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Testimony in support of SB 70 and SB 69 Environment Committee

Submitted by: Lisa Bassani, Project Director, Working Lands Alliance
February 19, 2014

Senator Meyer, Representative Gentile, and Committee members:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony in **support of SB 70**, An Act Concerning the Preservation of Lands Under the Control of Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and Department of Agriculture, and **SB 69**, An Act Concerning the Farmland Restoration and Vacant Public Lands Programs of the Department of Agriculture.

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. Over the past few years, our coalition has been working to achieve permanent protections of state-held agricultural lands, with the most significant of these farmland properties – Southbury Training School – protected last session with the unanimous support of our legislators and the Governor. We commend this Committee and the Governor for their support of that legislation.

Our coalition strongly supports the overall goals of SB 70, which will strengthen protections of our state-held lands of high conservation value, including our agricultural lands, parks, forests, and other areas. This bill classifies lands held by the Department of Agriculture and Department of Energy and Environmental Protection as high conservation value, unless determined by the respective Commissioners in writing to be otherwise, and requires the permanent protection of these high conservation value lands through a conservation restriction. In addition, this bill puts in place a clear and transparent process that must be followed if state lands of high conservation value are being considered for sale or transfer.

The framework set out through this bill ensures that there are protections in place for our state-held agricultural lands, forests, parks, and other natural areas. These are some of the lands that our citizens rely on for food and plant production, recreation, and scenic enjoyment; equally as importantly, these are lands that provide myriad environmental, economic and health benefits. Putting strong

policies in place today ensures that the public continues to reap the rewards of the investment in these state lands well into the future.

While WLA supports the overall goals of this legislation, our coalition wishes to see minor modifications and clarifications in the bill. The first of these relates to references within the bill to the ‘conservation values’ of state land, which we would like to see more explicitly stated that such conservation values include their agricultural values. We ask this Committee to consider adjustments to the bill such that it recognizes the difference between the preservation of agricultural lands and lands held for open space and wildlife purposes, since the conservation pathways for each may differ in some ways. With these adjustments, we believe this bill would provide a clear path for the permanent preservation of both categories of state-held conservation land, which our coalition strongly supports.

With these modifications, we believe this bill will provide strong protections for our state-held conservation and agricultural lands, which are currently lacking in the kinds of legal protections that many of our residents assume exist (as detailed in a recently released report by the Council on Environmental Quality, “Preserved but Maybe Not”). This bill will also create a clear process when lands of high conservation value are proposed for transfer, which will serve to make the land conveyance process more transparent for state lands of high conservation value, including our agricultural lands. We commend this Committee for raising this bill in an effort to address the issues raised in the CEQ report, and believe that the permanent protections of these lands as provided for in this bill will benefit the public in numerous ways.

WLA also supports SB 69, which provides minor modifications and clarifications for the Farmland Restoration Program, a program created in 2011 to restore farmland acreage back into production. Our coalition supports the language in this bill clarifying that ‘farmland restoration plan’ as referenced within the original statute refers to a USDA-NRCS conservation plan or similar plan approved by the Commissioner of Agriculture. This is an important detail ensuring that our investments in farmland restoration efforts are done in accordance with a conservation plan that has considered the soil, water and other natural resources on the property. As such, we also support allowing some funds from the program to reimburse farmers in part for developing, implementing, and complying with these plans, as provided for in this bill. Finally, we would ask for one minor modification in section 2, clarifying the fact that fencing for wildlife refers to “crop damaging” wildlife so this clause is not more restrictive than intended.

On behalf of the Working Lands Alliance, I urge the Committee to act favorably on HB SB 70 and SB 69, with the modifications to SB 70 noted above.