Dear Members of the Environment Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My husband and I operate a small certified organic vegetable farm in Putnam, CT. We purchased our land in 2016 and started our farm in the Spring of 2018. Considering land access is the largest issue for beginning farmers, we consider ourselves extremely lucky to have found our land and the funds to do so. We purchased raw land, which did not have any infrastructure or driveway, since that is what we could afford. Finding a mortgage lender with no infrastructure (= collateral) on our land was difficult and consequently our down payment was very high. Having previous non-farming jobs, we had savings that helped us through these financial obstacles but not all beginning farmers might have that option. Today, there is an increasing trend for young and beginning farmers to farm on a very small piece of land and make a comfortable living. We grow on no more than 3/4 of an acre with my husband and I working full-time on the farm. We’re able to make a living off of our farm and make enough to money to reinvest in the business. Therefore, land access for new farmers does not necessarily require huge swaths of land. If only we could give beginning farmers access to even just a small parcel of land, the community around it can benefit from locally grown and nutritious food as well as a myriad of other positive effects. We hope that you support this bill so that we can see more farmers tend the land and ensure that we continue to have control over our own food and health.

Connecticut 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.”[1] Despite having an outsized impact in a small state, the General Assembly and Department of Agriculture will have to make great strides to address the challenges facing Connecticut farmers and ensure the industry’s success for years to come. According to the USDA’s 2018 State Agriculture Overview of Connecticut, the average age of principal farm operators is 58 years old.[2] This is on par with a national trend that over 57% of farmers nationwide are 55 or older and likely to retire in the next two decades.[3] As farms transition to new ownership, these statistics point to great opportunity for young farmers, but also great risk in the potential loss of farmland to non-agricultural uses.
Luckily, young farmers are stepping up in our state to fill this void and push our agricultural industry towards innovation and diversification. Between 2007 and 2012, Connecticut saw a 15% increase in young farmers, the second largest in the nation.[4] At the time of the last agricultural census, 281 of the 3,794 principal operators were under the age of 35.[5] While we await the results of the 2017 agricultural census due out this spring, we can expect similar increases. Though the field of farmers continues to expand, we need state policies that will bolster this expansion and give young farmers the resources they need to establish their own farms. The establishment of the Connecticut Land Access Task Force through SB 1063 would be a crucial step towards developing these policies, and creating an environment in which young farmworkers, managers, and aspiring farmers can become principal operators of their own farm businesses.

The New Connecticut Farmer Alliance--a chapter of the National Young Farmers Coalition--formed in 2010 to bring together emerging farmers from across Connecticut to network, share resources, and identify common challenges and opportunities for a more accessible, successful, and diverse agricultural community. Since then, we have grown our network to over 375 members from every corner of the state. Each year, we invite our members to join us for farm tours, potlucks, conferences, workshops, round table discussions with legislators, and our annual Hootenanny and meeting. Our members interact almost daily on a New Connecticut Farmer Alliance listserv, asking for technical advice, sharing training opportunities, identifying new pest or diseases issues, seeking available farmland, and generally commiserating about the challenges and triumphs of being a young farmer in Connecticut. Collectively, we have a strong voice and want to make sure that we are being heard here in Hartford, and that our legislators are fighting for us by enacting policies to benefit the next generation of farmers.

While issues facing young farmers share many commonalities across the country, there are unique barriers to entry facing us in Connecticut. 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 as a whole at $5,050.[6] 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. In the thirty years leading up to the latest agricultural census in 2012, 47,900 acres of agricultural land were lost to development.[7]

In response to these worrying trends, and in solidarity with our members and farmers around the country, we ask that the Environment Committee support SB 1063 to authorize a Land Access Task Force and become a leader in the nation in developing impactful policies for young farmers. This legislation would establish a working coalition of farmers, advocates, legislators, and state officials who together will have the capacity to support a vision for agriculture that is more equitable, more sustainable, more diversified, and more successful.

The establishment of this task force and the subsequent passage of legislation to implement the task force’s recommendations, would show a commitment to Connecticut’s young and aspiring farmers that has been desperately needed for the last decade.
As we have seen from our young farmer peers in Minnesota--who passed a tax incentive program that has made a significant impact in transferring farmland and other agricultural assets to the next generation of farmers--or in New York as they took greater steps to help protect farmer ownership and affordability of conserved farmland, policies passed at the state level can carry enormous weight for young farmers. With your support, we know we can be successful.

Sincerely,

Yoko Takemura

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