



# AN ASSESSMENT OF CHALLENGES FACING CONNECTICUT FARMERS IN 2023

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## Executive Summary

### *Objectives and Scope*

Agriculture contributes \$4 billion to the Connecticut economy and generates approximately 22,000 jobs annually (Lopez et al., 2017), but farms have faced increasing economic pressures and constraints since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Under the College of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources' Strategic Vision Implementation Committee's strategic initiative of [\*Ensuring a Vibrant and Sustainable Agricultural Industry and Food Supply\*](#), we conducted this study of Connecticut producers to understand the business, regulatory, and environmental challenges impeding the retention and development of agriculture in the state. Our work builds on the intensive study from the Connecticut Governor's Council for Agricultural Development (GCAD) in 2012 by assessing the evolution of challenges identified in that report and identifying new challenges in the post-pandemic period.

Our study addresses two essential questions:

- What are the most pressing challenges facing Connecticut farmers?
- What should be done and what programmatic changes are needed to address those challenges by the College of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources (CAHNR) at the University of Connecticut?

### *Major Findings*

After conducting a producer survey and four listening sessions, we found that the top obstacles facing Connecticut producers were high input costs, climate change, labor, and pest management. However, the services most sought from CAHNR were help in navigating available resources, aid with legal and regulatory compliance, and crop and animal technical assistance. The variety of resources across multiple organizations, agencies, and governments are difficult for producers to manage, and participants suggested that a centralized clearinghouse or employee who could point farmers to what they need would be valuable to them. Similarly, producers also struggle to understand the various regulations that impact agricultural operations and would benefit from personnel who could help them with compliance. Participants highlighted technical assistance as a key service CAHNR performs well, and their increased concern about climate change mitigation suggests this need will grow.

### *Recommendations*

Based on our results we suggest the following three priority areas for CAHNR:

- *Farm business and regulation assistance.* Participants expressed a clear preference for a “one-stop shop” to provide resources and support, especially regarding business management. We propose that CAHNR hire a state-level specialist whose role is to provide training in business management and financial literacy, connect producers to available resources and training, and aid producers in achieving regulatory compliance. This ombudsperson would also assist in grant writing and act as an advocate for Connecticut agriculture.
- *Education and labor force development.* Beyond the technical training and workshops offered to producers through the Department of Extension, CAHNR can also take the lead in educating future farmers and agricultural workers. To address the labor shortage, potential students must view agriculture as an attractive career path, and Connecticut could benefit from a champion whose role is to create an agricultural career pipeline. Practical technical and business management training could be integrated into classes and curriculum, with an emphasis on “learning by doing.” CAHNR can also facilitate micro and traditional internships with agricultural operations.
- *Weather and climate change adaptation and mitigation.* The impact of climate change on agriculture is a growing concern among producers, and they seek technical assistance on how best to adapt to these changes. Participants also suggested several economic, environmental, and social topics requiring further research.

## Overview of the Study

### *Introduction*

Agriculture contributes \$4 billion to the Connecticut economy and generates approximately 22,000 jobs annually (Lopez et al., 2017), but farms have faced increasing economic pressures and constraints since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Under the College of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources' Strategic Vision Implementation Committee's strategic initiative of [\*Ensuring a Vibrant and Sustainable Agricultural Industry and Food Supply\*](#), we conducted this study of Connecticut producers to understand the business, regulatory, and environmental challenges impeding the retention and development of agriculture in the state. Our work builds on the intensive study from the Connecticut Governor's Council for Agricultural Development (GCAD) in 2012 by assessing the evolution of challenges identified in that report and identifying new challenges in the post-pandemic period.

Our study addresses two essential questions:

- What are the most pressing challenges facing Connecticut farmers?
- What should be done and what programmatic changes are needed to address those challenges by the College of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources (CAHNR) at the University of Connecticut?

The task given to the study team of ascertaining key challenges facing the entire agricultural industry is extremely broad as biological, climatic, regulatory, and business challenges are highly complex activities with diverse effects on a variety of producer groups. Of necessity, we have had to interpret the questions, conclusions, and recommendations more narrowly in order to carry out the study within the very modest budget and short time frame provided.

