



Testimony in Support of Raised SB 347

An Act Concerning the Percentage of State and Federal Funds that May Be Used to Purchase Open Space under the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program

To the Environment Committee

Submitted by: Elisabeth Moore, Executive Director, CT Farmland Trust
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Co-Chairs Kennedy, Albis and honorable members of the Environment Committee:

Connecticut Farmland Trust appreciates this opportunity to provide comments today in **strong support of Raised SB 347**: An Act Concerning the Percentage of State and Federal Funds that May Be Used to Purchase Open Space under the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program.

Connecticut Farmland Trust ("CFT") is the only land trust in the state dedicated to the permanent protection of working farms. Since our founding in 2002, we have protected over 2,750 acres of farmland, and have helped the CT Department of Agriculture and other partners to protect nearly 1,000 acres more. CFT accepts donations of and purchases agricultural conservation easements and farmland; partners with towns and land trusts to identify threatened farms and opportunities for land protection; and partners with communities throughout the state to encourage local farmland preservation efforts through outreach and support to farmers, local officials and community groups.

CFT applauds the committee's raising this important bill that would have a significant impact on preservation of Connecticut's farmland and open space. The bill would eliminate "the 70% rule" – a cap that limits the total amount of federal and state funds that can be used on a land conservation project to 70% of the land's appraised value. Due to this rule, land trusts, towns, and water companies that are attempting to protect important agricultural, conservation, and recreation lands must raise a minimum of 30% of the property's value from non-state, non-federal sources.

CFT focuses on the preservation of farmland with prime and statewide important agricultural soils -- the very best soils for growing food. Connecticut has some of the best farmland soils in the country and as a result the **state has been able to annually secure \$3-4 million in USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service funding** for farmland preservation. CFT relies on these grants in addition to funding from the CT Department of Agriculture and CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection for 90% of its farmland preservation projects. CFT is not alone. Municipalities and other land trusts also rely on leveraging state and federal funding to protect important farms.

Four pending projects have been awarded federal and DEEP grants to protect key farmland properties. Together they total 242 acres in Cornwall, Morris, Bloomfield, Vernon, and Tolland. These projects -- which include recreation, habitat, and other conservation resources -- are possibly **in jeopardy due to the 70% rule** because the remaining portion of the purchase price of the properties may not be able to be raised by the sponsoring entity -- local land trusts, municipalities, and/or CFT. **If these projects fail, Connecticut will be forfeiting up to \$1.43 million in federal funding.** The return of this funding could also significantly impair Connecticut's ability to secure federal farmland preservation funding in the future.

Because Connecticut is densely populated, the vast majority of the state's remaining active farmland is in rural communities. Preserving active farmland is a statewide goal with strong public support that benefits not only the local community but also the entire state. The 70% rule places the financial burden on rural communities to protect these important resources that have statewide value. **With small populations, these towns have a challenging time raising the required 30% matching funds.** There is a limited number of households to shoulder a property tax increase as well as support private fundraising campaigns.

CFT, local land trusts, and towns that receive DEEP and federal grants to protect farmland have significant **"skin in the game"** without the 70% cap. Sponsoring entities pay for professional property appraisals, surveys, and environmental review as well as legal, closing, and ongoing property management costs. These expenses on average total more than **\$75,000 for each project.** The entities also have the **perpetual legal responsibility** to steward the properties that they protect as well as **defend them against any violations, including going to court** if necessary. In addition, CFT commits hundreds of hours of staff time to execute these projects from start to finish, which often takes several years. Local land trusts, 90% of which are all volunteer, also dedicate comparable hours to take these projects from start to finish.

On behalf of Connecticut Farmland Trust, I respectfully urge the Environment Committee to support SB 347.

We strongly support HB 5419 that will permanently protect the next most significant state owned agricultural land, Savin Farm in Lebanon. The Farmland Preservation Advisory Board did an exhaustive study in 2010 of all state-owned farmland and identified Savin Farm as the second property most worthy of protection, just after Southbury Training School. Savin's high percentage of the best agricultural soils, more

than 500 acres of pasture, corn and forest land, and location in one of the state's most active agricultural communities make it a critical public resource to preserve.

Preservation of Savin Farm is a win-win. The state will add 575 acres of prime farmland to its list of protected farms and will be that much closer to its goal of 130,000 acres of preserved farmland. While preservation projects can take years to complete and have high price tags, the state can protect Savin Farm in a short-period of time at minimal cost.

On behalf of Connecticut Farmland Trust, I strongly urge the Committee to act favorably on HB 5149. Thank you for your consideration of this important bill.