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A Project of American Farmland Trust

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Testimony in support of SB 842
Finance, Revenue, and Bonding Committee
Submitted by: Lisa Bassani, Project Director, Working Lands Alliance
March 4, 2013

Senator Fonfara, Representative Widlitz, and Committee members:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony in **support of SB 842**, An Act Authorizing and Adjusting Bonds of the State for Capital Improvements, Transportation, and Other Purposes, specifically Sections 61 and 13c of this bill.

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. The top priority of our diverse coalition is to ensure that the state's Farmland Preservation Program has the financial resources to permanently protect at least 2000 acres of productive farmland a year, helping to move Connecticut closer to its goal of 130,000 acres of protected farmland.

To this end, we strongly support the \$20 million in bond funds authorized in section 61 of SB 842 for the Farmland Preservation Program (FPP). This program provides funding for the state to purchase development rights on farmland that meet the program's criteria for prime and important soils, size, and contiguity to other farm parcels. Most importantly, the state bond funding leverages federal, local, and private dollars for farmland preservation. In 2010 and 2011, for instance, CT received nearly \$5 million and \$6 million respectively in federal funding through the Farm and Ranchlands Protection Program, which provided important cost-sharing dollars for the state's farmland preservation efforts.

With the annual \$10 million investments authorized in this bill, the Department of Agriculture can build upon the momentum gained over the past few years and continue to meet landowner demand for the program. To date, the state has preserved nearly 40,000 acres through this program.. Over the past five years, the state has protected 56 farms, totaling 6,143 acres. The Department of Agriculture has another 53 farms in various stages of the Program's review process, with 11 of these farms totaling another 1,068 acres near completion.

Consistent and robust annual funding is critical to the success of this program, and we are grateful to Governor Malloy and to members of this committee for this sustained investment in farmland preservation. Consistent funding provides

important reassurance to landowners interested in preserving their land that funding will be there to complete the deal. This, in turn, ensures that the Department will have a steady pipeline of prime and important farmland to protect through this program, and that the state continues to make gains towards its overall farmland preservation goals.

Overall, these state-level investments in farmland protection are necessary to sustain a viable agricultural industry in CT, which is a growing and important part of our state's economy – accounting for \$4.6 billion in output in 2010 and over 26,700 jobs in the state. The protection of our finite farmland base through this program is making land more affordable for new and beginning farmers, and ensuring continued availability of local and healthy food.

In addition, the Working Lands Alliance supports the bond funding allocated in section 13c of SB 842 for the CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection's Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program. This program, which provides matching funds to municipalities and land trusts for the purchase of farmland and open space, is a valuable complement to the Farmland Preservation Program, protecting farmland that may not meet the FPP's criteria but is nonetheless productive and important to the local community. Last year alone, these bond funds provided important matching funds for the protection of farms and prime soils in places such as Gunther Farm in Tolland and Stillmeadow Farm in Southbury.

These two programs, which leverage federal, local, and private dollars, preserve the farms and forestland that are an important part of our state's economy and our local heritage. These are the investments that will pay dividends for years.

On behalf of the Working Lands Alliance, I urge the Committee to act favorably on SB 842.