Connecticut Greenhouse Growers Association
Raised Bill 5066
Labor and Public Employees Committee

February 18, 2014

Members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee:

The Connecticut Greenhouse Growers Association objects to Section 4 of the bill as it would repeal the exemption from collective bargaining of agricultural workers. We would like to make a number of points on this issue.

The policy of the state of Connecticut is to embellish and enhance and preserve agriculture. The state's history, in this regard, has been to provide as many incentives as possible to keep farmers farming. Passage of collective bargaining legislation would be at direct odds with this age-old policy. It would provide perhaps the greatest disincentive for farms to keep operating.

Ag unionization would hurt Connecticut farms by making them noncompetitive with similar farms in other states. There are only approximately 5 states that have chosen to pass collective bargaining rights for agriculture. As much as 70% of Connecticut's green industry products are exported out of CT. When a garden center in, say, New Jersey, gets a price list from 30 nurseries around the country, how will Connecticut's farms compete when they have the added costs of unionization?

Connecticut is already the highest cost state for agriculture to cope with. Collective bargaining simply heaps on another major cost. Labor is the single largest cost for farming in the state.

All of Connecticut's green industry and much of agriculture in general is highly mobile -- meaning these farms could easily pick up their operations and move to another, less expensive state very quickly -- look to the example of Franklin Mushrooms. Land values as close as upstate New York, for example, average one-quarter those of Connecticut. The same goes for costs of doing business (property taxes, labor, energy, etc.). The passage of ag unionization could easily prompt as many as 50 major farms to leave within two years as less.

5. There really is no need for collective bargaining in Connecticut agriculture. Our farms can't find the workers to begin with; therefore, they must pay high wages and benefits to hold on to the staff they already have.

6. There may be attempts to apply ag unionization to larger farms, such as those employing 50 or more. However, it's the larger farms that the state needs to keep in business here, because they are keeping thousands of acres of land in a natural state. Connecticut will never have enough money in the state budget to buy the development rights to these farms, pitting collective bargaining at direct odds with another 30-year-old public policy of preserving agricultural lands.

Thank you for considering the views of the Connecticut Greenhouse Growers Association, Diane Karabin, President.