



Working Lands Alliance

A Project of American Farmland Trust

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Testimony in support of Raised Bill No. 347: An ACT CONCERNING THE STATE'S OPEN SPACE PLAN

Submitted by: Kip Kolesinskas, Steering Committee, Working Lands Alliance
Submitted on March 16, 2012

Senator Meyer, Representative Roy, and members of the Environment Committee. I am Kip Kolesinskas, a member of the Steering Committee for the Working Lands Alliance. The Working Lands Alliance is a broad-based coalition of farmers, conservation organizations, and food security groups whose policy, education, and advocacy has led to the protection of thousands of acres of productive Connecticut farmland.

The Working Lands Alliance is supportive of Raised Bill 347, which would require a regular update of the state's open space plan, identify lands owned and managed by the state that would be valuable for conservation, and make recommendation for the establishment of a registry to accurately keep track of preserved lands.

Working Lands Alliance recommends that in Proposed 23-8 (b) that the Commissioner of Agriculture be added to the consultation with the Commissioner of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), the Council on Environmental Quality, and other entities. Many of the protected lands referenced serve multiple purposes, including agricultural production. As such, in the same section, agricultural potential should also be included along with wildlife habitat and ecological resources to be identified for protection. Agriculture can be a compatible and even necessary use with these other purposes.

Currently the State of Connecticut is fortunate to own thousands of acres of land throughout the state, under control of a number of agencies. A significant acreage of this land is in agricultural production and serves as a critical base of farmland for our growing agricultural industry. The permanent protection of these state lands has been recognized as a priority by the Working Lands Alliance. In addition, the Commissioner of Agriculture's Farmland Advisory Board studied the extent and value of the agricultural potential on a number of agency properties. The study did not include DEEP owned lands. Their recommendations should be considered in the strategy referenced in Proposed 23-8(d). This section also should include farmland, or agricultural production, in addition to open space as a conservation purpose of state agency lands.

Over thirty years ago passage of Public Act 78-232 laid the groundwork for what is today known as the Connecticut Farmland Preservation Program. The

main objective of the program is to secure a food and fiber producing land resource base for the future of agriculture in Connecticut. The state goal is to protect 130,000 acres of farmland, including cropland and supportive lands such as forest and wetlands.

We currently do not know how many acres of farmland have been protected in the state and, subsequently, how close we are to reaching the state's goal.

As of March 2012, the CT Farmland Preservation Program has protected over 38,000 acres. There is currently no statewide registry or data base that tracks other farmland that has been protected by towns and land trusts without the use of state or federal funding. We very roughly estimate that some notable towns and land trusts which have aggressively protected farmland have added an additional 10,000 acres to the state's total. These figures tell us that Connecticut is roughly 37% of the way toward meeting its goal of 130,000 acres.

The Working Lands Alliance is committed to the state's goal and believes it can be reached by 2043 if at least 2,000 acres of farmland are protected annually using state funding while land trusts and municipalities protect another 500 acres of farmland each year. Without a centralized registry, however, the state will continue to be unable to track its progress toward the goal.

A registry would also be useful for monitoring easements on protected farmland as well as setting and implementing municipal open space and farmland preservation goals. Knowing what lands that are critical to protect, or develop is essential to smart growth, natural resource protection, climate change adaptation, food security, and economic development. It will ensure that public and private investments are used effectively and efficiently.

The Working Lands Alliance is supportive of Raised Bill No. 347, which would establish a statewide system to keep track of the extent of protected open space and farmland.

Thank you for your consideration.