



**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,
Agricultural Experiment Station, and Council on Environmental Quality Budgets

H.B. No. 5044 AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE
EXPENDITURES FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2017.

Submitted by: Lisa Bassani, Working Lands Alliance
February 10, 2016

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and Committee members:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony on the FY17 midterm adjustments for the Department of Agriculture, Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, CT Agricultural Experiment Station, and Council on Environmental Quality budgets within HB 5044.

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 appreciates the difficulties this committee faces in trying to address chronic budget deficits. However, our coalition remains concerned with the significant impact the budget cuts will have on the Department of Agriculture, Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, CT Agricultural Experiment Station and the Council on Environmental Quality, all of which have absorbed significant cuts in recent years.

The Department of Agriculture is a small agency with limited staff already stretched thin by a series of budget cuts. Our concern with this additional 5.75% cut is that it comes on top of the unprecedented 50% diversion of Community Investment Act funds for FY17. The Community Investment Act provides critical funding for a variety of programming and direct support to our farmers, and helps support the agency's efforts with needed administrative dollars. These steady cuts to an already-thin agency budget, compounded by the CIA diversion, compromise the ability of a small agency to deliver services and programs to our farmers.

STAFF

Lisa Bassani
Director

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Across the Department, this small staff is tasked with preserving our prime farmland, providing needed grants to farmers to help them expand and diversify their operations and comply with new food safety regulations, helping dairy farmers withstand drastic swings in milk pricing, enforcing laws relating to milk safety, and dealing with animal control and other health issues, among many other items. Important parts of the agency's work are supported by CIA dollars, including our vital efforts to make progress towards our goal of preserving 130,000 acres of farmland in this state. We hope that this Committee considers the important work this agency does to support our state's increasing numbers of farmers, and will take into account the impact of budget cuts and the 50% reduction in CIA funding on the necessary programs that these farmers depend on.

Our coalition is also concerned with the significant impact the 5.75% reduction will have on the critical work taking place at the CT Agricultural Experiment Station. The Core mission at the Station spans several vitally important areas – agriculture, environment, food safety, and public health. Their timely and important research focuses on pollinator health as well as insects and diseases threatening our food crops. They are the go-to agency for mosquito and tick surveillance and mosquito-borne diseases, and will be on the front line for issues relating to the Zika virus. In addition, their scientists provide testing on soil contamination, oversee nursery inspections (which is the leading sector of the agricultural economy in CT), and ensure that our agricultural producers are armed with the best science to deal with an array of constantly changing threats and issues. The Station has recruited extraordinarily talented young scientists working in these areas, and they are bringing in significant grants totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars. If the Station were forced to lay off some of these scientists, it would drastically affect their cutting edge work and the robust federal and other grants they have and are continuing to pull in. In short, the Station is at the hub of an economic ecosystem and is a model that is essential to growing Connecticut's economic future. The research and exchange of ideas between the Station, Yale, Quinnipiac and other area colleges – as well as its outreach to business communities like Science Park and stand-out schools like New Haven's Sound School and Common Ground High School – is a model worthy of our investment. Cutting back is short-sighted. We urge this Committee to consider the impact further cuts to the Station would have on public health and on growing our agricultural economy.

Our coalition is also concerned with the impact of this across the board cut on the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), which has, over time, seen its staffing levels steadily decline. This is particularly acute in the Land Acquisition Division, which 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 is roughly half of what it was just five years ago and simply cannot withstand additional reductions in force. This Division is also supported by CIA dollars, and is similarly impacted by the unprecedented diversion of these funds for FY17. Again, we ask this Committee to consider the impact to our environment that would result from further cuts to a DEEP staff which has already absorbed steady reductions.

Finally, our coalition also offers our strong support to the work of the Council on Environmental Quality, which is perennially threatened due to budget deficits. The importance of their work on environmental matters cannot be overstated, particularly their efforts to gauge our progress on key environmental indicators and identify areas where we must improve. The Council does this great work on a modest budget, in part by leveraging the time, energy and talent of our own citizens. We urge this Committee to consider the growing importance of their work as Connecticut and the region grapple with climate change and other complex environmental challenges.

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