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Testimony in Support of: Raised Bill No. 6542, AN ACT CONCERNING THE PRESERVATION OF FARMLAND AT THE SOUTHBURY TRAINING SCHOOL

Submitted by: Henry N. Talmage, Executive Director, Connecticut Farm Bureau Association

The following testimony is submitted on behalf of the Connecticut Farm Bureau, a statewide nonprofit membership organization of over 5,000 families dedicated to farming and the future of Connecticut agriculture.

Senator Meyer, Representative Gentile and Members of the Environment Committee:

The Connecticut Farm Bureau enthusiastically supports Raised Bill No. 6542, AN ACT CONDERNING THE PRESERVATION OF FARMLAND AT THE SOUTHBURY TRAINING SCHOOL. This bill provides a mechanism to protect this unique and substantial agricultural resource for the future of Connecticut. The fact that the land is already owned by the state does not protect it from future development or fragmentation that would result in the loss of this special resource. By permanently protecting this land we will add 825 acres to our protected farmland at very little cost to the taxpayers.

The Farmland Preservation Advisory Board conducted a study of this property as well as several other state-owned properties to evaluate the appropriateness of protecting the lands for permanent agricultural use. Each property was ranked using the same criteria that the Farmland Preservation Program uses when evaluating a farm for purchase of development rights. Not surprisingly, the Southbury Training School property ranked extremely high, confirming what many already knew... This is an agricultural gem that deserves to be permanently protected.

Raised Bill no. 6542 provides for the creation of a permanent conservation easement that would be held by a qualified third party non-profit organization with competency and experience in holding agricultural conservation easements. The ownership of the fee title would remain in the State of Connecticut. The Commissioner of Agriculture would be granted authority to manage and lease the land to farmers subject to the terms of the easement. The involvement of the third-party easement holder will help the state by assisting in the role of stewardship through monitoring and enforcement of the terms of the conservation easement. Our only concern with this arrangement is that we would like to see measures included in the bill that would waive the state's right of sovereign immunity or some other measure that would assure the easement holder legal standing to enforce the terms of the easement if the need arose in the future.

We are very pleased that the Governor and this committee has recognized the unique opportunity we have to protect one of the most spectacular farm properties in the state. The Connecticut Farm Bureau therefore urges adoption of Raised Bill No. 6542.