

CONNECTICUT
Land Conservation Council

Testimony
House Bill No. 5345
Environment Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Esq., Executive Director
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Co-Chairs Cohen and Demicco, Vice-Chairs Gresko and Kushner, Ranking Members Harding and Miner, and members of the Environment Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council in support of **HB 5345, An Act Concerning State Review of Farmland Preservation Transactions**.

As the state's umbrella organization for the land conservation community, including its 130+ land trusts, the Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) advocates for land conservation, stewardship and funding, and works to ensure the long-term strength and viability of the land conservation community in Connecticut. A consistent priority on CLCC's annual Conservation Agenda is to responsibly increase the pace of state land conservation and farmland preservation programs.

CLCC strongly supports HB 5345 which would remove the State Property Review Board's (SPRB) review of state Farmland Preservation Program (FPP) transactions in order to expedite the FPP process. Established in 1978 and administered by the Connecticut Department of Agriculture, the FPP provides a source of revenue for the state to permanently restrict non-agricultural uses on Connecticut's highest quality farmland, while keeping the farms in private ownership. The program is voluntary and provides farmers with a critical source of revenue to continue to operate their businesses. Placing an agricultural easement on these farms also makes them more affordable for purchase by new and beginning farmers.

The state's long-term goal is to preserve 130,000 acres of farmland. To date, over 46,000 acres have been protected. With Connecticut having already lost 9,100 acres of agricultural land to development¹, it is critical that the state ramp up the efficiency and efficacy of its farmland preservation efforts.

FPP projects are already subject to extensive scrutiny from their inception to closing. Due diligence to ensure these transactions meet legal, financial and organizational best practices include extensive review of appraisals, contracts and other legal documents (including by the office of the Attorney General), title search and survey results, baseline documentation, and other elements of the transaction. For projects funded in partnership with USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service, appraisals are also subject to an independent third party technical review prior to approval. Review of FPP projects by the SPRB is thus a duplicative step which slows down the process -- reportedly by at least several months.

Connecticut's agricultural industry is an economic driver in terms of food production, jobs, and quality of life. We urge the committee to approve HB 5345 which would reduce redundancies, streamline the FPP review process and ultimately help to save more farmland at a time when we can't afford to lose anymore. To avoid statutory inconsistencies, we ask that the SPRB authority to review FPP transactions also be removed in CT General Statutes Section 4b-3(f).

Thank you for this opportunity to provide our comments. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

¹ *Farms Under Threat: A New England Perspective*, American Farmland Trust (2020)

