

Environment Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-6273

AN ACT ESTABLISHING FUNDING FOR FARMERS WHO HAVE CROP LOSS

Title: DUE TO SIGNIFICANT ACUTE WEATHER EVENTS.

Vote Date: 3/14/2025

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Change of Reference to Finance, Revenue and Bonding

PH Date: 3/3/2025

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Rep. Vincent J. Candelora, 86th Dist.

Rep. Aundre Bumgardner, 41st Dist.

Sen. Heather S. Somers, 18th Dist.

Sen. Christine Cohen, 12th Dist.

Sen. Paul Cicarella, 34th Dist.

Rep. Mary M. Mushinsky, 85th Dist.

REASONS FOR BILL:

H.B. 6273 would add an emergency fund that will help farmers mitigate losses after an extreme weather event. As the frequency of extreme weather events continues to rise, farmers are increasingly at risk of losing all their crops in just moments time. These weather events leave farmers with little to no support to recover from damage and crop losses. Although there are insurance options for farmers, due to the nature of the farming landscape in the state of Connecticut, very little, if any, help is offered to farmers, especially because with even just one lost crop, an entire farm can be put out of business. While there are emergency funds available on federal level, the process for receiving them is long and drawn out, to the point these are not realistic options for Connecticut farmers. By implementing an emergency fund in the case of a one-time extreme weather event that could catastrophically affect a farm, the Department of Agriculture (DoAg) would be able to help farms directly, provided that certain criteria are met. This emergency fund will streamline a typically elongated process through the federal Department of Agriculture and ensure farmers have a viable safety net in the case of extreme weather.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Bryan Hurlburt, Commissioner, CT Department of Agriculture (DoAg)

The Department of Agriculture submitted testimony sharing multiple disasters that affected farmers citing sub-freezing temperatures in May of 2023 and two instances of heavy rain in July and September of 2023. These disasters let farmers apply for federal assistance through the US Department of Agriculture although DoAg acted as well. DoAg listed various amounts of directives including but not limited to (1) creating and distributing a crop loss report based on voluntary reports by farmers, (2) creating a disaster email which farmers can have a direct dialogue relating to disaster circumstances, (3) established a Farmland Restoration Flood Response Grant to aid flooded farmlands awarding \$312,000 to 21 "entities", and (4) "shared loan programs, stress relief resources, and other disaster relief efforts" through a weekly report published by DoAg. DoAg believes that there needs to be more discussion based on lines 12-14 which require applications to be acted on no more than 60 days after receipt. These lines interfere with the current grant program that has been set in place, and DoAg believes there needs to be more discussion with DAS. While DoAg is committed to helping farmers during disasters, there is belief that implementing a new program will not work as the funds that would be offered to farmers were not included in the governor's budget. DoAg included that Section 12 of HB-1247 states "grants -in-aid to support municipalities, homeowners and small businesses who have been impacted by catastrophic event, not exceeding \$15,000,000".

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Rep. Vincent Candelora, Eighty-Sixth District

Rep. Candelora supports H.B. 6273 as he has seen the devastating effects of significant weather firsthand. Rep. Candelora cites that on August 26, 2024, there had been an unexpected hailstorm that devastated the farmland in his hometown sharing that one farmer "lost his entire crop inventory in just 13 minutes" which resulted in losing over \$600,000. H.B. 6273 would provide for a "straightforward grant program" that all but ensures that farmers will have financial relief if there are any more disasters such as the one that occurred in August 2024. The grant program would go towards farmers being able to reinvest in "seeds, equipment, and recovery efforts," ensuring that the flow of distributing local goods will not be disturbed.

Keith Bishop, Bishop Orchards

Mr. Bishop supports H.B. 6273 as Connecticut farms are more diversified than other farms around the country which means traditional crop insurance is not a realistic option. This is an issue as in the span of 15 minutes on August 26, 2024, Bishop Farms lost \$100,000 of revenue leaving 66% of the "sampled and sorted fruit" damaged. Not only was this stock damaged but premature fruits not yet ripe fell off their trees, leaving them damaged with few options to utilize their usefulness. Bishop Orchards believes that "payments from a program...would be invaluable in helping farmers meet their loan obligations".

Michael Downes, Town Manager, Town of North Branford

Mr. Downes supports H.B. 6273 as, after a hailstorm incident on August 26, 2024, little to no assistance was given to farms affected by the extreme weather. On that day, Cecarelli Farm was devastated and the federal assistance that was provided to the farm only offered "pennies on the dollar" which was a resource that had been bought into. Cecarelli Farm lost

\$600,000 worth of crops and what had been offered to the farm for financial help had been \$42,000 which was less than what a Go-Fund-Me had raised by residents in the surrounding area. By passing this bill it will help relieve farmers in the future if any freak incidents occur such as the hailstorm in the future and help grow security to the industry.

