William B. Avery

February 10, 2016

Appropriations Committee Connecticut State Legislature

Re: Connecticut Agriculture Experiment Station Conservation & Development Hearing

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen of the Appropriations Committee;

Balancing the state budget should be priority #1 in Hartford right now. However, there are certain state agencies that are critical to the health and safety of our great state, and their budgets should not be slashed to the point where their important missions may be compromised. The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station (CAES) is one of these agencies.

Most citizens in Connecticut are not aware that Connecticut agriculture produces up to $4.6 billion in annual sales and accounts for some 30,000 jobs (Source: CAES). There is a robust market for Connecticut grown vegetables, meat, milk, eggs, animal breeder stock, wood products, tobacco, cut flowers, and garden center plants and shrubs. Horticulture is a $1 billion business in Connecticut, and 40 % of the plants grown here are exported (Source: CAES). The Agricultural Experiment Station, the oldest state agricultural institution in America, monitors the quality of the state's agricultural products, and provides technical assistance to Connecticut's farmers and growers.

The public, and many state legislators as well, are probably not aware that the CAES is also one of the leading research institutes in the country for the study of insect-borne diseases that inflict humans and animals, and is a leader in studying and mitigating the impact of plant pathogens. These include Lyme disease, and mosquito-borne equine encephalitis, West Nile virus, and now the horrifically painful and so far incurable Chikungunya virus. Lyme disease is rampant in Connecticut, and the state has had cases of equine encephalitis and West Nile virus. The Zika virus has now entered the United States – Connecticut must be vigilant. It is the CAES that monitors the spread of insect diseases, and researches methods to combat them.

Connecticut's woodlands, wetlands, and rural roadsides are being ravaged by invasive plants such as oriental bittersweet, burning bush, Japanese barberry, purple loosestrife, garlic mustard and a host of other plants that are eliminating our native species. Our children will not enjoy the ash trees that are being killed off by fungi and a virus carried by the emerald ash borer. The state's majestic hemlock trees are being killed off by a virus carried by the wooly adelgid insect. Ornamental boxwood, a common landscape planting, is being killed off by a fungus. Again, the CAES is our first line of defense against these pests.

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Connecticut's Agricultural Experiment Station is also one of five regional facilities in the nation that is charged by the Federal government with doing the very high-tech analytical work to test food for chemical and biological contaminants. Again, unbeknown to the public, food is randomly sampled in the state's grocery stores on a regular basis, and sent to the CAES laboratory in New Haven for analysis.

My understanding is that the proposed state budget for FY 2017 was originally $18,711 Million. The estimated state-funded FY2016 budget for the Agricultural Experiment Station is $8,131,824 and for FY2017 is $8,248,270. This means that the appropriation for CAES represents roughly 0.0004 of the total state budget.

Given the strategic importance of the CAES in protecting the health of Connecticut's human and animal populations, and assuring the quality of our agricultural products, I urge the Appropriations Committee to keep the CAES budget intact. The mission of the CAES must not be jeopardized in the process of cutting the state budget. There are departments and agencies with far greater budgets where a 5% cut in appropriations would not significantly reduce the quality of life in our great state.

Respectfully yours,

William Avery
Taxpayer and amateur beekeeper

Cc: Gov. Daniel Malloy
Sen. Toni Boucher (26th District); -
Rep. Tom O'Dea (125th District)
Rep. Fred Wilms (142nd District);
Rep. Gail Lavielle (143rd district).

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