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Environment Committee Public Hearing - March 7, 2022 RE: S.B. 243- An Act Concerning Climate-Smart Agricultural Practices

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

Working Lands Alliance appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony ***in support*** of S.B. 243- An Act Concerning Climate-Smart Agricultural Practices.

My name is Chelsea Gazillo, and I am American Farmland Trust's New England Policy Director. I also lead the CT Working Lands Alliance (WLA), a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving Connecticut's farmland. WLA includes farmers and such organizations as CT Farmland Trust, CT Forest and Park Association, Northeast Organic Farming Association of CT, New CT Farmer Alliance, City of New Haven Food Policy Division, CT Land Conservation Council, and the CT Farm Bureau Association, among many others. As an Alliance, we care deeply about saving Connecticut's farmland and ensuring a healthy agricultural sector and a prosperous future for Connecticut's farmers. In addition, this legislation has the support of Farm Credit East, a financial services cooperative with 985 farmer-members in Connecticut.

Climate destabilization threatens lives, livelihoods, food security, natural resources, and our economy across the State and Nation. Farmers, especially Beginning Farmers, Black Farmers, Indigenous Farmers, and Farmers of Color or BIPOC producers have been on the edge of financial viability, and disruptions to the food system during the pandemic hit them hard. The significant and undeniable changes in weather patterns are impacting growing conditions, in addition to the increased threat of natural disasters, which can destroy a producer's entire operation. At the same time, our farmers, and the farmland they manage are a key part of the state's fight against climate change. Farmland soils and plants store carbon, manage stormwater, provide a more stable and just food system, and diversify our economy. Dairy and livestock producers who hold the greatest %age of farmland, are actively seeking ways to not only improve soil health but ways to utilize digesters and other innovative technologies. Climate change is no longer a distant problem. There is no more time to waste.

Why an update to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture's Farmland Restoration Grant Program Statute?

The Connecticut Department of Agriculture's Farmland Restoration Grant Program has been a tremendous resource to farmers across the state. The program was originally started by Governor Malloy's administration who allocated \$5 million



dollars to increase food and fiber production in the state by restoring lands into active agricultural production. To date, the Connecticut Farmland Restoration Program has supported over 343 applications and restored nearly 2,900 acres of land. The

Program has also been an important tool for farmers across the state looking for additional farmland to expand their operations including beginning farmers who often cannot afford to buy or lease existing farmland. Although the statute does support some climate adaptation practices, it is limited in scope and reimbursement amounts that do not match the full extent of the tools that farmers need to implement climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices. Thus, there is a need to update this highly successful and well-liked Connecticut Department of Agriculture Program statute to be explicit in paying for farmers and landowners to implement climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices. The current statute also does not allow for key agriculture service providers to provide technical assistance. Adding capacity to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture to help with technical assistance is key to ensuring producers know about the programs available to assist them to implement these practices.

How does this update support the State of Connecticut's Climate Goals?

The potential economic, environmental, and community benefits of investing in farmers implementing climate-smart agricultural practices are multifaceted. In alignment with the [Governor's Council on Climate Change Phase 1](#) report and [Governor Lamont's Executive Order 21-3](#), updating the Farmland Restoration Grant Program to include climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) is a critical step the legislature can take to combat climate change this session. [Here](#) is a link to the current list of climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices as defined by USDA-NRCS. The working lands of Connecticut and the ecosystem services they provide hold a significant place in aiding the state in mitigating, adapting, and becoming resilient in the face of the climate crisis.

Connecticut has a goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80 % below the level emitted in 2001 by 2050. A critical component to the state's efforts to reach this goal is to include natural climate solutions such as sequestering carbon in forests, grasslands, and farmland soils. Dr. Jennifer Moore (soil health expert, USDA-ARS scientist, and prior climate director for American Farmland Trust) testified to the U.S. House of Representatives in the fall of 2019, "If U.S. farmers adopted cover crops on 25% of our cropland and conservation tillage on 100% of tillable acres, we could potentially reduce one-quarter of the total U.S. agricultural emissions." In addition to this eye-opening opportunity, the soil is an inseparable part of our local food system, ecology, watershed, and economy.