Paul Larson, President, The Connecticut Farm Bureau Association

Mr. Larson supports H.B. 6273 because, due to the spout of extreme weather that has occurred over the past 2-3 years in the state, DoAg would be able to compensate for the financial losses that farmers experience in an "efficient manner." Due to small profit gains and thin margins, a farmer can go out of business just after one crop is lost due to extreme weather. By passing H.B. 6273, farmers would have more assurance that if the weather is to go awry there will be resources to help recoup losses and lessening the mental strain that farmers face. This aspect of reducing mental strain could quite literally be lifesaving as the suicide rate amongst farmers is "way above the national average".

Tracey McDougall, Executive Director, The Connecticut Farm Bureau Association

Ms. McDougall supports H.B. 6273 as it will have a direct impact on the farms that are in the state of Connecticut. Although there are insurance plans to cover crop loss, it is catered to "larger, single commodity farms" that are located only in the mid and west regions of the country. There is an extremely limited amount of insurance plans that cover crop loss in the state of Connecticut and even for the ones that are available, they are typically unaffordable. By passing H.B. 6273, farmers can keep up with payments for loans and operating expenses that are required to be paid regardless of crop loss.

Lars Demander, Clover Nook Farm

Mr. Demander supports of H.B. 6273 as there needs to more support to farmers who can lose their entire seasons worth of work from a singular "extreme weather event". It is shared that farming is an industry that is high-risk that faces tight margins as costs continue to rise all while supply chains can be disrupted and the lack of labor. It is acknowledged that although there is a federal program in place it is a lengthy process and when it comes to losing crops, a farmer can go out of business quite fast. There is belief that the program is set up in a way that will be efficient all while properly "establishing clear eligibility criteria, prioritization rules, and reimbursement limits". This program would provide a more realistic and "responsive safety net" for farmers in the state of Connecticut.

Eliza Paterson, Senior Policy Associate, American Farmland Trust

Ms. Paterson supports H.B. 6273 since farmers need fast and responsive support when severe weather destroys crops. Ms. Paterson cites data showing that the agriculture industry in Connecticut loses around \$11.3 million per year and in 2023 alone farmers lost \$36.2 million due to weather. A plan for crop insurance on a federal level is not a realistic option for Connecticut farmers so, by having an emergency fund that is operated through DoAg, farmers can be at ease knowing help is available if bad weather strikes.

Susan Pronovost, Executive Director, CT Greenhouse Growers Association

CT Greenhouse Growers Association supports H.B. 6273 because there is “a concern with...the growing insurance gap” as major insurance companies are increasing their risk caps. These risk caps are associated with the buildings and what contents are inside of the buildings as well. From this, there are companies that are being told that growers are too big to have insurance. There is belief that not only will crops be affected but also the various amounts of other investments that are made to keep a grower running.

Chris Phelps, State Director, Environment Connecticut

Environment Connecticut supports H.B. 6723 in order to reduce the economic damage on the state's agricultural industry and communities caused by climate change. Support, as proposed by the bill, would provide much needed support and funding for farmers who suffered crop losses wrought by significant weather events that, if not for economic aid, could drive farms out of business. Addressing the threat of severe weather is just one of many significant challenges facing Connecticut businesses and communities and this proposed legislation is an important first step in addressing climate-related issues.

Teresa Eickel, Executive Director, Interreligious Eco-Justice Network (IREJN)

The Interreligious Eco-Justice Network supports H.B. 6273 because of the dire impact that crop loss has on farmers and that religious communities often are on the front lines to provide support when extreme weather impacts an area and its people. Clergy report that those farmers in their communities are acutely feeling the impact of severe weather, with \$30 million in crop losses in Connecticut in 2023 alone. IREJN urges passing of H.B. 6273 since "extreme weather threatens of lifeblood of farming communities and the local farms that our state needs."

Kimberly Stoner, Director of Advocacy, The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Connecticut (CT NOFA)

The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Connecticut supports H.B. 6273 because destructive weather events are becoming more frequent and more severe and the crop insurance system presently in place does not work well for Connecticut farmers. A 2023 National Climate Assessment supported this claim, showing that days with precipitation of more than 5 inches in the Northeast grew by 103% from 1953 to 2022. In Connecticut, in just the last two years, numerous weather events of a varying nature, have caused repeated crop failures. The CT Department of Agriculture calculated that in 2023 and 2024, agricultural damage from weather events exceeded \$72 million. Yet, the crop insurance structure is generally not suited for Connecticut farms, which are mostly small and highly diversified, while crop insurance is mostly designed for larger, monoculture farms growing commodities like corn, wheat, and soybeans. As a result, crop insurance is expensive and difficult to obtain. In conversations following destructive storms in 2024, the agricultural community made clear that they need an assistance program that is clear, timely, and fair. While, of course, the state can't cover all losses some degree of assistance meeting those criteria is vital to growers and consumers alike.

Ashen Harper, High School Student, Fridays for Future Stamford

Representing a group of students, Fridays for Future Stamford supports H.B. 6273 because farmers are already facing significant financial challenges and climate change-associated severe weather will only present greater threats to profitability. Flooding in July of 2024 alone

caused over \$21 million in crop damage and the state needs to help farmers through future incidents that will surely befall the state.

46 Residents Submitted Testimony in Support of H.B. 6273

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None expressed.

Reported by: Joshua Dontigney

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