



WORKING LANDS ALLIANCE

A Project of American Farmland Trust

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Testimony on HB 5139

Planning and Development Committee

Submitted by: Lisa Bassani, Project Director, Working Lands Alliance
February 21, 2014

Senator Osten, Representative Rojas, and Committee members:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony on HB 5139, An Act Concerning the Use of State Funds for the Installation of Solar Panels on State Land.

The Working Lands Alliance (WLA) 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 Nursery and Landscape Association, End Hunger CT!, and the CT Farm Bureau, among many others. As an Alliance, we care deeply both about saving Connecticut's farmland and about ensuring a healthy agricultural sector and prosperous future for Connecticut's farmers. As such, this bill has prompted a significant amount of discussion within our coalition – the kind of discussions that we must have now if our agricultural sector is going to grow and thrive well into the future.

Our coalition has chosen to neither support nor oppose this bill, but rather to use this opportunity to raise some questions that this bill begs. On its surface, this bill has a goal that makes sense: to ensure that the state does not incentivize the conversion of prime farmland to solar development. Indeed, there is a good argument to be made that the state should not incentivize the conversion of prime farmland for any non-agricultural development, because of the potential importance of prime farmland (the most productive and resilient of our farmland) to future generations.

However, like an iceberg, there is much more to this bill below the surface. The bill raises a lot of questions—around land use and property rights, around technology and energy production, and around the role and needs of agriculture in the decades ahead. Some of our member organizations will be sharing some specific perspectives on these issues in their testimony today.

If Connecticut remains committed to preserving prime farmland, ensuring the viability of our agricultural sector, *and* incentivizing the production of alternative energy—three important goals—then we must begin to address the following questions:

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- Over the next 20-30 years, what are the likely trends in CT agriculture, and how will these trends impact the agricultural land base? Are farms likely to continue to need to diversify to remain competitive, and, if so, how important a potential revenue source will commercial renewable energy production be?
- Is the State's goal of preserving 130,000 acres of farmland still relevant? If yes, are the tools we have in place now sufficient to meet this goal? If not, what new tools or current program improvements are needed; and are there state policies that are working against this goal? How much of an impact has solar development had on farmland loss?
- What is needed to sustain and grow agriculture in this state?

We know there is tremendous interest, need and opportunity to expand our food production, and that new technologies could enable our farmers to be more competitive in the local and global marketplace. We also know that a key sector of CT agriculture, the nursery and greenhouse sector, is especially challenged at the moment by high costs, low margins, and the loss of several of its largest farms and their associated purchasing power. What strategic state investments could leverage our current agricultural strengths and resources, as well as proximity to markets, to give our farms a unique competitive advantage?

This year, WLA will be working with partners to begin to answer these questions, which will guide our work over the next decade. And we would welcome the Committee's input as we do so. By focusing on these larger strategic questions, we hope to be able to provide better context for specific policy suggestions such as in the bill before us and a broader framework for the types of policy shifts and strategic investments needed to ensure a vibrant and resilient future for Connecticut's farms and farmland.

On behalf of the Working Lands Alliance, I thank the Committee for this opportunity to testify on HB 5139, and ask the Committee to consider these questions in their deliberations over this bill.