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LANDS  
ALLIANCE**

A Project of American Farmland Trust

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**Testimony to Environment Committee  
In Support of HB 5383**

Submitted by: Lisa Bassani, Working Lands Alliance  
March 4, 2016

Senator Kennedy, Representative Albis, and Committee members:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony on House Bill 5383, An Act Concerning the Farm Viability Matching Grant Program and the Connecticut FarmLink 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, Connecticut Forest & Park Association, CT Farmland Trust, End Hunger CT!, Connecticut Farm Bureau, CT Land Conservation Council, among many others. Our efforts focus on increasing the pace of farmland preservation and advancing agricultural viability in Connecticut.

**Our coalition strongly supports HB 5383**, which broadens the statutory authority for the CT FarmLink Program to improve the Program's impact and program delivery. The CT FarmLink Program, created in 2005 through the Community Investment Act (CIA), aims to link farmland owners (ie. farmers, non-farming landowners, land trusts, etc) who have available farmland with farm seekers. Currently, the program is hampered by the narrow authorizing language for the program – which is limited to the database and website functions. We also fully acknowledge the limited resources and challenges faced by the Department of Agriculture's staff in this tough fiscal climate.

The changes proposed in HB 5383 provide for an additional emphasis on outreach to and "matchmaking" between landowners, farmers and farm seekers, and educational programming around farm succession planning, estate planning, farm leasing, and other topics relevant to farmland owners and seekers. The statutory changes also give the Department of Agriculture the authority to create partnerships or utilize qualified third parties to help implement the FarmLink program, and to utilize the dedicated CIA money towards these efforts. This provides new tools, recognizing the difficult choices and limited resources available to support farming investment and job creation in Connecticut.

This bill will provide the Department of Agriculture with the necessary authority and flexibility to expand the FarmLink program, to leverage outreach efforts with both farmland owners and farm seekers, and to support the direct boots-on-the-ground work that is needed to promote access to farmland in Connecticut. Given our aging farmer population here in Connecticut and the known challenges our young farmers face in accessing farmland (as is the case in other neighboring states), a robust and proactive FarmLink program is needed to ensure that agricultural lands remain in production as they transfer to the next generation. This kind of proactive outreach and programming will ensure that our young as well as new and beginning farmers have the support they need to find suitable farmland with secure tenure – both of which are needed to ensure their future success.

Similarly the minor change in HB 5383 to the Agricultural Viability Program would expand the eligibility criteria and provide an additional avenue for the Department of Agriculture to fund direct work with landowners, including technical assistance for older farmers related to farm transfer and succession. This would be consistent with Ag Viability Programs in Vermont and Massachusetts that include funding for farm succession planning in those programs. In short, we believe HB 5383 provides positive changes to both programs that will provide leverage to the Department of Agriculture to augment the boots-on-the-ground work with farmers and non-farming landowners. We urge the Committee to support HB 5383.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on this bill.