Investing in climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices will aid farmers and landowners in managing stormwater, reducing soil erosion, and increasing water infiltration, resulting in decreased sediment and nutrient pollution in surface waters, and improved resilience to flooding events. The economic investment in climate-

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smart agriculture practices increases a farm's profitability and saves farmers money in the long term.¹ A 2017 study by the National Association of Conservation Districts found that using cover crops and no-till can result in an economic return of over

\$100 per acre.²

In Connecticut, cropland accounts for 148,609 acres, and pastureland comprises 31,923 acres. There are approximately 7,208 acres of irrigated cropland and 141,401 acres of non-irrigated cropland in 2017.³ According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, woodlands represent about 29% of the state's total land in farms and often not be easily separated from the total farm unit. If 100% of Connecticut farms incorporated better management practices, it would remove 94,902 (MTCO2e) from the atmosphere or the equivalent of taking 20,500 cars off the road annually.

In reality there are numerous technical, financial, knowledge, and cultural barriers to rapidly increasing the adoption of climate mitigation and adaptation practices. The expanded Farmland Restoration and Climate Resiliency Program will assist farmers and landowners to afford and implement these practices that benefit us all.

Why does the Connecticut Department of Agriculture need a Climate-Smart Agricultural Program?

USDA-NRCS offers a variety of different programs to support farmers in implementing climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices. However, these programs do not cover all associated costs and have limitations on how much technical assistance is available to producers.

With the progress at the federal level on funding to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, infrastructure, and more, there is a HUGE influx of federal funds that will be available to farmers. Most of the funding will be administered by USDA-NRCS through existing programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). These programs are two significant avenues for funding to be awarded to farmers. States that are well-positioned to provide farmers the technical assistance required to receive these federal funds will be allocated an outsized share of these funds.

In the federal government fiscal year 2021, Connecticut's USDA-NRCS received 150 applications and was able to fund 92 contracts. There were 58 unfunded applications. It is important to note that not all these contracts were to support farmers in implementing climate-smart agriculture applications. The agency obligated 6.54 million dollars on the 92 contracts that were funded. USDA-NRCS financial assistance programs do not cover 100% of the cost of implementing a conservation practice. On average, the agency pays between 40 and 60% of the cost of a conservation practice. Farmers consistently reference the higher cost of doing

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¹ <https://farmland.org/the-math-is-in-soil-health-practices-produce-real-return-on-investment/>

² National Assoc. of Conservation Districts, Soil Health Research, <http://www.nacdnet.org/soil-health-research>

³ CT Department of Agriculture and American Farmland Trust, Planning for Agriculture, 2020

business in the northeast as a hindrance to implementing climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices.

WLA would encourage Connecticut to dedicate funding towards a climate-smart agriculture and forestry program that is focused on projects that will assist farmers and achieve significant leverage of federal dollars. By updating the statute to allow for non-profit organizations, CT Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the University of Connecticut's Cooperative Extension, and other institutions to develop innovative proposals that will leverage their local knowledge and connections, it will more effectively use the discretionary state dollars to cover the aspects of those projects that cannot be met with federal funds.

Numerous State Department of Agriculture across the county have programs dedicated to providing financial support for farmers to implement healthy soil and climate-smart agriculture practices. A few examples include the following:

- [The California Department of Food and Agriculture's Healthy Soils Program](#) provides financial assistance for incentivizing and demonstrating the implementation of conservation practices that sequester carbon, reduce atmospheric greenhouse gases, and improve soil health.
- [The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources: Agricultural Climate Resiliency and Efficiencies Program](#) is a competitive reimbursement grant program that funds materials and labor to implement practices that address the agricultural sector's vulnerability to climate change and improve economic resiliency, among other things.
- [The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Market's Capital Equipment Assistance Program \(CEAP\)](#). This vital program offers financial assistance for equipment such as no-till drills and roller crimpers.⁴

Priority funding for CT's beginning and historically marginalized producers

We are supportive to see this bill prioritizes funding for socially disadvantaged farmers as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture. Today, in Connecticut, according to the 2017 National Agricultural Statistic Service - Census of Agriculture, there are 134 BIPOC producers in Connecticut, totaling 1.4 % of all producers with another 1.4% identifying as Hispanic. Yet nearly 40% of the state's population identify as People of Color.⁵ This is in comparison to the 5,467 farmers who identify as White. This stark disparity is a result of centuries of land and agricultural policies, planning practices, and other forms of systemic racism that have prioritized White producers. The cost of the services, materials, and equipment necessary to implement these practices can be prohibitive (e.g. increased cost for practices such as improved irrigation, integrated pest management, and fair wages

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⁴ <https://soilhealthinstitute.org/resources/catalog/#stateagency>

⁵ US Census Bureau, 2020 and 2021 AFT, DoAg & partners, Farmland Needed Report

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for increased amounts of labor to implement practices, etc.). Additionally, funding for technical assistance that will benefit BIPOC producers should be directed towards community organizations that are already serving BIPOC producers, including those located in our urban communities. This will ensure BIPOC communities are able to fully take advantage of and utilize the funds available.

