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A Project of American Farmland Trust

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Testimony In Support of SB 806, HB 6314, and HB 6316
Submitted by Kip Kolesinskas, on Behalf of the Working Lands
Alliance

Joint Committee on the Environment
February 11, 2013

Dear Senator Meyer, Representative Gentile, and members of the committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to speak in support of three bills that aim to improve the state's Farmland Preservation and Community Farms Programs. If enacted, these changes will facilitate and expand the state's capacity to permanently protect farmland.

The Working Lands Alliance is a broad-based coalition dedicated to saving Connecticut's farmland. Our 200+ members reflect the diversity of organizations, businesses, and individuals that care deeply about our working lands and the farmers who steward them—land and farms that grow our economy and jobs, provide our food, filter our air and water, and make our communities special places to live and visit. Improving the State's capacity to permanently protect farmland has been the top priority of the Working Lands Alliance since we began our work in 1999.

WLA supports the three bills—SB 806, HB 6314, and HB 6316—on today's calendar that relate to farmland protection and are priorities of the state's Department of Agriculture.

Senate Bill 806 clarifies existing law with regard to municipal purchase of development rights. Local governments have been vital partners in many farmland protection projects, and this clarification would ensure that municipalities can purchase the same bundle of rights that the State can now purchase—including the right to build a house. This is important as some landowners selling their development rights do not wish to retain the right to build a house on their land in the future, and this language would ensure that a municipality could purchase or accept as a gift that right.

House Bill 6314 strengthens the new Community Farms Program, by adding similar terms and conditions to that program as those that govern the Farmland Preservation Program. The Working Lands Alliance championed the language authorizing the Community Farms Program, and we agree with the Department of Agriculture that this additional language would be

valuable. The language stipulates, among other things, that restrictions must be recorded and that notice of transfer of the underlying land must be provided to the Department of Agriculture; that the Department of Agriculture has no authority to release land subject to an easement except under very specific conditions laid out in the language; and that the U.S. Department of Agriculture may hold a contingent right of enforcement in the property if federal funds are used in part to purchase the development rights.

House Bill 6316 would allow municipalities working with the state on the joint purchase of development rights to purchase easements on farms that have part of their land situated in an abutting town. This is a small but important clarification needed to ease program administration in those situations where land crosses town boundaries. Without such authority, negotiating and finalizing an easement on land that crosses town lines may require multiple easements and ongoing stewardship complications for the State, for the town, and, most importantly, for the landowner.

These three bills offer small but important improvements to the state's Farmland Preservation and Community Farms Programs, and we urge the Committee to act favorably on them.

I would like to take a minute to express support as well for SB 804, and HB 6313. These two measures would open new markets for Connecticut's poultry and livestock producers. In doing so, these bills have the potential to improve profitability for the farms that steward a majority of Connecticut's farmland, and hence, to help stabilize a significant portion of the state's farmland base.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify, and urge the Committee to act promptly and favorably on these bills.