### *Methodology*

The team implemented a two-pronged approach, combining an online producer survey with producer and stakeholder listening sessions. Following revisions from stakeholder feedback, the team created a survey in Qualtrics consisting of 10 questions concerning producer operations, sources they approach for aid, and what services CAHNR could provide to help them with identified challenges. The survey instrument is reproduced in **Appendix 2**. The survey was made available from March 30 until April 30, 2023. Three listening sessions were held with Connecticut agricultural producers. The first listening session was in person at the Tolland County Farm Bureau Meeting on April 6, 2023, and two virtual listening sessions with producers were held via Zoom on April 26, 2023, and May 2, 2023. Sixteen producers participated in the listening sessions, representing a variety of agricultural operations. An additional listening

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session with Connecticut leaders and stakeholders with experience and expertise in agriculture in the state was held via Zoom on May 8, 2023. A copy of our scripts is provided in **Appendix 3**. Most of the analysis of the survey data carried out for this report consists of frequency distributions and cross-tabulations derived utilizing Excel. This study has some limitations, mainly due to the short time available to complete our project. Despite our efforts to advertise the virtual listening sessions with CT producers, we reached only a small number of participants. This undesirable outcome is very likely since the listening sessions occurred when the planting season had already started, and many producers were busy during that time. It is also important to acknowledge that our report does not include aquaculture producers, which is a producer population that warrants further study.

### *Survey Sample Characteristics*

While 68 participants began the survey, our sample consists of the 59 producers who provided information on their farm income. Table 1 summarizes the types of farms by income range. Most of the survey participants run relatively small farms and have a gross annual revenue of less than \$149,000 (76.3%). Nearly half of all respondents (45.8%) generated gross annual incomes of less than \$10,000, while a minority (11.9%) generated more than \$350,000. By comparison, in Connecticut overall 71% of all farms had less than \$10,000 in sales, and only 8% of farms had sales of \$100,000 or more (USDA, 2017).

**Table 1: Number of Farms by Gross Annual Revenue and Farm Type**

Farm Type	Less than \$10,000	\$10,000 - \$149,999	\$150,000 - \$349,999	\$350,000 and over	Total
Vegetables	8	7	1	1	17
Meat Animals (Except Poultry)	3	4	0	1	8
Dairy	1	1	4	2	8
Fruits, Berries, and Nuts	3	3	1	0	7
Grains, Hay, and Field Crops	3	1	0	0	4
Nursery, Greenhouse, and Sod	2	1	0	1	4
Horses	2	1	1	0	4
Eggs and Poultry	1	0	0	0	1
Other	4	0	0	2	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>59</b>

As noted in Table 2, our sample demonstrates geographic diversity as farms from all eight Connecticut counties completed the survey, with slightly more respondents from Litchfield (23.33%) and New London (21.67%) counties where more agricultural businesses are located.

**Table 2: Connecticut Counties Where Farms are Located**

County	Number of Farms	Percentage of Farms
Fairfield	7	11.7%
Hartford	8	13.3%
Litchfield	14	23.3%
Middlesex	3	5.0%
New Haven	4	6.7%
New London	13	21.7%
Tolland	8	13.3%
Windham	3	5.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100%</b>

Turning to Table 3, a slight majority of responding producers (57.1%) have more than 10 years of experience, suggesting we have representation from both new and seasoned farmers. These experienced farmers are larger, as measured by mean acreage (151.8 acres), and lease slightly more of their land (32.3%). In comparison, farmers with less than 5 years of experience represent 28.6% of the sample and tend to have smaller operations, with a mean acreage of 35.1 acres. As farmers increased in experience, they also leased a greater proportion of their land.

**Table 3: Farms by Years of Farming and Farm Acreage**

Years Of Farming	Number of Farms	Mean Acreage	Percent Leased
Less than 5	16	35.1	25.0%
5 to 10	8	37.3	27.1%
More than 10	32	151.8	32.3%
<b>All Farms</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>102.1</b>	<b>29.0%</b>

Producers were also asked to consider the primary organizations they turn to when seeking help or information. The most commonly cited organizations (by 50% of respondents) were faculty from the UConn College of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources (50% of the respondents) and the Connecticut Department of Agriculture (50%). While less than half of respondents (43.1%) selected county-based UConn Extension Centers, forty-two farmers (72.4%) selected either CAHNR faculty or an Extension center. Approximately 36.2% of respondents turned to the Connecticut Farm Bureau and 27.6% to the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station. As CAHNR is such an important source of information for producers, it is vital we understand their needs.

