

Testimony before the Rhode Island State Legislature House Finance Committee  
By Emeran Irby, American Farmland Trust, New England Communications and Outreach  
Coordinator  
February 16, 2021

RE: Amending H7123 Article 5 – Question 3 – Green Economy Bonds

Dear Chairman Abney, First Vice-Chairman Slater, Second Vice-Chairman Representative Marszalkowski, and members of the House Finance Committee, my name is Emeran Irby, and I am American Farmland Trust's New England Communications and Outreach Coordinator and a fellow Rhody. I appreciate this opportunity to testify on behalf of American Farmland Trust in **conditional support** of Article 5 – Question 3—Green Economy Bonds. We recommend including increased conservation funding in the bond including funding for the Agricultural Land Preservation Commission (ALPC).

**AFT respectfully requests the following additions to Rhode Island's Green Economy Bond.**

- Include \$3 million in bond funding to support the work of the Agricultural Land Preservation Commission
- \$5 million is needed for the States Land Acquisition Program which provides funding to protect important forest lands, open spaces, watersheds, and recreational land. This funding should not compete with funding made available for farmland protection.
- Invest \$3 million in the Local Land Acquisition Matching Grant Program

*Please note that our request echoes the Rhode Island Land Trust Council's recommendation to increase funding levels for land conservation in the States Green Economy Bond.*

AFT is the nation's leading conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. Since its founding in 1980 by farmers and citizens concerned about the rapid loss of farmland to development, AFT has helped protect over 6.5 million acres of farmland and led the way for the adoption of conservation practices on millions more. Established in 1985, AFT's New England office works to save the land that sustains us across the region.

As a new resident of Providence, I have been amazed by the beauty the green spaces have to offer. My weekends often consist of visiting my local market in Dexter Park or hiking in one of the many beautiful state parks. Protecting these spaces is essential to maintaining a vibrant and resilient community.

**Rhode Island is losing farmland**

Rhode Island's farmland plays a vital role in our regional economy and food security. According to American Farmland Trust's [Farms Under Threat: The State of the States](#), 4% of RI's agricultural land was converted to urban development or low-density residential land use between 2001 and 2016.<sup>1</sup> These 3,600 acres of land converted is enough to generate \$3.7

million in annual revenue.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, since its inception in 1981 the Rhode Island Farmland Protection Program has permanently protected 120 farms or 8,114 acres of farmland with agricultural conservation easements.<sup>3</sup> To date, Rhode Island has protected roughly 21.6% percent of the state's agricultural land.<sup>4</sup> More must be done to address the growing threats to Rhode Island's farmland including real estate development pressures, land loss because of a changing climate, and high land prices.

The time for Rhode Island to continue investment in farmland protection and access efforts is now. Funding the state's farmland protection and access efforts will be a key component of Rhode Island's strategies to combat climate change. Human activity on an acre of farmland produces 66x's fewer GHG emissions than that on an acre of developed land, and participation in farmland protection programs has been proven to encourage the adoption of new, improved, and more widespread regenerative farming practices. Farmland also provides a range of reliable cost-saving environmental services, such as air pollution removal, wildlife habitat, flood mitigation, and carbon sequestration.

As an organization that has actively been involved with state farmland protection efforts for over 40 years, we can attest that farmland protection keeps land in farming permanently while supporting a more economically and ecologically resilient agricultural sector. Studies show farmers use farmland protection funds to invest in business viability and innovation, most frequently using them to pay down debt, put money towards saving, purchase leased land, expand, and diversify their operations, upgrade farm equipment, and/or transfer farms to the next generation. Protecting farmland also encourages other local farmers and business owners to invest in their own operations because they have greater confidence in the stability and longevity of the local farm sector.

Providing additional funding for farmland protection and open space conservation efforts will not only be good for the environment and agricultural producers in the state but also help leverage federal resources through the USDA – Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). The 1996 Farm Bill created a pilot Farmland Protection Program which allowed for federal funds to be used to purchase agricultural conservation easements. This pilot program eventually became the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agriculture Land Easements in the 2014 Farm Bill and continues in the 2018 Farm Bill. Today, the program which is overseen by the USDA – Natural Resource Conservation Service uses federal funds to match state dollars in protecting our agricultural lands for perpetuity. Additional funding for farmland protection and access will set the state up to receive additional matching funds through USDA-NRCS – ACEP-ALE program which would be a very good deal for our communities. From the Federal Government's FY 2014-2018, Rhode Island protected 11 farms using USDA-ACEP-ALE and leveraged around \$2.7 million in federal funds to do so<sup>5</sup>. If additional state funding is allocated towards farmland protection, there would be an opportunity to leverage more of these funds through the ACEP-ALE program.

American Farmland Trust's 2021 Status of State Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement Programs outlines that to date, Rhode Island has expended \$36.7 million<sup>6</sup> on

farmland protection efforts. As part of American Farmland Trust's 2020 Farms Under Threat report, we estimated that based on the average project cost of agricultural conservation easements in each state-by-state PACE program, AFT estimates— conservatively—that it would cost at least \$10 billion to permanently protect New England's remaining farmland

### **Farmland Access is exceptionally challenging in Rhode Island**

Working lands lie at the heart of the state's food and agricultural system. As Rhode Island looks towards further building a robust, equitable, and resilient agricultural economy, farmland affordability and accessibility are cardinal to these efforts. And Rhode Island's new and beginning farmers are at the crux of ensuring the state's agricultural sector continues for future generations. According to recent reports published by both the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Young Farmer's Coalition, access to affordable farmland remains one of the main barriers to new and young farmers especially Black Farmers, Indigenous Farmers, and Other Farmers of Color (BIPOC) to start a farm and remain viable.

Rhode Island's Farmland Access Program is one of the many tools the state must address the high cost of farmland on the speculative market. According to the 2021 National Agricultural Statistic Service 2021 Land Values Survey, the median cost of farmland per acre in the state is \$15,600 per acre. The state continues to have the most expensive farmland in the country. The State's Agricultural Land Preservation Commission plays a crucial role by aiding the Department of Environmental Management to identify and purchase farmland that is later transferred at its agricultural value to a Rhode Island farmer. Therefore, additional funding for the Agricultural Land Preservation Commission will be critical to advancing farmland protection

### **Let's start funding the farmland for the future**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify ***conditional support*** of Article 5 – Question 3—Green Economy Bonds. Protecting Rhode Island's beautiful working lands is one step towards creating a resilient future for all.

As leaders in farmland protection, please feel free to reach out to me at Emeran Irby at [eirby@farmland.org](mailto:eirby@farmland.org) or my colleague, the AFT New England Policy Manager at [cgazillo@farmland.org](mailto:cgazillo@farmland.org), if you have any questions about funding for farmland protection and access in Rhode Island.

To conclude, we strongly urge you to conditional support H7123 with the outline additions above. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

***American Farmland Trust is an agricultural non-profit organization with a mission to save the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. AFT is the only national agricultural organization that approaches its work in this comprehensive, holistic manner. We recognize the connection between the land, forward-looking farming practices, and the farmers who do the work.***