



WORKING LANDS ALLIANCE

A Project of American Farmland Trust

Working Lands Alliance Policy Statement
SB 181
Planning and Development Committee Public Hearing
2-26-2017

Senator Cassano, Senator Logan, Representative Lemar and members of the Planning and Development Committee, my name is Terry Jones. I chair the Steering Committee of the Working Lands Alliance, an alliance of organizations concerned with agriculture, hunger, farmland access and land conservation dedicated to the preservation of working farmlands in Connecticut. Our hallmark is fierce cooperation.

This statement is to provide comments and support for Senate Bill 181 AN ACT ESTABLISHING A PILOT PROGRAM FOR THE PRESERVATION OF OPEN SPACE'

WLA supports this bill, which would provide to communities participating in this pilot program an important new tool in their farmland protection toolbox, enabling them to more effectively leverage state and federal farmland protection program dollars.

This type of "local option" enabling statute has worked well in other states. In Massachusetts, the Community Preservation Act enables towns and cities to impose a local property tax surcharge to finance, among other things, open space and working lands protection. To date, 172 Massachusetts communities, representing 60% of the Commonwealth's residents, have approved this local surcharge, which has generated over \$1.93 billion for historic preservation, affordable housing and open space protection. It has enabled communities to protect over 27,000 acres of farmland, forest, and other open space.

Farmland is the foundation for CT's agricultural industry--an industry which, according to a 2017 study by the University of Connecticut, contributes up to \$4 billion in economic output and provides 21,696 jobs. Protecting its resource base is one important piece in sustaining the viability of this industry. The state Department of Agriculture has made important investments in doing so through its Farmland Preservation Program, preserving more than 43,000 acres of farmland on 350 farms to date.

To reach the State's goal of protecting 130,000 acres of farmland, Connecticut's communities can and will need to be more active partners in this effort. This pilot program gives participating towns a tool to do that, enabling them to leverage state funds through the Farmland Preservation or Community Farms programs, and federal funds through USDA's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. It also enables towns to



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prioritize the land that the local community, including its farmers, feels is most important to protect.

Connecticut farmers--especially the young men and women who represent our next generation--are challenged to find and afford farmland. WLA continues to look for tools to help ease this challenge, and believes this bill offers such a tool to participating communities. We would ask the Committee to modify the bill to eliminate the timeframe for the pilot, and, with that modification, we urge the Committee to give it favorable consideration.

Thank you.