**Table 4: Organizations Farmers Would Probably Contact for Help or Information**

Organization	Number	Percent
Connecticut Department of Agriculture	29	50.0%
UConn College of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources Faculty	29	50.0%
County-Based UConn Extension Center	25	43.1%
Connecticut Farm Bureau	21	36.2%
Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station	16	27.6%
Commodity Organizations	5	8.6%
Local Board of Agriculture or Agriculture Commission	4	6.9%
Other	25	43.1%

Note: Respondents could select more than one answer

## Findings

### *Challenges*

The most pressing challenges identified in the survey were analyzed three ways: (1) by farm size, (2) by enterprise type and (3) all farms in the sample. We combined responses for serious or extreme challenges to express the importance of a challenge. The results are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

The survey identified the top (most serious or extreme) challenges across all farmers in the sample, shown in the last columns of Tables 5 and 6. In order of importance, these are:

1. High input costs
2. Weather variability and climate change
3. Lack of labor availability and skills
4. Infrastructure gaps and pests and pest management (tie)
5. Lack of processing facilities for my products and state and local regulations (tie)

It is interesting to note that GCAD (Piotrowicz, 2012) identified high input cost as the top obstacle to expanding Connecticut agriculture 11 years ago. Thus, the high cost of inputs is a formidable, long-standing challenge facing state farmers, and this appears to have only increased since the pandemic. Only two other top obstacles identified by GCAD (Piotrowicz, 2012) were also captured in our survey among the top seven challenges: the regulatory environment and infrastructure gaps. Farmers were slightly more concerned about local and state regulations, though presumably this problem only intensifies when combined with federal regulations. While GCAD (Piotrowicz, 2012) also identified land availability and market competition as top obstacles, they were not among the top seven challenges in 2023 when



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evaluated across all farmers. Instead, producers are now more concerned with climate change, labor availability, and pest management.

To understand the relationship between farm size and challenges faced, we divided our sample into three size categories following similar divisions used by economists to differentiate between commercial and non-commercial farms (Table 5). We also differentiate between operations that do and do not incorporate animal agriculture as they may face different challenges (Table 6). As expected, size and enterprise type were key variables affecting the types and intensity of challenges faced by Connecticut farmers, which is in line with findings from our stakeholder listening sessions. However, these simplified categories may not sufficiently reflect the complexity resulting from the diversity of agriculture in the state.

**Table 5: Percent of Farmers Expressing that a Challenge is Serious or Extreme by Size of Operation**

Challenge	Farms with less than \$10,000 in Sales	Farms with \$10,000-\$150,000 in Sales	Farms with more than \$150,000 in Sales	All Farms
High Input Costs	55.6%	63.2%	92.9%	67.8%
Weather Variability and Climate Change	37.0%	36.8%	57.1%	42.4%
Lack of Labor Availability/Skills	29.6%	42.1%	50.0%	39.0%
Infrastructure Gaps	22.2%	42.1%	21.4%	28.8%
Pests/Pest Management	29.6%	26.3%	28.6%	28.8%
Lack of Processing Facilities for My Products	22.2%	31.6%	21.4%	25.4%
State and Local Regulations	18.5%	21.1%	42.9%	25.4%
Federal Regulations	14.8%	21.1%	35.7%	22.0%
Lack of Land Availability	22.2%	21.1%	14.3%	20.3%
Trouble Accessing Markets or Customers	22.2%	26.3%	7.1%	20.3%
Lack of Consumer Knowledge of Connecticut Grown products	11.1%	15.8%	21.4%	15.3%
Marketing	11.1%	26.3%	7.1%	15.3%
Geographic Constraints	7.4%	10.5%	21.4%	11.9%
Access to Credit/Financing	14.8%	5.3%	7.1%	10.2%
Market Competition	0.0%	15.8%	7.1%	6.8%
Other	25.9%	10.5%	14.3%	18.6%

