WORKING LANDS ALLIANCE
A Project of American Farmland Trust

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Testimony to Appropriations Committee with regards to
Department of Agriculture, Department of Energy and Environmental Protection,
and Council on Environmental Quality Budgets
Governor's Bill 6824
Submitted by: Kip Kolesinskas, Working Lands Alliance
March 2, 2015

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and Committee members:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony on the agency budgets for the Department of Agriculture, Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, and Council on Environmental Quality within Governor's Bill 6842.

The Working Lands Alliance is a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving Connecticut's farmland, and includes such organizations as American Farmland Trust, CT Forest & Park Association, CT Farmland Trust, End Hunger CT!, CT Farm Bureau, CT Land Conservation Council, among many others. Our efforts focus on increasing the pace of farmland preservation and advancing agricultural viability in Connecticut.

Our coalition is pleased that the Department of Agriculture's budget appears to remain intact in Governor's Bill 6842. However, we believe this Committee must take into account the drastic cuts proposed to the Community Investment Act (CIA) in SB 946 in evaluating the overall impact of the budget decisions on the Department of Agriculture's operations and services.

In SB 946, the Governor proposes a complete sweep of CIA funds from 1/1/16 through 6/30/17, and calls for those funds to be deposited into the General Fund. This funding source provides invaluable administrative dollars to the Department of Agriculture, allowing this small Department to fund 4 key positions in the Farmland Preservation Program (FPP) and Marketing Division. In addition to managing the protection of farmland through our Farmland Preservation Program, the limited FPP staff has steadily taken on the administration and management of numerous other important programs such as the Farmland Restoration Program, Community Farms Preservation Program, and FarmLink. These are all important programs that benefit our Connecticut farmers; however, they require significant time and energy of a staff that is already stretched thin and cannot withstand further cuts.

The Community Investment Act funds also support many of the due diligence and other costs associated with the protection of our working lands; a complete sweep would hamper these vital efforts to protect and steward Connecticut farmland and directly impact the many programs and services the Department provides to Connecticut farmers. We strongly urge this Committee to oppose the sweep of Community Investment Act funds, and make the necessary adjustments to the Department of Agriculture budget to continue supporting these important programs.

Similarly, the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) also relies on administrative dollars from the Community Investment Act to help support three positions within the agency related to its Land Acquisition division. The Land Acquisition staff focuses on protecting lands through our Open Space grant program, making needed acquisitions of state conservation lands, building the Public Use and Land Benefit Registry, and defining the state's land conservation priorities through its Green Plan. Despite the increased demands, the staff for this division has reduced greatly in recent years, declining from nearly 10 professional staff just four years ago to 5.5 employees today. The deep cuts proposed to the Community Investment Act are in addition to significant cuts to DEEP in the Governor's budget (which fall disproportionately on the Department's Environmental Conservation efforts). Taken together, these cuts will undoubtedly hamper the Department's efforts to protect and steward valuable conservation lands in our State. We strongly urge this Committee to restore this funding for DEEP's critical conservation work and ensure that we can make the needed progress towards our state's land conservation goals.

Finally, our coalition also strongly opposes the elimination of staff funding for the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and its proposed transfer to the Office of Legislative Management. Since 1971, CEQ has been charged with assessing the condition of the environment in Connecticut and reporting those findings annually to the Governor. On a small budget, the Council serves a critical function as an independent watchdog of the state's environmental efforts, and its annual report tracks our progress towards goals set by the state. CEQ, for instance, has reported annually that we are not on track to meet our farmland preservation or our open space goals, and has been an important voice in delivering those messages to the Governor and legislators.

To function effectively, the Council must remain independent of the legislative branch of government and be able to provide critique on environmental matters and bring forward recommendations that may not be supported by leadership at the time. The transfer to Legislative Management, as proposed by the Governor, would put the Council's independence in question and limit its ability to report honestly and openly about our progress on key environmental indicators. Finally, our coalition strongly opposes the elimination of funding for the Council staff, who leverage hundreds of hours of volunteer time to fulfill its responsibilities. The proposal to strip the Council of its staff is short-sighted, particularly in light of the many environmental challenges we expect to face as a state and a region over the coming decades. Our efforts to protect our farmland and conservation lands, our water, and our many other natural resources will only grow in importance, and, in turn, so will the role of CEQ in evaluating our progress and finding areas we can improve. We urge this Committee to fully evaluate the benefits CEQ provides on a small budget, and restore the staffing levels and administrative structure that allow the CEQ to function effectively and to do the job as mandated by statute.

On behalf of the Working Lands Alliance, thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony.