



Testimony in Support of HB 5383

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Senator Kennedy, Representative Albis, and Members of the Environment Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony *in support of* House Bill 5383, an *Act Concerning the Farm Viability Matching Grant Program and the Connecticut Farm Link Program*. This bill would make an important improvement to the CT FarmLink Program, enabling the Department of Agriculture to provide more robust and more diverse services to connect farmland owners with farm seekers, and to assist retiring farmers in transferring their farm to a next generation farmer.

Land For Good is a New England-based non-profit working to ensure the future of farming in Connecticut and across New England by putting more farmers more securely on more land. Since 2004, we have provided caring support and expert guidance to help farmers, landowners and communities navigate the complex challenges of land access, tenure and transfer. In Connecticut, as elsewhere, we work at multiple levels and with multiple audiences. We have a Connecticut Field Agent, Rachel Murray, who helps farm families think through succession needs and strategies and connects farm seekers with farmers and farmland owners. We work with conservation and agriculture organizations and networks around the state to provide technical assistance to their members, and to build their collective capacity to help farmers gain access to land. And, we're collaborating with the Department of Agriculture and groups such as CT Farm Bureau, CT Farmland Trust, New CT Farmer Alliance, UConn Extension, and Working Lands Alliance, to identify state policy changes to address the real, land-related challenges faced by both new and established farmers in Connecticut. This bill is an outgrowth of that work.

In authorizing an expansion in the types of services the Department of Agriculture can provide through the CT FarmLink Program, this bill will enable the use of Community Investment Act funds for

programming that is needed, but not now possible. This includes outreach and technical assistance to farmers around farm transfer and succession planning, and direct outreach and matchmaking between farmland owners and young or beginning farmers seeking land to lease or purchase. In expanding how these services are delivered, the bill enables the Department to make use of cost-effective third-party expertise.

Almost one-third of Connecticut farmers are age 65 and older. According to recent research conducted by American Farmland Trust and Land For Good using 2012 Census of Agriculture data, the vast majority of these senior farmers are not farming with a young farmer alongside. This subset of seniors (more than 1,750 Connecticut farmers) owns a collective \$1.4 billion in farm real estate, and manages 123,000 acres of the state's land in farms. Over the next two decades, the land and assets these seniors own will change hands one way or another. It is important that these seniors, and the growing demographic of 55-64 year old farmers behind them, have the knowledge and resources needed to plan for their farms' future in a way that keeps farmland in farming and helps get a next generation of farmers on the land.

As part of this research, we conducted focus groups of older farmers who self-identified as having no successor for their farm. The farmers in the Connecticut focus group, like their counterparts in other New England states, uniformly wanted to see their land remain in farming if at all possible. But many felt challenged to find a suitable farmer to succeed them on their land, to know what type of tenure arrangement with another farmer might work, and to navigate the farm transfer process. This bill will enable the Department of Agriculture to put resources to the very type of programming that these older farmers say they need.

Attached to this testimony is a copy of the Connecticut findings from this research. We feel that it makes the case for the changes that this bill seeks. This legislation can make an important and lasting difference in helping older farmers get the help they need to plan for their future and connect to younger farmers. And, in so doing, this legislation helps more farmers gain more ground in Connecticut.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony. If any members of the Committee would like to discuss our testimony or the findings from our research in further detail, please feel free to contact me at cris@landforgood.org.