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**Table 6: Percent of Farmers Expressing that a Challenge is Serious or Extreme by Type of Operation**

Challenge	Plant-Based Farms	Animal-Based Farms	All Farms
High Input Costs	63.2%	71.4%	67.8%
Weather Variability and Climate Change	50.0%	28.6%	42.4%
Lack of Labor Availability/Skills	36.8%	42.9%	39.0%
Infrastructure Gaps	28.9%	23.8%	28.8%
Pests/Pest Management	34.2%	19.0%	28.8%
Lack of Processing Facilities for my Products	15.8%	42.9%	25.4%
State and Local Regulations	26.3%	23.8%	25.4%
Federal Regulations	23.7%	19.0%	22.0%
Lack of Land Availability	21.1%	19.0%	20.3%
Trouble Accessing Markets or Customers	21.1%	19.0%	20.3%
Lack of Consumer Knowledge of Connecticut Grown product	21.1%	4.8%	15.3%
Marketing	15.8%	14.3%	15.3%
Geographic Constraints	13.2%	9.5%	11.9%
Access to Credit/Financing	13.2%	4.8%	10.2%
Market Competition	7.9%	4.8%	6.8%
Other	13.2%	28.6%	18.6%

### 1. High input costs

*Overall, this challenge was identified as by far the most salient and important in the survey, with nearly 68% of the farmers indicating that this is a serious or extreme challenge.*

However, it is particularly daunting for larger farmers (>\$150,000 in sales) as nearly 93% of them indicated that this was a serious or extreme challenge to their operations.

This challenge was one of the main ones reported by the farmers present at the listening session held at the Tolland County Farm Bureau. They listed rising energy, labor, and material costs as having the greatest impact on Connecticut farmers. The participants in the virtual listening sessions confirmed this difficulty and stated that the increased prices of seeds, fertilizers, and packaging materials were also major obstacles to their operation. They noted as well that this challenge may overlap with concerns about regulations that increase costs, such as a rule disallowing reuse of packaging materials.

### 2. Weather variability and climate change

*Overall, this challenge was identified as the second most important in the survey, with nearly 42% of the farmers indicating that it is a serious or extreme challenge.* This is a new challenge relative to the GCAD (Piotrowicz, 2012) survey and interviews done more than 10 years ago. Because farmers are involved directly with basic natural resources like land and water, extreme

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weather variations and climate change are of particular concern now, to the point that it was identified as the second most important challenge across farmers. However, it is a greater challenge for commercial farmers (>\$150,000 in sales) and for plant-based agriculture compared to animal-based agriculture. This result is not surprising as plant-based farmers face more challenges with weather variability, which affects planting time, yields, and harvest.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Lack of labor availability and skills

*Overall, this challenge was identified as the third most important in the survey, with nearly 39% of the farmers indicating that it is a serious or extreme challenge.* This concern is proportional to the size of operations, becoming more severe for commercial farms and less so for small farms, which are often self-employed or part-time operations. However, lack of labor is still a formidable concern even for smaller operations, with nearly 30% of them expressing that it is a serious or extreme concern. Lack of labor also cuts across types of farms, with nearly equal incidence in both plant-based and animal-based operations. This concern seems to have gained in importance since GCAD (Piotrowicz, 2012). In a tight labor market with plenty of outside opportunities and competition from other industries for similar skills (e.g., construction laborers and Amazon drivers, for example), this challenge needs further evaluation for labor force development and H2A-targeted immigration programs to alleviate this constraint.

During listening sessions producers highlighted concerns about both the availability and quality of labor. For instance, while producers in the green industry have not recently experienced problems finding general labor, they have had difficulties hiring more educated and experienced workers in irrigation techniques, gardening, pruning, and plant identification. In general, the labor shortage appears especially acute for workers with technical skills. In terms of labor recruitment, participants shared that providing housing and insurance for farm workers improved the ability of farms to hire and retain quality workers. Unsurprisingly, this contributes to larger farms having an advantage in finding experienced workers. Producers also suggested that their most successful recruiting occurred through network contacts and job boards. For some of them, diversity in hiring is important, which also impacts recruitment choices and abilities.

