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LANDS
ALLIANCE**

A Project of American Farmland Trust

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Testimony to Environment Committee on Senate Joint Resolution 5
and Raised Bill 76

Submitted by: Lisa Bassani, Working Lands Alliance
February 19, 2016

Senator Kennedy, Representative Albis, and Committee members:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony on Senate Joint Resolution 5 and Raised Bill 76.

The Working Lands Alliance is a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving Connecticut's farmland, and includes such organizations as American Farmland Trust, Connecticut Forest & Park Association, CT Farmland Trust, End Hunger CT!, Connecticut 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 strongly supports the concept of Senate Joint Resolution 5, and believes that our conveyance process needs greater transparency when it comes to proposals to sell or otherwise convey lands of conservation and agricultural value. Seemingly each year proposals come up that would sell or transfer lands that the general public assumes are "protected", as was documented last year in the report issued by CEQ, "Preserved but Maybe Not: The Impermanence of State's Conservation Lands". Our state's conservation and agricultural lands deserve greater protections, which would be afforded by a much-needed constitutional amendment.

However, our coalition has a few concerns with the bill as currently drafted. First, this bill limits the protection to "any state land or easement held for conservation purposes" – without properly defining what would or would not fall under such a category. We respectfully encourage the Committee to amend the language to specifically include agricultural, recreation, and conservation lands in this bill, but to then also limit the scope to lands under the custody and control of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and the Department of Agriculture. By limiting the scope to lands held under these two agencies, the constitutional amendment would appropriately focus on the lands needing greater protections.

Second, we are also concerned how the language as currently drafted in the first sentence of Section 21 would impact issues surrounding the right-to farm. We urge the Committee to consider the impact of the language on the state's agricultural community – in particular on the ongoing efforts of municipalities around the state to promote and pass right-to-farm ordinances.

Our coalition also supports the suggestions offered by our colleagues at Connecticut Forest & Park Association on ways to strengthen this bill. This includes adding language that would require separate bills be considered by the General Assembly when public lands with agricultural, conservation, and recreational values are proposed for conveyance. We also concur that compensation be required even for lands that are simply given away and not sold.

In short, our coalition believes that Connecticut should follow the lead of states in the region (Massachusetts, New York, and Maine) that already have similar constitutional amendments in place. We believe an effort to provide greater transparency for any such conveyances or transfers is needed, but that the bill as presented requires some adjustments to properly address the issues with our current conveyance process.

Our coalition also supports Raised Bill 76, which will amend regulations governing procurement of food for school breakfast and lunches, helping to facilitate purchases from our local farmers. As this Committee knows, the future of our farms depends on their economic viability. As such, these farm businesses would benefit from an overall effort to make regulations governing food procurement by our local and regional Boards of Education align better with the reality of agriculture in Connecticut. This bill requires the food service companies to document how their bid is consistent with the farm-to-school program, thereby making these companies consider ways to more fully utilize Connecticut-grown products and giving preference to those proposals that achieve higher levels of local sourcing.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on these two bills.