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TO: Alaura Rich, Committee Assistant arich@leg.state.vt.us

H.126 An act relating to community resilience and biodiversity protection

We understand the intent of H.126 is to set goals for conservation to ensure that much of our land remains open and protect plants & animals. As you know, the 2021 Vermont Climate Assessment highlights an increase in extreme weather events such as droughts and floods as a significant impact of climate change in Vermont and recommends nature-based solutions as a proven, low-cost strategy for climate adaptation and resilience. Vermont Agriculture is doing its part to keep lands open and accessible while growing food and crops. With the new wetlands mapping that is not yet complete that we don't have an accurate understanding of how much land will be left to meet the goals within H.126.

According to the Agency of Natural Resources', the Use Value Appraisal Program (UVA), established in 1980, "is arguably the most successful state program for conserving Vermont's working landscape. By achieving a greater equity in property taxes on undeveloped land, the program has kept agricultural and forest land in active production. Another key to the forest land program is the commitment to manage the land to a state-defined standard. With well over 1.5 million acres enrolled to date, roughly 40% of Vermont's eligible acreage is currently enrolled".

The Agricultural community, for years, has conserved land by working with the Vermont Land Trust and utilizing the UVA program. We want to be sure that any legislation that passes recognizes this program and the work farmers are doing for conservation and to maintain a working landscape. We oppose any legislation that would remove farm and forest land from working lands.

We strongly recommend to the General Assembly to have VHCB complete an inventory of land, and take into consideration; the total wetlands mapped, how much land is used for working lands and already in the current use program. You will likely find that with the U.S lands included that your goals in a program is not achievable. Further, a conservation plan should encompass a broad stakeholder process and then an affirmative vote of the General Assembly. Without this you will be setting goals blindly.

Today, Vermont has had excellent conservation success through UVA, farm & forest conservation easements, and state lands acquisitions. H.126 should explicitly state that the bill will not in any way take away from the importance of these other types of conservation. There is excellent conservation work occurring using many tools in Vermont and we should embrace the work.

Should your committee decide to push forward with this bill we ask that agricultural activities to be exempt from this bill and H.126 should embrace the Use Value Appraisal program and its successes.

Respectfully submitted,

Amanda St Pierre, Executive Director

