

Testimony for Legislative Program Review and Investigations on behalf of
Connecticut Department of Agriculture Farmland Preservation Program

Submitted by: Jim Smith

Dear Co-Chairs Senator John Fonfara and Representative T.R. Rowe, and
Members of the Committee,

Senator Fonda, representative Rowe and Committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you to testify on behalf of the Farm Land Preservation Program. My family and I own and operate Cushman Farms in Franklin. It is there that we milk 1200 cows, raise 900 replacement heifers and crop 1600 acres of land for corn and hay. We employ 22 full-time and 5 part-time people

Over the past twenty-two years we have protected all 1400 acres of the farm. This has allowed us to accomplish many goals that would not have been possible without the program. First it allowed for the expansion of the Farm in 1990 to build a new production center and double the herd to 600 cows. The program has also made it possible for a generation to move toward retirement and for the next generation to move forward. I have seen the program work, making an adjoining parcel affordable that would have been sub divided and is now part of the working farm with 70 acres of corn being grown on it instead of houses.

I am very fortunate to have 5 of the next generation that have a real desire to join the farm in the near future. However it does hold its challenges. This will require us to double this size of the business again. I can tell you that as sure as I stand here today I am going to need the program to make that work. We cannot afford to pay Connecticut raw land values for farmland. Without it we would not have a viable dairy industry. I do however feel that it is imperative for the people of Connecticut that we increase the amount of food we produce in the state. The rising cost of transportation, safety and reliability of our food makes it so.

I have held a seat on the steering committee of The Working Land Alliance where we have spent the last 15 years advocating for farmland preservation. I can report that over the years we have put a lot of time and effort making people here at the capital and in the general public more aware of importance of agriculture in Connecticut and how important it is to preserve the farmland. We work at this tirelessly because we believe in the future of agriculture in Connecticut. I know because of our efforts there is a very positive perception of the value agriculture in the state.

One of the highlights was lump sum bonding which has proven invaluable when we look back on the progress of the program. I would also like to point out that I appreciate the support we have here at the capital now. I would like you to take into consideration that it was not always that way when you review the progress of the program. I can remember the frustrations of not being on the bonding agenda and the delays of finalizing contracts. The program should be looked at as anything in agriculture... you need to plant it, nourish it, and weed it, in order to harvest its fruit. I believe that as you look at the progress timeline, you should see when it has been cared for.

I have shown how the program has helped in past and present generations, but most importantly future generations will benefit the most by being able to farm the best soil in the country, Connecticut soil. There is a call on agriculture to feed a growing population; however there are some who question our ability to do so. We can but we need these programs to continue more aggressively with the continued support of the state. There was a time when everyone remembered a connection to agriculture but as we have a very small percent of the population that is involved in agriculture, the connection is being lost. I feel we need to have a fully funded and staffed department of agriculture. It needs to continue to be one that understands agriculture and the effects of policy on agriculture and to move these programs toward their goals. I will continue to support the Farm Land Preservation program and the state needs to support it too.

Thank you for your time.