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**ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING
MARCH 16, 2009**

**TESTIMONY OF
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AUDUBON CONNECTICUT**

***IN SUPPORT OF S.B. 1082 AN ACT CONCERNING THE PRESERVATION OF
STATE-OWNED AGRICULTURAL LAND.***

***IN SUPPORT OF S.B. No. 793 AN ACT CONCERNING STEAP GRANTS AND THE
CONVERSION OF PRIME FARMLAND TO NONAGRICULTURAL USE.***

Audubon Connecticut, the state organization of the National Audubon Society with more than 10,000 members statewide, works to protect birds, other wildlife and their habitats through education, science and conservation, and legislative advocacy for the benefit of people and the earth's biological diversity. Through our network of community-based nature centers, protected wildlife sanctuaries, and local volunteer Chapters, we seek to connect people with nature and inspire the next generation of conservationists.

Senator Meyer, Representative Roy, and members of the Environment Committee: thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today in strong support of S.B. 1082, AAC the Preservation of State-Owned Agricultural Land. Audubon Connecticut strongly supports this common sense legislation that will help the state evaluate the potential of permanently protecting 1,300 acres of state-owned working land and the high quality wildlife habitats associated with these areas. On behalf of the more than 10,000 members of Audubon Connecticut statewide, I urge you to **support** this legislation.

Connecticut has an untapped treasure of prime, productive farmland at approximately 12 sites across the state where various state agencies own property, a portion of which is leased to farmers and used in active agricultural production. Roughly 1,300 acres of land is farmed in this manner in towns such as Cheshire, Lebanon, Middletown, Newtown, Niantic, Somers/Enfield, and Southbury.

The ability of farmers to continue farming these lands, however, is subject to periodic lease negotiations with agencies as diverse as Department of Public Works, Department of Development Services, Department of Corrections and Department of Agriculture. In addition, in recent years approximately 9 parcels have been transferred from state ownership to non-farm use, taking roughly 160 acres of farmland out of production.

S.B. 1082 charges the newly created Farmland Preservation Advisory Board whose members include representatives from the farm community, Connecticut Farm Bureau, UCONN, CCM, and the Working Lands Alliance to work with the Commissioner of Agriculture to review these parcels of state-held farmland and make recommendations on a strategy for permanently protecting each parcel, including identifying a conservation organization such as local land trusts or other entities to serve as a third party holding development rights on the property.

S.B. 1082 will set the stage for further action and it is our expectation that this legislation will result in a set of **no-cost, low-cost approaches** to conserving more than 1,300 acres of farmland already owned by the State of Connecticut. In these difficult economic times, S.B. 1082 offers the opportunity to make progress toward our farmland conservation goals without expending taxpayer dollars.

For you information, I have attached to this testimony a fact sheet about the Southbury Training School, a state-owned site with roughly 600 acres of active farmland adjacent to the Audubon Center at Bent of the River in Southbury. As you will see from this fact sheet, the site provides significant habitat for a number of bird species. The Training School property is a critical part of a large mosaic of protected land that stretches from Roxbury in the north all the way to the Housatonic River. Such protected corridors are increasingly recognized as critical to the survival and health of many species of birds and other wildlife.

On behalf of the members of Audubon Connecticut, *I urge the Committee to support S.B. 1082* and thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important matter today.

S.B. 793 AN ACT CONCERNING STEAP GRANTS

Audubon Connecticut supports S.B. 793 that will ensure that state funds do not go to develop or convert prime agricultural land to nonfarm uses. Closing this loophole will ensure that all state bond funded projects, including those funded by STEAP grants, meet existing state law that requires the Commissioner of Agriculture to review and approve any project that would convert more than 25 acres of farmland to non farm uses in order to determine whether the project promotes agriculture or agricultural land preservation, or if not, that there is no prudent and feasible alternative site for the project.

