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Testimony in support of HB 5419 Environment Committee

Submitted by: Lisa Bassani, Project Director, Working Lands Alliance
March 7, 2014

Senator Meyer, Representative Gentile, and Committee members:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony in **support of HB 5419**, An Act Concerning the Preservation of the Savin Farm in Lebanon.

The Working Lands Alliance is a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving Connecticut's farmland, and includes such organizations as American Farmland Trust, the CT State Grange, CT Forest & Park Association, End Hunger CT!, and the CT Farm Bureau, among many others. Over the past few years, our coalition has been working to achieve permanent protections of state-held agricultural lands identified in the 2010 report by the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board as "high priorities". The most significant of these farmland properties – Southbury Training School – was protected last session with the unanimous support of the legislature and the Governor. We commend this Committee, the General Assembly and the Governor for their support of that legislation.

Our coalition strongly supports HB 5419, which will permanently protect the 575-acre Savin Farm in Lebanon and continue the momentum in efforts to preserve key agricultural lands held by the State of Connecticut. This bill, modeled after the bill that preserved farmland at Southbury Training School, will allow the State to make another significant stride in protecting our critical farmland resources and ensure that these prime working lands remain in agricultural production for generations to come (a point that is surely important to the two farm families who lease over 250 acres of cropland at Savin Farm from the State). Most importantly, this bill protects a key farmland property in an active agricultural community at minimal cost, and provides an opportunity to quickly and cost-effectively increase the pace of farmland preservation in Connecticut.

In 2010, the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board conducted a study of state-owned farmland, and identified a number of properties worthy of protection. Lebanon's Savin Farm was identified for protection in this report alongside the farmland at Southbury Training School, as well as five other state-held agricultural properties. The Savin property scored among the highest due to its

high percentage of prime farmland soils and its location in a vibrant agricultural community.

As noted above, over 160 acres of the Savin Farm is leased to an active dairy operation, and another 93 acres of agricultural land is leased for corn and hay production to a member of The Farmer's Cow – a six-family Connecticut dairy cooperative that markets itself under a single brand. The permanent protection of this land will further the ongoing efforts in Lebanon to protect its land base, which includes some of the finest agricultural land in the state, and will ensure that the land remains in agriculture in perpetuity.

Our coalition wishes to see one key modification in the bill. WLA believes that the legislation should specify that the overall intent of the conveyance is that the land remains available for active agricultural use in perpetuity. This clarification is needed to ensure that the agricultural use of the property retains primacy relative to other possible future uses of the property.

On behalf of the Working Lands Alliance, I urge the Committee to act favorably on HB 5419, with the one modification noted above.