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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: December 10, 2008

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USDA APPROVES DISASTER RELIEF FOR MASSACHUSETTS FARMERS

BOSTON – The U.S. Department of Agriculture has given eight Massachusetts counties a special “Secretarial Designation” in recognition of losses resulting from extreme weather patterns, giving farmers in those counties, and four adjacent counties, access to federal natural disaster benefits.

The USDA made the designation on November 20, 2008, six weeks after Governor Deval Patrick sent a letter to federal officials requesting the relief for farmers who suffered damage to their crops, buildings and livestock due to severe weather last summer.

In his letter, Governor Patrick requested federal assistance for farmers who suffered reduced crop production in excess of 30 percent. The governor said severe weather including hail, high winds, excessive rainfall, and excessive heat between June 15 and August 24 caused damage to crops including alfalfa, pumpkins and apples, while lightning strikes damaged buildings and livestock.

“Agriculture is integral to the Massachusetts economy,” said Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) Secretary Ian Bowles. “We applaud the USDA’s support of local farmers in their time of need.”

“Keeping farms viable is vital to maintaining the health of the state’s agricultural economy, which employs workers, supplies local restaurants with Massachusetts-grown food and continues Massachusetts agrarian traditions,” said Department of Agricultural Resources Commissioner Doug Petersen.

Farmers in Berkshire, Essex, Franklin, Hampden, Hampshire, Middlesex, Plymouth, and Worcester counties are eligible for low interest loans and other benefits. Farmers in adjacent counties, including Barnstable, Bristol, Norfolk, and Suffolk, also qualify for the benefits.

The benefits include access to low interest emergency loans from the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) and programs including the Emergency Conservation Program, Federal Crop Insurance and the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program.

Governor Patrick sent the letter, dated October 28, 2008, asking for Secretarial Designation to U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer.

Farmers have eight months from November 20, 2008 to apply for loans. The FSA will consider each loan application on its own merits, taking into account the extent of losses, security availability and repayment ability.

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