



Date: March 4, 2024

To: Chairman Marvin Abney, House Finance Committee
Cc: Members of the House Finance Committee

From: Diane Lynch, Board President, Rhode Island Food Policy Council

Re: House Bill 7550 -- FOR

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee,

The Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC) is a nonprofit network whose purpose is to create a more just and resilient food system in the Ocean State. Established in 2011, we are working to build and maintain a network of committed stakeholders from across the local food system. We center equity, accessibility, economic vitality, and environmental sustainability.

We are writing to voice our strong support for HB 7550, which would add \$5 million in funding for farmland protection in Rhode Island to this year's Green Bond, as well as additional funding for protecting open space and forest management. Despite the challenges of intense development pressure and the extraordinarily high costs of land, Rhode Island farms continue to provide powerful environmental, social and economic benefits to our state. And there is recent evidence from the USDA Census of Agriculture that the efforts to support farms provided by the RI Department of Environmental Management, the Agricultural Land Preservation Commission, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Rhode Island land trusts, and a strong network of coordinated local and regional non-profits, are bearing fruit in terms of a growing number of farms, growing farm profitability and productivity, and growing farm ownership among new and beginning farmers. Some of the most important services that Rhode Island farms are providing to our residents are as follows:

- Rhode Island farms that are managed with climate smart/soil regenerative methods sequester carbon, and a recent influx of federal IRA money through our state Natural Resources Conservation Service is helping dozens of Rhode Island farms to implement regenerative practices like no-till growing and cover crops.
- Rhode Island farms provide hundreds of acres of stable, vegetatively protected soil that is capable of absorbing water runoff during extreme weather events.
- Rhode Island farms provide hundreds of acres of protected firebreaks between forested areas. These firebreaks are a critical component of forest fire management in our state (a local farm provided the firebreak needed to stop last year's forest fire in Exeter).



- Most of our farms provide a mix of cultivated land and forest land, many also protect wetlands/water recharge areas/aquifers, and most provide a healthy environment for a range of insects and animals, thus contributing to needed biodiversity in the state.
- Most produce from RI farms is locally/regionally consumed and has the shortest shipping distance and lowest fossil fuel use of any fresh produce when getting to market.
- Rhode Island farms – including both food and nursery products – contribute around \$500 million in direct revenues to the state and employ over 4000 people (Sproul, URI). According to the latest (2022) USDA Census of Ag, the number of farms and the productivity of our farms has increased over the last five years, and Rhode Island is the only state in New England to have experienced growth in both areas since the 2017 Census of Ag.
- Farmers markets and agritourism have become a top component of our state's tourism industry and figure prominently in the "ALL THAT" tourism campaign recently developed by Commerce RI.
- State farmland protection investments have attracted over \$38 million in matching funds from the federal government.
- Over 1 million pounds of local farm produce has gone to RI hunger relief agencies since 2018.
- 35,000 Rhode Islanders per month are receiving fresh local produce from Rhode Island farms through emergency food sites.
- Dozens of Rhode Island urban farms are providing open space for learning and recreation in addition to providing fresh, local and culturally appropriate food in urban communities. Many of these farms are providing affordable food to families who are experiencing food insecurity. We estimate that there are around 80 urban and small farms currently operating in Rhode Island.

With all of these benefits being provided by Rhode Island farms, and with federal and philanthropic matching funds of \$1.70 for every state dollar, we urge the state to continue investing in farm preservation and protection in the upcoming Green Bond. Current uncommitted funding available to the state Agricultural Land Preservation Commission (ALPC) is around \$1.8 million, which is not enough to last until the next round of potential bond funding in 2026. Regular bond funding for the ALPC was the norm for several decades and is a practice that minimizes disruption in land acquisition planning and coordination, and avoids last minute, fire-drill style appropriation efforts to fill gaps.

The demand for farm protection has been steady state for years and does not look like it will disappear any time soon. Farmers who own land and want to keep their land in



agriculture need the infusion of cash that conservation easements can provide. Even though the ALPC invests roughly \$1-1.5 million every year in farmland protection, there is still a backlog of 40+ farms that have been approved for protection and are in a queue. A good portion of our new farmers are farming on land that was protected a generation ago and then put on the market at an agricultural value that was more affordable than unprotected land. This is a pattern that will keep happening as long as we continue to protect farms.

We would be happy to answer any questions about the information included here. Thank you for considering this request.

Best regards,

Diane Lynch

Diane Lynch
Board President