Furthermore, the average age of a principal farm operator in Connecticut is 58 years old and many of these farmers are looking to transition their farm operations to new ownership. According to a 2016 report written by [American Farmland Trust and Land for Good, 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. In addition, other farmland owned by non-farming landowners is being transferred to the next generation, often without a clear direction towards long-term agricultural use. In addition to passing policies that will address farmland access issues in the state, beginning farmers need affordable access to equipment and other investments that aid in their efforts to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

Support for Urban Producers

Urban spaces are also an important element in Connecticut's food economy. Historically, urban and low-income neighborhoods have been disproportionately divested of quality public infrastructure as well as natural and financial resources which increases the vulnerability of communities to effectively mitigate the impacts of climate change.⁶ The need for targeted and specialized technical assistance, research, and solutions, specifically for urban environments is critical. Funding can strengthen the infrastructure, enabling communities to have power throughout the food chain from soil to production to access to waste alleviation.⁷ Allocating resources to increase healthy soil initiatives will not only support healthy food production in Connecticut's most impacted communities but also increase the resiliency of this important element to the regional food system. The Governor's Council on Climate Change Phase 1 Report also recognizes and supports the important role urban green spaces (including farms and gardens) can play in cooling our cities, stormwater management, and improving air quality.

Funding Opportunity

As Connecticut lawmakers continue to configure the future allocation of American Rescue Act Plan funding, the state has an opportunity to help farmers increase their transition to climate-smart farming practices and to put in place the knowledge, equipment, and infrastructure needed to do this. As we mentioned above, climate-smart agricultural practices are an investment in water and sewer infrastructure and

⁶ Hoffman, J.S.; Shandas, V.; Pendleton, N. The Effects of Historical Housing Policies on Resident Exposure to Intra-Urban Heat: A Study of 108 US Urban Areas. *Climate* 2020, 8, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3390/cli8010012>
<https://www.mdpi.com/2225-1154/8/1/12/html#B27-climate-08-00012>;

⁷ Schwarz, K.; Fragkias, M.; Boone, C.G.; Zhou, W.; McHale, M.; Grove, J.M.; O'Neil-Dunne, J.; McFadden, J.P.; Buckley, G.L.; Childers, D.; et al. Trees Grow on Money: Urban Tree Canopy Cover and Environmental Justice. *PLoS ONE* 2015, 10, e0122051.



management; and are excellent examples of the lower-cost benefits of green infrastructure.

Under the U.S. Treasury Department’s Interim Final Rule for American Rescue Act Plan (ARPA) funds, governments have a “wide latitude to identify investments in water and sewer infrastructure that are of the highest priority for their own communities,” and specify that projects on privately-owned infrastructure are eligible. This suggests that ARPA funds can be used on private land such as privately owned farmland, provided funds are used for eligible water infrastructure projects. To accomplish high-priority investments, the Interim Final Rule aligns the eligible uses of ARPA Funds with categories of water infrastructure projects that would be eligible to receive assistance through the EPA’s Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) or Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF).

Additionally, Under CWSRF, projects eligible for assistance include, “projects to construct, improve, and repair wastewater treatment plants, control nonpoint-source of pollution, improve resilience of infrastructure to severe weather events, create green infrastructure, and protect water bodies from pollution.”⁸

Climate Resilient Infrastructure for Connecticut’s Food System

We are confident that this request will support the economic recovery and viability of our agricultural community while continuing to promote climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices statewide. Working Lands Alliance sincerely appreciates the opportunity to submit this testimony in **full support** of S.B.234.

Please feel free to reach out to me at cgazillo@farmland.org, if you have any further questions.

With sincere regards,

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⁸ <https://workinglandsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Memo-AFT-ARPA-Full.pdf>

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