandate the type of farming that occurs on protected farms or require that landowners actively farm the property at all. Instead, our way of ensuring that land remains available for agricultural use is by requiring landowners to maintain the fields that existed at the time the easement was granted. This ensures that the fields will not revert to forestland so they can be available for agricultural use for current or future landowners. For landowners whose easements contain field maintenance re- quirements, you can find a map of the designated fields as an exhibit to your conserva- tion easement (usually known as “Exhibit B”). If you would like an aerial map of your property with the field layer depicted, please contact your steward for a copy.

Recently, some landowners have converted forestland to silvopasture or open fields. Most of MFT’s easements allow this type of clearing in accordance with a forest man- agement plan, or ideally an NRCS Conservation Plan. Whether the site was histori- cally a field or has been mapped to show that agricultural soils are present, our stewar- dship role is to make sure that the conversion doesn’t have unintended consequences that impact the conservation values of the farm. We always recommend walking the site with a forester and a soil scientist to evaluate its potential for agricultural use and to also assess any risk of soil erosion or impacts to water quality and wetland habitat.

If you would like more information about this, MFT partnered with the State Dept. of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry as well as Pasture of Plenty Farm to present a webinar on best practices for agricultural land reclamation. The webinar is posted on www.mainefarmlandtrust.org/webinar-ag-land-reclamation/

Maine Farm Link
www.MaineFarmLink.org connects farmland owners who want to sell, lease or work out non-traditional tenure arrangements on their land with people who are seeking farmland.

Planned Giving: Your Legacy is Our Future
At MFT, we are grateful to those who have chosen to leave a lasting charitable legacy by including MFT in their will, trust, or estate plans. If you have decided to include MFT in your plans, please don’t forget to let us know! Understanding your goals in advance helps us ensure that funds are used at MFT in accordance with your wishes, and we would also like to express our appreciation. For more information, please contact Erin Cavallaro, erin@mainefarmlandtrust.org or by calling (207)338-6575

2019-Current Stewardship Territories
Landowners in the yellow territory should contact Lyndsey with questions and inquiries until we hire a new Land Steward.

Future 2020 Stewardship Territories
Once a new Land Steward is hired we’ll transition to these territories. April will begin covering Aroostook County in June of 2020.

Check out the MaineFarmlandTrust.org or the back page of this newsletter to find farmer resources that MFT is offering in response to COVID-19