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Working Lands Alliance Policy Statement Environment Committee *In support of H.B. 6725* Public Hearing February 27, 2023

Dear Co-Chairs Senator Lopes and Representative Gresko, Vice-Chairs Senator Hochadel and Representative Palm, Ranking Members Senator Harding and Representative Callahan, and esteemed members of the Environment Committee:

Working Lands Alliance appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony ***with conditional support of H.B. 6725*** – An Act Revising Certain Farming and Aquaculture Programs of the Department of Agriculture.

My name is Chelsea Gazillo, and I am the New England Policy Manager for American Farmland Trust. In Connecticut, I direct the Working Lands Alliance (WLA), a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving Connecticut's farmland. WLA includes farmers and such organizations as American Farmland Trust, 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 both about saving Connecticut's farmland and ensuring a healthy agricultural sector and prosperous future for Connecticut's farmers.

If passed, this bill would update many CT Department of Agriculture program statutes, including the Farmland Restoration and Climate Resiliency and Farmland Preservation Program Statutes.

Updating the CT Farmland Restoration and Climate Resiliency Grant Program – Conditional Support

Climate destabilization threatens lives, livelihoods, food security, natural resources, and our state's economy. Farmers, especially Beginning Farmers and 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 as a result of climate change have hit them hard. The significant and undeniable changes in weather patterns are impacting growing conditions and 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 crucial 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 percentage of farmland, are actively seeking ways to improve soil health and utilize digesters and other innovative technologies.

Before climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices were added to Section 22-6c last legislative session, the Connecticut Department of Agriculture's Farmland Restoration Grant Program was and continues to be a tremendous resource to farmers across the state. The Program was started by the Governor Malloy administration which allocated a \$5 million bond to increase food and fiber production by restoring lands into active agricultural production. Since its inception, the Program has been an essential tool for farmers looking for additional farmland to expand their operations, including Beginning



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farmers who often cannot afford to buy or lease existing farmland. And now, thanks to the hard work of the 2022 CT State Legislature, this highly successful and well-liked Connecticut Department of Agriculture Program explicitly pays farmers and landowners to implement climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices. In addition, the current statute allows for key agriculture service providers to provide technical assistance. This added capacity to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture helps increase the technical assistance available to producers, ensuring they have the necessary tools and resources to implement these critical practices.

Building off last session's success in passing critical legislation that updates the CT Farmland Restoration and Climate Resiliency Grant Program, WLA supports removing the \$20,000 project cap which H.B. 6725 does in Section 1. Section 22-6c, 2(b). Earlier this year, the CT Department of Agriculture announced the first round of grant funding for the program with an initial investment of \$7 million allocated to the agency in the FY 2023 Biennium Budget Adjustments. In this first grant round, the agency received 78 applications for nearly \$55 million in requests. These requests came from farmers, non-profit organizations, and others who are committed to supporting an increase in climate-smart agriculture. The high number of applicants and requests shows that there is a tremendous need for this grant program.

Since the original allocation of \$7 million to the agency was to create an entirely new grant program, the agency was not required to limit project proposals to \$20,000. However, the agency will leverage the CT Farmland Restoration and Climate Resiliency Grant Program to support farmers implementing climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices moving forward. Because this grant has been extended to allow agricultural service providers to offer technical assistance, distribute grant funds to producers, coordinate training programs and projects that pilot or demonstrate conservation practices, and create tools that help reduce barriers to access assistance for conservation practices on farms, establish equipment sharing programs or other activities that will increase the number of farmers who are implementing climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices, a \$20,000 grant award will not be sufficient to offer these services.

Finally, WLA highly recommends that the legislature strike the word "federal" from the language in Section 1 of H.B. 6725, which proposes to limit the combination of state and federal funds to 90 percent of the project costs. It is understandable for the legislature to limit the expenditure of state funds a farmer can leverage to implement climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices; however, this language is unfair to farmers who might otherwise receive federal funds that could be used to match state expenditures. In other words, farmers might rely on matching funding from the state when they are approved for a grant through the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Services to implement climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices fully. Limiting where they can leverage matching funding might hinder their ability to implement these practices.

Changes to the CT Department of Agriculture's Farmland Preservation Program – Oppose

WLA is opposed to the changes outlined in Section 5 of H.B. 6725. This change has raised a lot of questions within the agricultural community. At this time there is a lot of uncertainty as to how this statute change will be implemented and the impacts it will have on the State's Farmland Preservation Program. While we appreciate the Agency's intent to



configure new ways to protect farms that will increase farmland access opportunities, we recommend that this provision be studied in more detail to answer what impacts it could have on future farm valuations, conservation efforts, and easement enforcement.

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This proposed statute amendment also leaves much room for future misinterpretations, and while other states allow for the future sub-division, they have identified certain criteria before the tool can be utilized. An example is that North Carolina's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program allows future sub-divisions provided no future sub-divided parcel is less than 20 acres. These imperative details (e.g., future farm valuations, particular project application ranking, easement enforcement, and acreage minimum, etc.) should be thoroughly discussed and researched before this tool is authorized in Connecticut. We strongly recommend that the CT Department of Agriculture work in collaboration with the CT Farmland Preservation Advisory Board to conduct a study that outlines a broad consensus view of how the CT Department of Agriculture could allow for the future subdivision of agricultural conservation easements while not undermining the intent of the CT Farmland Preservation Program which protects farms in perpetuity.

On behalf of the Working Lands Alliance, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on H.B. 6725. We strongly urge this committee to conditionally support changes to the CT Farmland Restoration and Climate Resiliency Grant Program that are outlined within Section 1 and to oppose changes to the CT Farmland Preservation Program that are outlined within Section 5. We would welcome the opportunity to work in "fierce collaboration" with the CT Department of Agriculture and CT Farmland Preservation Advisory Board to research and draft a report that outlines opportunities to improve the Farmland Protection Program.

If you have any questions regarding Working Lands Alliance testimony, please feel free to contact me at cgazillo@farmland.org.

Sincerely,

Chelsea Gazillo
Working Lands Alliance