

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the House Finance Committee,

Please support H7242. The Urban and Small Farms Success Act levels the playing field for beginning farmers to support a healthy agricultural system over the long-term.

As an environmental sociologist, I study the dynamics of agriculture and the effects of open space on nearby residents. Through this work, I have gained a huge appreciation for the role that small farms and urban farms play in the health of the food system as well as local communities.

One major reason to support H7242 is that it's currently so hard for people to get started in farming that our agricultural system is actually at risk. The population of current farmers is aging, with the latest data from the USDA finding average farmer age in the US is over 58 years. That's the average. As current farmers move into retirement, who will replace them? There are many young people who want to get into farming, but can't—simply because they don't have access to farmland. Due to long-term trends of farm consolidation and competition for real estate, we now have a scarcity of "starter farms" to help aspiring farmers get a foothold in the industry. Here in Rhode Island, we have the most expensive farmland in the nation, compounding this problem. If farmers are cultivating over 5 acres, they currently qualify for tax relief, which ensures that they can keep growing food for Rhode Islanders rather than having to sell their land for a use that would justify steep property taxes. However, farmers cultivating less than 5 acres currently do have to pay taxes on the land. Not only are their margins smaller due to the scale of operations, but they are at a further disadvantage due to the tax discrepancy. H7242 resolves this discrepancy and supports the ability of young farmers to get a foothold for their business.

Second, small and urban farmers deserve the same tax benefits as large farms, because these smaller growing spaces provide a patchwork of open space that is important for Rhode Islanders' wellbeing beyond the food produced. Numerous studies show that people who have access to green spaces have better physical and mental health, and they are more likely to form positive relationships with neighbors—meaning the community overall becomes stronger and healthier. Neighborhoods with active green space tend to see reductions in gun violence, crime, and resident perceptions of social disorder. In cities, green spaces like urban farms increase nearby property values and local economic development.

For the farmers, for the food system, and for the health of Rhode Island communities, please vote yes on H7242. Thank you.

Kind regards,
Charlotte Roberts, PhD
Providence resident (02908)
Board member, Zero Waste Providence
Professor of Sociology, Providence College