### 4. Infrastructure gaps

*Overall, this challenge was identified by 29% of the farmers as a serious or extreme challenge, and it tied for fourth position with pest and pest management.* Infrastructure gaps are a more significant challenge for mid-sized farms (42.1%), possibly because they are large enough to have infrastructure needs, but lack the resources needed to pay for these improvements.

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<sup>1</sup> Spring 2023 had especially unpredictable weather, including a sudden freeze after a mild winter, which could be why this issue was prominent in the minds of producers.

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However, there does not appear to be much of a difference between animal and plant-based operations. In listening sessions, producers highlighted the high up-front costs of infrastructure, such as wells for water management, fencing, and stables to protect animals. While several of the participants had received microgrants through the Solid Ground Stipend Program, most granting agencies require one to three years of successful business returns and may also require matching funds, which is prohibitive for new and under-resourced farming operations. One new farmer specifically mentioned a desire to apply for funding for alternative energy but noted that they were required to show 12 months of existing utility bills, in effect, requiring them to first build non-renewable energy infrastructure.

### **5. Pests and pest management**

*Overall, this challenge was identified by nearly 29% as a serious or extreme challenge, and it tied with infrastructure gaps.* All farmers seem to be affected by pests or have issues with pest management, but smaller farmers with incomes below \$10,000, and especially plant-based farms, are impacted to a greater extent. Producers noted during listening sessions that pest management has become more difficult as the climate changes since flies, mosquitos, and ticks are now overwintering due to milder winters, suggesting that climate change and pest management are two highly interrelated obstacles.

### **6. State and local regulations**

*Overall, this challenge was tied with lack of processing facilities as the fifth most important, with more than one in four of the farmers indicating that it is a serious or extreme challenge.* Connecticut is the fourth most densely populated state in the country (third in New England after Rhode Island and Massachusetts). Although this provides some benefits, such as proximity to markets and roads, it also results in high land values and often burdensome local and state regulation in all areas of farm operation as well as land use conflicts. It is not surprising that the intensity of this challenge was proportional to the size of the operation, with 42.9% of commercial farmers viewing local and state regulations as a serious or extreme challenge. The type of operation (plant vs. animal) did not seem to have a major impact on the perception of this challenge, with a nearly equal percentage of farmers (26% vs. 24%) stating that this was a serious or extreme challenge to their farm operations.

The participants in the listening sessions reported that regulations could be a large obstacle to farming in Connecticut. As expressed by one farmer, trying to navigate different regulations at the federal, state, and local level is time consuming and “almost a full-time job” due to a lack of clarity on rules, few information sources, and burdensome paperwork and record keeping requirements. Farmers expressed a concern that they must compete with producers from other countries or states with less restrictive regulations, which puts them at a disadvantage. While the certified organic program has always enforced strict regulations for

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pesticides and fertilizers, this has become especially onerous with the increase in production costs (such as pesticides and alternatives) and decrease in labor availability (for activities such as conservation tillage and manual removal of weeds). Although one farmer noted that regulations are primarily an obstacle to for-profit farms, others expressed concern about the high level of compliance required even for small farms. The high taxes that Connecticut farms must pay can also be a deterrent to farming.

### 7. Other challenges

Though it was not one of the top seven challenges in the survey, barriers to marketing their products was discussed by producers during the listening sessions. However, few large operations noted they had trouble accessing markets or customers in the survey. Producers suggested that successfully marketing their products was nearly a full-time job, which meant small operations were not able to devote time to activities that could improve their overall sales. While farmers interacted with the CT Grown brand, they noted that customers have a perception that locally produced food should be cheap and that the increase in consumer interest in locally grown food during COVID has faded as they have returned to lower-priced grocery offerings. While producers did note that there appears to be demand for local food based on attendance at local events and product requests, they did not always have the resources needed to increase capacity. Producers also stated that farmers' markets are becoming a less profitable alternative due to increased competition and finicky customers, which is problematic if this is a channel used by smaller farms.

