



**WORKING
LANDS
ALLIANCE**

A Project of American Farmland Trust

STEERING COMMITTEE

Joseph Bonelli
University of Connecticut

Bonnie Burr
University of Connecticut

Cris Coffin
American Farmland Trust

Gordon Gibson
Connecticut State Grange

John Guszowski
CME Associates

Eric Hammerling
CT Forest & Park Association

Lisa Holmes
CitySeed

Terry Jones
Jones Family Farms

Llyn Kaimowitz
West Hartford

Kip Kolesinskas
Manchester

Henry Lord
New Haven

Elisabeth Moore
Connecticut Farmland Trust

Lucy Nolan
End Hunger CT!

Amy Paterson
CT Land Conservation Council

Richard Roberts
Halloran & Sage

Jim Smith
Cushman Farm

Melissa Spear
Common Ground

Keith Stechshulte
Farm Credit East

Kevin Sullivan
Chestnut Hill Nursery

Henry Talmage
CT Farm Bureau Association

John Turenne
CT NOFA

STAFF
Lisa Bassani
Director

Testimony in support of SB 347
Environment Committee

Submitted by: Lisa Bassani, Project Director, Working Lands Alliance
February 4, 2015

Senator Kennedy, Representative Albis, and Committee members:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony in **support of SB 347**, An Act Concerning the Percentage of State and Federal Funds that May Be Used to Purchase Open Space under the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program.

The Working Lands Alliance is a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving Connecticut's farmland, and includes such organizations as American Farmland Trust, CT Forest & Park Association, CT Farmland Trust, End Hunger CT!, CT Farm Bureau, CT Land Conservation Council, among many others. Our efforts focus on increasing the pace of farmland preservation in the state and ensuring that we are maximizing state and federal dollars for farmland protection efforts.

Our coalition strongly supports SB 347, which would eliminate what is referred to as "the 70% rule" – a cap that limits the total federal and state dollars that can be used on a land conservation project at 70% of the land's appraised value. With this rule in place, the land trusts, municipalities, and water companies that are trying to protect valuable conservation, agricultural, and recreation lands must raise at least 30% of the value of the land from non-state, non-federal sources. In addition, DEEP has interpreted the language in the statute (CGS 7-131g(c)) to mean that the 70% cap applies only to the appraised value of the property, and it does not recognize the many costs to land conservation organizations and municipalities associated with a transaction (appraisals, surveys, legal/closing costs, stewardship expenses, etc.) as part of the 30% non-state, non-federal match.

As this Committee is aware, the legislature, in bipartisan fashion, set a goal to conserve 21% of Connecticut's land base as open space by 2023 (with 10% to be held by the State of Connecticut and 11% to be held by land trusts, municipalities, and other partners). While we have made important progress towards these goals, we know that we must dramatically increase the pace of preservation to fully realize both the goals set for the State and its partners.

By setting an arbitrary cap on the total federal and state funds that can be used in a conservation project, we are putting an unnecessary burden on our land trusts – many of which are small, and do not have professional staff to help fundraise these additional costs. Moreover, we live in a state where land values are high relative to other parts of the country. As a result, our coalition believes that we should be maximizing any and all land conservation dollars that can leverage the contributions our state is willing to make to preserve our farmland, forestland, and other natural resources.

There are numerous examples of projects from around the state that have been hampered by the rule in CGS 7-131g(c). This includes important land conservation projects in Bloomfield, Simsbury, Morris, and Vernon, to name a few. In a number of these projects, the grantee is seeking to combine federal funding through the NRCS's Agricultural Land Easements Program (formerly the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program) with funding from the State's Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program. Under the federal program, applicants are eligible for up to 50% of the appraised value of the land; with the '70% rule' in place, it then significantly limits the amount the applicant can receive from the Open Space grant program. As a result, our land trusts and other entities are forced to raise the remaining 30% from private or non-state sources (in addition to the significant transaction costs they already bear). For land trusts or municipalities who are unable to meet these requirements, they would have to forgo the land deal entirely.

In short, we believe our legislature should be using every tool to encourage the protection of our state's natural resources, given the fact that we are lagging behind in our farmland and land conservation efforts. By eliminating the 70% cap, SB 347 removes an unnecessary obstacle, and in turn, ensures that we are not leaving any federal resources on the table that would support our critical land conservation efforts.

On behalf of the Working Lands Alliance, I urge you to act favorably on SB 347.