



#### STEERING COMMITTEE

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New CT Farmer Alliance

Joseph Bonelli  
University of Connecticut

Bonnie Burr  
University of Connecticut

Paul Elconin  
Weantinoge Heritage Land Trust

Gordon Gibson  
Connecticut State Grange

Eric Hammerling  
CT Forest & Park Association

Bryan Hurlburt  
CT Farm Bureau Association

Terry Jones  
Jones Family Farms

Kip Kolesinkas  
Manchester

Nathan L'Etoile  
American Farmland Trust

Henry Lord  
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CT NOFA

Richard Roberts  
Halloran & Sage

Kathy Ruhf  
Land for Good

Jim Smith  
Cushman Farm

Keith Stechschulte  
Farm Credit East

#### STAFF

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## Working Lands Alliance Policy Statement SB 1063 Environment Committee Public Hearing March 18, 2019

Dear Co-Chairs Cohen and Demicco, Vice-Chairs Gresko and Kushner, Ranking Members Harding and Miner, and members of the Environment Committee:

Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB 1063, legislation that will create a Farmland Access Task Force.

My name is Chelsea Gazillo and I am the Director of the Working Lands Alliance (WLA), a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving Connecticut's farmland. WLA includes such organizations as American Farmland Trust, the CT State Grange, New CT Farmer Alliance, End Hunger CT!, CT Land Conservation Council, CT NOFA, and the CT Farm Bureau Association, among many others. As an Alliance, we care deeply both about saving Connecticut's farmland and ensuring a healthy agricultural sector and prosperous future for Connecticut's farmers. As such, the issue that this bill seeks to address has prompted a significant amount of discussion within our coalition.

Over the next 20 years, 371 million acres of farmland (41% of all farmland) in the United States is expected to change hands. The average age of principle farm operators in Connecticut is 58 years old and many of these farmers are looking to transition their farm operations to new ownership. According to 2014 report written by American Farmland Trust, *Gaining Insight, Gaining Access*, over 92% of Connecticut's 1,892 senior farmers do not have a young (under 45) farm operator working with them. While this does not mean that these farmers do not have a succession plan, it suggests that the future of many of these farms is uncertain. At the same time, according to a 2018 report written by the National Young Farmers Coalition, *Building a Future with Farmers*, the biggest issue facing young and beginning farmers in our country is access to land tenure.

Connecticut's agriculture remains a vital contribution to our state's overall economy. In 2017, the University of Connecticut Zwick Center for Food and Resource Policy found that the agricultural industry in Connecticut has an output of up to \$4.0 billion, creates 21,696 jobs, and "generates more jobs per million dollars of sales than nearly any other sector in the rest of the state economy." Yet, despite having an outsized impact in a small state, many beginning farmers still struggle in finding affordable farmland in the state. In fact, Connecticut has some of the most expensive farmland



in the country. According to the USDA, the average price per acre of farmland in Connecticut is \$11,200, over double the price of farmland in the Northeast. Development pressure continues to force young farmers to compete with more profitable land use ventures--despite efforts to slow down development by local nonprofits and state officials.

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The State of Connecticut has done a great job in protecting Connecticut's farmland from development. Since its inception in 1978, the state's Farmland Preservation Program has protected over 44,000 acres or 365 farms from development. The Department of Agriculture was instrumental in setting up the state's FarmLink programs which connects farmland owners with farm seekers. However, more needs to be done to create an environment in which young farmworkers, managers, and aspiring farmers can become principal operators of their own farm businesses. As the state continues to protect our farmland from development, we must configure new and innovative policy solutions that will make this land affordable and accessible to beginning farmers.

The establishment of a Farmland Access Task Force will require that state agencies, farmers, agricultural advocates, and service providers come to consensus on the challenges and barriers surrounding farmland access and affordability in Connecticut. Additionally, the task force will work to diligently draft a report that will allow the 2020 legislature to implement informed policies which will address this issue.

From Minnesota—which passed a tax incentive program that encourages senior farmers to sell their agricultural lands to a beginning farmer to New York which took great steps to help protect farmer ownership and affordability on preserved farmland, states across the country have started to pass policies that have made a significant impact in transferring farmland to the next generation.

I strongly urge you to join states across the country in implementing land access legislation and pass SB 1063 with the following provisions:

- The task force should include an existing farmer who has been a producer in the state for more than 10 years

WLA is happy to work with you in implementing this important piece of legislation.

Sincerely,  
Chelsea Gazillo