Another problem highlighted during the listening sessions is the lack of land availability in Connecticut, though this problem was less relevant for the largest farming operations. Not only has the cost of living increased, including the cost of land, it is also hard to find land to rent. Relatedly, established farmers need help with land transition, and there are concerns about both how to ensure land remains in farming and how to connect land to potential producers. While the Connecticut Department of Agriculture and American Farmland Trust have developed the [CT Farmlink](#) program to facilitate access to land, there are five times more farmers seeking land than farmland available.

In a listening session with stakeholders, a major stakeholder noted that the largest hindrance to farmers in Connecticut comes down to resources, both in terms of time and finances. Farmers are an increasingly aging population, and there are insufficient resources for aging farmers who are transitioning out of farming. Additionally, young farmers lack access to capital, land, and financial planning, while also being saddled with student loans. Moreover, farmers from underrepresented BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) groups in particular may struggle with a lack of resources and may not be aware that they are eligible for certain grant programs. However, even if producers are aware of resources, many lack the time or ability to utilize them. In fact, stakeholders suggested that while a variety of technical

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assistance programs exist for farmers across a variety of platforms, even when farmers attend these events, they do not have the time or resources to implement the recommendations.

### *Importance of CAHNR Services*

A core purpose of this study was to identify potential services or outreach activities that CAHNR could provide to support Connecticut producers. In Table 7 we identify the percentage of producers who ranked a potential CAHNR activity as very or extremely important. Respondents most highly valued aid in navigating federal, state and local resources. During the stakeholder listening session, they noted that while a wide array of programming is offered by a variety of organizations, the many listservs promoting these services become difficult for a producer to keep track of. Beyond information on available aid programs, farmers also need support in grant writing, which is not a service offered through CAHNR and may not be available at the state-level as it could represent a conflict of interest for state-based grants. While Farm Credit East offers grant-writing workshops, they also suggested these opportunities could be better advertised. This suggests the potential of a “clearinghouse” where information on grant resources is easily accessible. UConn Extension used to host a “new farmer bucket list” with links to resources, and the state Department of Agriculture has recently provided a similar online resource “[Growing a Farm Business in Connecticut.](#)”

**Table 7: Importance of Potential CAHNR Services**

<b>How Important Would Each Service from CAHNR Be</b>	<b>% of Respondents Who Rank Service as Very or Extremely Important</b>
<b>Navigating federal, state, and local resources</b>	41.7%
<b>Crop or animal production technical assistance</b>	38.3%
<b>Obtaining licensing and certifications</b>	40.0%
<b>Marketing and communications</b>	26.7%
<b>Legal and regulatory compliance</b>	28.3%
<b>Business and strategic planning</b>	31.7%
<b>Product development and commercialization</b>	23.3%
<b>Accounting and financial planning</b>	16.7%
<b>Labor training and development</b>	13.3%

\*Question Asked: How can UConn's CAHNR be helpful to the viability or expansion of your operation? How important/useful would each of the following services be? 1. Not important, 2. Somewhat Important, 3. Important, 4. Very Important, 5. Extremely Important

In the survey, producers also raised the need for legal aid related to regulatory compliance and obtaining licenses and certifications. As noted previously, regulations are a top

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concern for Connecticut producers. Agriculture can be impacted by regulations from various departments, and sometimes even regulators are not clear on the implications for farming. One producer provided an example in which they went to the town office to ensure their proposal fell within guidelines, and after building a new structure, learned they had not been provided the correct information to meet the regulatory compliance requirements.

The next most important service participants identified is crop and animal technical assistance, which is a primary focus of UConn Extension. During the listening sessions this was highlighted as an area that CAHNR already does well, but only 43% of survey respondents reported turning to county-based Extension agents when they needed help (Table 4), suggesting these services could potentially be better marketed.

Another important service need is assistance with business and strategic planning. Producers in the listening sessions noted that farmers may lack business skills and that there is a need for financial training, including accounting and tax compliance, to ensure farming operations can remain viable.

