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Working Lands Alliance Policy Statement H.B. 6496 Environment Committee Public Hearing March 3, 2021

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

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 6496 – An Act Concerning Certain Soil-Related Initiatives Sec. 2. through Sec. 5. and would propose amendments to Sec. 1 and Sec. 6.

My name is Chelsea Gazillo, and I am American Farmland Trust's New England Policy Manager. In Connecticut, I direct the Working Lands Alliance, a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving Connecticut's farmland. WLA includes farmers and such organizations as Connecticut Farmland Trust, the CT State Grange, New Connecticut Farmer Alliance, City of New Haven Food Policy Division, Connecticut Land Conservation Council, 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.

Healthy soil practices are climate smart practices. As Connecticut strives to strengthen local food production, the adoption of healthy soil practices is of paramount importance. Farm producers that implement these climate change adaptation practices increase productivity, mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, sequester carbon, and improve the overall agricultural viability for the state's food producers and Connecticut's food economy. In December 2020, the Governor Lamont announced the completion of the state's Climate Action Plan, [Taking Action on Climate Change and Building a More Resilient Connecticut for All](#). This comprehensive plan provides recommendations as to how Connecticut can reduce GHG by 2050. Incentivizing the adoption of climate-friendly agricultural practices that focus on soil health – specifically increasing the planting of cover crops and use of rotational grazing and reduced tillage practices are cited in this report as key and impactful actions the state can take to meet Connecticut's climate change goals.

The benefits of increasing soil health practices for Connecticut's agricultural producers are far-reaching, from increasing farm productivity to improving farmland resiliency. However, these benefits extend far beyond agriculture, as healthy soils on forested, urban, and suburban lands provide ecosystem services that are essential for all of Connecticut's residents and include such benefits as:

- better water quantity management that protects us from droughts, floods, and runoff;
- improved water quality protection through reduced soil erosion and less nutrient and sediment pollution;
- reduced dependence on fossil fuels based fertilizers through nutrient management and recycling of organic wastes; and
- protection of the biodiversity necessary for functioning ecosystems.



Updating the Connecticut Council on Soil and Water Conservation's charge to include soil health, as well as other functions that better express their role in natural resource management is the first step the state can take in ensuring CT's agricultural producers have the technical assistance needed to implement healthy soil practices.

We respectfully request the following amendments to Sec. 2 through 5.

- In Sec. 2, we recommend that the state definition of Soil Health be developed in consultation with the United States Department of Agriculture – Natural Resources Conservation Service, the University of Connecticut, the Connecticut Agriculture Experiment Station, and the Connecticut Department of Agriculture.
- The addition of language that clarifies the current role of the Council: *including soil health, soil erosion, and loss of important soil landscapes including prime and important farmland soils, watershed health, and related ecosystem services including their role in the role in climate change mitigation, adaptation, and resiliency.*

We respectfully request the following amendments to Section 1 and 6:

- The definition of soil should follow the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's definition, which is defined by Soil Taxonomy.
- Fill and dredge materials should not be applied to Prime or Statewide Important soils without prior review of the project and site by a soil scientist, and as part of a restoration plan.

These efforts are needed to protect the unique properties of our most productive agricultural soils from the possible negative impacts of the potential fill materials referenced in this Bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important piece of legislation. Please reach out to me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

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