In 2007, Audubon was contacted by the Council on Environmental Quality to provide avian resource information about two sites in Cromwell and South Windsor proposed for STEAP funded projects that would have converted prime farmland to nonfarm uses. After investigation, it was determined that the areas did not host significant bird populations, however, during this process, CEQ became aware that the projects were being proposed on prime farmland, without undergoing review by the Commissioner of Agriculture. Because of the lump sum bond allocation the State Bond Commission was providing to DECD for STEAP, these projects were not undergoing this review.

Together with S.B. 1098, Audubon Connecticut strongly believes that S.B. 793 will help to better protect one of our state's most rapidly vanishing resources, farmland and the wildlife habitat associated with it. We urge the Environment Committee to support this legislation. Thank you again for the opportunity to comment today. .

IMPORTANT BIRD AREA INFO SHEET

Southbury Training School ~900 acres 73° 16' W
Southbury/Roxbury, New Haven County 41° 29' N

Status: Provisional approval, awaiting more information.

Ownership: State of Connecticut Department of Mental Retardation.

Habitats: Primary- Field. Secondary- Conifer forest, deciduous forest, shrub, swamp, river/stream, pond/lake.

Land Use: Primary – Institutional/special education, undeveloped, agriculture/livestock. Secondary – Hunting/fishing, forestry.

Threats: **Serious** – Invasive or non-native plants, introduced animals, cowbird parasitism. **Minor** – Predators. **Potential** – Habitat conversion, development, disturbance to birds or habitat, hydrologic changes.

Site Description: Southbury Training School is a state-run facility for the care of the mentally handicapped. The land is occupied not only by patient-care facilities, but also by a large amount of open space and varied habitats including orchards, evergreen stands, patches of deciduous or deciduous-white pine forest, a fresh water pond, and areas of brush, edge and old-field growth. The largest habitat at the site consists of wide expanses of pasture on the grounds of the dairy farm associated with the facility. The pastures are used for cattle grazing, hay, open space, and are occasionally cultivated with crops. Field habitat at the Southbury Training School is ideal for grassland birds.

IBA Criteria: Connecticut Endangered and Threatened species; High Conservation Priority Species; Rare, Unique, or Representative Habitat; 500+ waterfowl (winter)/1000+ waterfowl (staging); Exceptional Concentrations of Migratory Landbirds; Single-species Concentrations (>1%); Long-term research and/or monitoring.

Birds: The pasture habitat at the Southbury Training School is extensive and a suitable breeding/staging area for various grassland birds such as special concern species Eastern Meadowlark and American Kestrel and high conservation priority species Bobolink. It also serves as a feeding area in migration and winter for threatened Horned Larks and large numbers of migratory Canada Geese. Canada Geese as well as various other water birds (Hérons, Grebes, Ducks, Gulls) utilize the pond on the premises as it is a valuable staging area during winter and both spring and fall migrations. The brushy fields, orchards and edge strips create a valuable breeding habitat for edge/thicket species Brown Thrasher (special concern) and Eastern Towhee (high conservation priority).

Non-avian Resources: Southbury Training School is a major institutional site providing extended care for patients with mental retardation that need specialized, intensive and often lifelong treatment. Patients are generally severely handicapped. Also a major local employer.

Conservation Issues and measures to address them:

The future fate of the property is in question if the state closes the facility. There is a significant possibility of serious threats of large-scale development if this should occur.

Nominator: Russ Naylor, Connecticut Ornithological Association, American Birding Association, The Nature Conservancy.

State-listed Species:

Species	Breeding	Winter	Migration	Dates
Bald Eagle, E, Fed. E	-	Ave. 2-3 Max. 3-5	Ave. 2-3 Max. 3-5	1988-98
American Kestrel, SC	Ave. 3-5 Max. 6-8	-	3	1988-98
Brown Thrasher, SC	Ave. 6-8 pairs Max. 10-15+ pairs	-	-	1988-98
Common Nighthawk, T	-	-	Spring, fall	1988-98
Northern Harrier E	-	3	Spring, fall	1988-98
Horned Lark, T	-	3	Fall	1988-98
Eastern Meadowlark, SC	Ave. 5-10 Max. 15-20	-	Spring, fall	1988-98
Savannah Sparrow, SC	-	-	Spring, fall	1988-98