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LANDS
ALLIANCE**

A Project of American Farmland Trust

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**Testimony to Government Administration and Elections Committee
In Support of Senate Joint Resolution 36**

Submitted by: Lisa Bassani, Working Lands Alliance
March 14, 2016

Senator Cassano, Representative Jutila, and Committee members:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony in support of SJ 36, Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the State to Protect Certain Property Held or Controlled by the State for Conservation, Recreation, Open Space, or Agricultural Purposes.

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 Senate Joint Resolution 36, and we commend this Committee for raising this bill and holding a hearing on this important issue. It is evident 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 Conservation Lands". This is true again this year with a questionable proposal in Section 8 of the Conveyance Act to transfer more than 60 acres of waterfront land held by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection to the Town of Groton for no cost. Our state's conservation, recreation, and agricultural lands deserve greater protections, which would be afforded by a much-needed constitutional amendment.

This bill outlines a clear and transparent process for proposed conveyances of state-held conservation, agricultural, recreation and open space lands. We applaud this Committee for including requirements in the bill for a local public hearing and an affirmative 2/3 majority vote of each house in the General Assembly for any sale or transfer of these state-held lands. This bill also stipulates that the bill for the proposed conveyance of state conservation, agricultural, recreation or open

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space lands be considered separately, ensuring that bad proposals in the conveyance process do not get combined with benign proposals; and also requires that the agencies be compensated appropriately if these state conservation lands are given away or sold. Taken together, these provisions ensure that any proposed conveyance gets properly vetted in a transparent manner, and includes the necessary mechanism to appropriately compensate agencies if such conveyances proceed.

While our coalition is in full support of this bill, we concur with the recommendations offered by our colleagues at Connecticut Forest & Park Association on ways to strengthen this bill. This includes adding language that would stipulate that expenses associated with the proposed conveyance (ie. expenses for a local public hearing, and for appraisals that determine fair market value) be borne by the proposed new landholder rather than the agency that currently has custody of the land. We also agree that the ultimate approval of the fair market value of the land should be made by the agency that currently holds the land in question. Finally, minor administrative boundary adjustments that do not impact the conservation, agricultural or recreational values of the land should be exempted.

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, and urge this Committee to act favorably on SJ 36.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on this bill.