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A Project of American Farmland Trust

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Lisa Bassani
Director

Testimony in support of SB 988 (with two modifications)
Program Review and Investigations Committee
Submitted by: Lisa Bassani, Project Director, Working Lands Alliance
March 5, 2013

Senator Kissel, Representative Mushinsky, and Committee members:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB 988, An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Program Review and Investigations Committee Concerning the Farmland Preservation Program. We do, however, propose two modifications to the bill in sections 2c and 2d.

The Working Lands Alliance is a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving Connecticut's farmland, and includes such organizations as American Farmland Trust, the CT State Grange, CT Forest & Park Association, End Hunger CT!, and the CT Farm Bureau, among many others. One of the top priorities of our diverse coalition is to ensure that the state's Farmland Preservation Program (FPP) is effectively implemented and robustly funded, in order for the State to reach its goal of 130,000 acres of permanently protected farmland.

Overall, our coalition supports SB 988, and we commend the Committee for its thoughtful review of the Farmland Preservation Program. WLA believes the modifications suggested in this bill will strengthen the program and provide an important means of measuring the program's success over time.

The recommendations in section 2c provide for the formal establishment of a farmland preservation goal for the program. While the Department has had an acreage goal for many years, we believe that requiring the Department and the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board to formally set a goal and to review that goal periodically can only strengthen the program and increase the legitimacy of the goal. We do have two small modifications to suggest in section 2c. The first is to revise the language indicating that the Board will reevaluate the goal every five years to determine whether the goal is attainable. We would suggest that language also allow the Board to re-evaluate the goal to determine whether the goal is sufficient to provide an adequate resource base for food production and other agricultural needs in the future. The second relates to the Commissioner's authority to revise the goal, in consultation with department personnel who administer the program. We support this provision, but believe that the language should require that the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board formally adopt the revised goal. The Farmland Preservation Advisory Board should have a formal role to play in this regard.

While our coalition supports a strategic planning process for FPP, as called for in section 2d, we have concerns about the language requiring this strategic plan to “identify *farms* in the state” with prime and important soils that could be protected through the program. We are concerned that this kind of parcel-specific planning process is too intrusive, given that the program is entirely voluntary on the part of the landowner.

Many landowners react negatively to seeing their land named on a plan. In some instances, it can actually trigger conversion of the land to development, where a landowner fears that his or her land will be taken by the government. In instances where the state may be entering into negotiations with the landowner, the price can escalate if the landowner knows that their farm is on the state’s priority list. While we support a strategic plan for the FPP, we believe this can be adequately accomplished by focusing on key geographic regions, soil types, or other similar criteria.

Finally, we support the formal establishment of a stewardship program, as called for in section 3b. The purchase of easements through this program is a public investment which needs to be stewarded and protected. Regular monitoring of permanently protected land reduces the potential for more costly enforcement action in the event of an easement violation, and improves communication between the Department and landowners farming protected land. While the Department is currently monitoring properties protected through the program, we believe that a formal statutory stewardship requirement further legitimizes the Department’s efforts in this regard. We appreciate that a robust stewardship program requires resources, and look forward to working with the Department, the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board and relevant legislative committees to see that the Department has the resources it needs to meet both program acreage targets and stewardship responsibilities.

On behalf of the Working Lands Alliance, I urge the Committee to act favorably on SB 842, with the requested changes to the language in section 2d.