Beyond business management, producers also seek services related to marketing and communications. The significance of consumer education was highlighted frequently during the listening sessions. Producers are concerned about a lack of customer awareness of the importance of agriculture and the many activities that go into growing food. There also appears to be a lack of understanding of the costs faced by local producers, including how increased fuel and labor costs that impact all industries also play a role in agriculture. They suggested that programs to educate consumers and promote the value of locally produced products to the public (including informational materials and videos) could aid Connecticut producers. Farms could also benefit from improved market development, especially distribution. This could include expanding food hubs to better aggregate products from small farms, as well as providing marketing resources for farmers.

## Recommendations

In highlighting the top challenges identified by producers, we identify a shift from the priorities emphasized in GCAD (Piotrowicz, 2012). This could suggest that certain programs recommended in that report have worked, such as the increase in farm to school resources in the state. It could also represent external changes, such as increased concerns about climate change. Farmers at the virtual listening session shared with us that new and younger farms tend to be smaller and more diversified compared to farms with more years of operating experience. This is a generational shift that needs to be taken into consideration when developing programs for Connecticut farms.

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Based on our analysis, we identified three primary areas of producer challenges where CAHNR can provide assistance and services:

- Farm business and regulation assistance
- Education and labor force development
- Weather and climate change adaptation and mitigation

### ★ Farm business and regulation assistance

Some of the business and regulatory issues highlighted in the survey and in the listening sessions cannot be changed by CAHNR, but CAHNR can do a great deal in addressing and mitigating some of those challenges.

Several themes and suggestions appeared repeatedly in farmers' evaluations of obstacles to farming in Connecticut. *The most frequently mentioned problem was profitability of the farm enterprise due to high input costs.* This is an ongoing agricultural concern that was also the number one issue mentioned in GCAD (Piotrowicz, 2012). At the same time, *the top two areas mentioned in the current survey where CAHNR could help are navigating local, state, and federal regulations and assistance in obtaining licensing and certifications.* Other issues mentioned in the listening sessions that are worth addressing include centralized information on business support and applying for grants. Some farmers and stakeholders expressed that improved access to information and simplification of some procedures would reduce the regulatory burden. Some also observed that rule-makers and inspectors often demonstrated a lack of understanding of how agriculture works or what the specific applicable rules are. One of the GCAD (PIOTROWICZ, 2012) recommendations was to improve coordination between the CT agencies responsible for regulating agricultural businesses. However, our results suggest regulatory compliance is still a major concern of producers.

Given the foregoing, we recommend:

- Hiring a state-level specialist through UConn Extension whose role would include business assistance, farmer training, and support, as well as being an ombudsperson to navigate regulations, grant applications, and resource coordination with other state organizations.
- Forming an agricultural advocacy working group composed of specialists in agricultural policy and agribusiness from UConn Extension and other relevant state or regional agencies, such as the Connecticut Farm Bureau, Farm Credit East, and local agricultural commissions.

The state-level specialist's duties would specifically include:

- Establishing a bank of resources that facilitates timely and accurate information on business management, funding sources, and local and state laws and regulation. This would include periodically updating documents clarifying laws and regulations, such as required permits, laws, and compliance. The specialist would also be responsible



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- for channeling direct inquiries for help or information to ensure that producers are connected to all relevant support personnel.
- Developing educational and training materials and short-term courses or workshops in business and risk management, financial literacy, and accounting. The specialist would also provide business advice and analysis and help with strategic farm planning. Services are needed to support all elements of agribusiness management, including financial and business training, marketing, and grant writing and application assistance.
  - Acting as an agricultural liaison to other groups and agencies to advocate for agriculture in the state.

This is not to say that such efforts are not currently being made in Connecticut. These activities are, however, rarely the central mission of the individuals in UConn Extension or other organizations involved in providing individual support and assistance to farmers. Outreach duties and responsibilities should be a major part of the job description of an agricultural specialist. As appropriate, one or two county business specialists or ombudspersons could also eventually be added in the state's leading agricultural counties. The latter could also attend to the problems facing small, part-time, and beginning farmers who are important to the state as they play a vital role in keeping Connecticut green and providing produce to the region, regardless of their share in farm sales.

