

October 20, 2025

The Honorable Rebecca Rausch, Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
State House Room 215
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Christine Barber, House Chair
Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
State House Room 167
Boston, MA 02133

Re: Support for S.549 and H.1005, *An Act investing in natural and working lands*

Dear Chair Rausch, Chair Barber, and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of The Nature Conservancy, I am writing to respectfully offer testimony in support of S.549 and H.1005, *An Act investing in natural and working lands*, jointly filed by Senator Comerford and Representative Meschino.

The Nature Conservancy is a global conservation organization with a mission to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. The Conservancy is committed to finding durable solutions that support our ecosystems and communities.

The Nature Conservancy has been deeply engaged in the policy, planning, and implementation around sequestration and storage of carbon by our natural and working lands (NWLs). We collaborated closely with Senator Comerford and Representative Meschino and the legislature on NWL language in the 2021 RoadMap Law and worked with the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) to ensure robust goals and plans for NWLs were included in the *Clean Energy and Climate Plans* (CECP). We collaborated again with Senator Comerford and Representative Meschino and their staff on the drafting of S.549 and H. 1005 and greatly appreciated their leadership and willingness to consider and incorporate our input. The concepts in this bill are important steps in ensuring we support communities and meet our NWLs goals for the Commonwealth.

This bill:

- Builds on Executive Order 193¹ to give the Commonwealth and its agencies the mission of preventing the loss of natural and working lands.
- Creates a municipal opt-in *Farm and Forest Friendly Communities* program, fashioned after the Green Communities Program, with a suite of eligibility requirements to be

¹ Massachusetts, Governor Edward J. King. Executive Order No. 193: Seeking to mitigate the conversion of state-owned agricultural land to other use. 19 March 1981. Mass Register No. 254. <https://www.mass.gov/executive-orders/no-193-seeking-to-mitigate-the-conversion-of-state-owned-agricultural-land-to-other-use>

determined by EEA, with a goal of incentivizing municipalities to make land use and planning decisions and bylaws that further the state's overall goal of preventing the loss of NWLs. Participating communities would receive a higher rate of reimbursement under the state-owned-land Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) program which compensates communities for lost property tax revenue

- Directs the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act office (MEPA) to determine a review threshold, above which projects engaging in a certain level of permanent conversion of natural and working lands as well as freshwater wetlands and coastal wetlands would be required to undergo an environmental impact review; and to develop methodologies for quantifying the greenhouse gas emissions implications of land clearing and implement mitigation of lost lands where impacts can't be avoided.
- Advances the goals of Governor Healey's Executive Order 654, Establishing the Commission on PILOT for State-Owned Land², with language increasing the rate of PILOT reimbursements to participants in the *Farm and Forest Friendly Communities* program.
- Requires recurring reviews of incentive rates paid for land conservation, including PILOT payments, and specifies that the rates should adjust with the value of the land and further prevent the loss of farmland and forested land.

The elements of this bill are consistent with the goals and recommendations in the Commonwealth's climate and conservation plans. For example:

- In the CECP, the state has committed to increasing permanent conservation of undeveloped land and water in Massachusetts to at least 28% and 30% by 2025 and 2030, respectively.³ By 2050, the Commonwealth aims to permanently conserve at least 40% of lands and waters.⁴ These ambitious goals are echoed in the recommendations of the Climate Chief's report⁵ and will require a significant increase in the pace of land conservation across the state.
- The Resilient Lands Initiative Plan calls for enhanced adoption of local zoning and bylaws to advance no net loss of farms and forests.⁶ These tools, including Natural Resources Protection Zoning and tree retention bylaws, are included in the suite of eligibility requirements for the municipal program proposed in this bill.
- In the Biodiversity Goals for Massachusetts, the Commonwealth sets a goal to double the pace of land conservation and strategically protect 425,000 acres of the most important habitats by 2050.⁷
- According to the 2050 CECP, the MEPA Office has begun deliberations regarding the potential to add a review threshold in MEPA regulations, which would require

² Massachusetts, Governor Maura Healey. Executive Order No. 645: Establishing the Commission on PILOT for State-Owned Land. 13 August 2025. Mass Register No. 1555, <https://www.mass.gov/executive-orders/no-645-establishing-the-commission-on-pilot-for-state-owned-land>

³ Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. 2022. Massachusetts Clean Energy and Climate Plan for 2025 and 2030. <https://www.mass.gov/doc/clean-energy-and-climate-plan-for-2025-and-2030/download>

⁴ Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. 2022. Clean Energy and Climate Plan for 2050. <https://www.mass.gov/doc/2050-clean-energy-and-climate-plan/download>

⁵ Hoffer, Melissa. 2023. Recommendations of the Climate Chief, pursuant to Section 3(b) of Executive Order No. 604. <https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2023/10/24/CLIMATE%20REPORT.pdf>

⁶ Resilient Lands Initiative. 2023. Expanding Nature's Benefits Across the Commonwealth: A Vision and Strategy. <https://www.mass.gov/doc/the-resilient-lands-initiative-2023/download>

⁷ Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. 2025. Biodiversity Goals for Massachusetts <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/biodiversity-goals-for-massachusetts#goal-1-protect>

development projects engaging in a certain level of permanent conversions of natural and working lands to undergo an environmental impact review process. However, no new review thresholds have been proposed at this time.⁸

- Adding a review threshold and lowering the threshold triggering a GHG analysis of land alternation was also included as a recommendation in the Climate Chief's report.⁹

The Nature Conservancy has consistently advocated that the state follows the mitigation hierarchy – first, avoiding impacts to NWLs; then, minimizing unavoidable impacts; and, finally, mitigating those residual impacts. This bill codifies this approach and provides technical assistance to communities that help them to determine the most appropriate ways for them to prevent the loss of farms, forests, and trees. Once participating in the program, municipalities would have access to additional grants and loans to advance their NWL vision, as well as increased PILOT payments to compensate them for lost property tax revenues from state owned land.

The bill's holistic approach to working with communities, while also leveraging MEPA to better account for and guard against impacts to NWLs, is a model for advancing the NWLs goals in the CECP. It is an important starting place for a broader dialogue about how we can ensure that NWLs across the Commonwealth are valued and protected for their many services.

We remain committed to advancing the Commonwealth's NWLs goals and look forward to working with the bill sponsors and this Committee to continue to strengthen and advance this bill.

Thank you for your consideration, and please do not hesitate to reach out if there are any questions.

Sincerely,

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cc: The Honorable Senator Jo Comerford
The Honorable Representative Joan Meschino

⁸ EEA, 2022. 2050 CECP.

⁹ See *Recommendation 10* in Hoffer, 2023.