Regarding formation of a state-wide advocacy group, now may be the right time to reactivate and resume a new version of GCAD at the state level in which CAHNR could play a central or leading role. At the very least, CAHNR can formally partner with some of the organizations involved in agriculture to form a state working group that advocates for agriculture and to pool resources, rather than these organizations working in silos. Though a variety of organizations offer a myriad of programs to support the viability of agriculture in the state, and although some efforts, such as the Department of Agriculture's resource directory, could help connect these groups and producers working towards a common goal, there is no suite of personnel available to offer holistic support to farmers. A renewed GCAD could include the dean of CAHNR, directors of Farm Credit East and the Connecticut Farm Bureau, and the Agriculture Commissioner, among others.

### ★ Education and labor force development

While GCAD (Piotrowicz, 2012) findings emphasized the importance of K-12 agricultural education, our results suggest a strong need for overall consumer education. Multiple stakeholders decried the consumer perception that "food should be cheap" and expressed the need to educate the general public on all the inputs needed to grow and process food, including labor and fuel. One suggestion was a video detailing the agricultural process from farm to table that included all the relevant cost components. Another stakeholder proposed a campaign

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about the importance of agriculture and the necessity for preserving farmland in the state. UConn could also take a leadership role in marketing and education through institutional procurement and informational campaigns with students.

The survey respondents and the attendees at the listening sessions indicated that many farmers lack the necessary business skills to successfully manage their operation. The need to develop agricultural entrepreneurs' business skills can be addressed by building a workforce of qualified workers through post-secondary education and professional development workshops. Providing practical training in accounting, finance, economics, and business management to students in the Ratcliffe Hicks (RH) School of Agriculture and CAHNR is essential. Currently, RH students in the Plant Science and Urban Forestry and Arboriculture programs are required to take only one course in accounting and business. As these are individuals who are more likely to stay in Connecticut and work in agriculture, having more than one business course in their curriculum will help them build the required skills to start or manage an agribusiness.

Participants at the listening and stakeholder sessions emphasized the importance of providing hands-on technical training to Plant Science students and other related majors before graduation and adding lab-style classes focused on real-world scenarios to create a labor force ready to tackle the current problems that Connecticut agribusinesses face. They also suggested creating cross-disciplinary experiential learning programs, such as micro-internships or projects that involve CAHNR and UConn Business School students who could provide help and solve problems on farms, and developing internships for students with agricultural businesses and service providers.

There is also a need to increase the number of students entering agricultural majors. One stakeholder suggested the importance of creating an "agriculture career pipeline champion" that will make agriculture a more attractive career path for Connecticut youth. Another participant highlighted the importance of career pathways for agricultural service providers, so students will stay in the state.

### ★ Weather and climate change mitigation and adaptation

Climate change has clearly become a more salient concern for producers as this frequently noted obstacle was not addressed in the core recommendations of the GCAD (Piotrowicz, 2012). Producers especially highlighted how unpredictable weather patterns, such as unseasonably warm winters or sudden freezes, impacted their planting and pest management decisions. Requests for studies on how climate change is impacting Connecticut generally fell into three categories:

- *Technical or production oriented.* Examples include improved organic pest management options and creating geographic readiness for climate change.
- *Strategic.* Concerns included current reliance of agriculture on foreign components and how to redevelop local capabilities, as well as how to set up Northeastern markets to

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support future climatic changes, including a shift toward growing crops from warmer climate zones.

- *Social*. Participants were interested in potential social, economic, and environmental interrelationships. Examples include changing trends in population and resource use, especially land and water, in Connecticut and how to strike a balance between community development and agriculture production, given anticipated future trends.

CAHNR already has the Center for Land Use Education and Research (CLEAR), which conducts research and outreach on climate change and land use, as well as the Zwick Center for Food and Resource Policy, suggesting capacity already exists within CAHNR to address these questions.

Beyond our primary recommendations, respondents also suggested these potential areas of further need:

### ❖ Technical assistance

CAHNR's Department of Extension already provides technical assistance to Connecticut farmers and, as some participants in the listening sessions noted, is doing an excellent job in this regard. As mentioned earlier, 72% of farmers approach either CAHNR faculty or county-based Extension centers when seeking aid. While the Department of Extension does provide personnel directories within topic categories, a position such as a state-level specialist that connects producers with services could improve total program reach. Additionally, one suggestion from the listening session was to provide workshops and training in new technologies and aid with their implementation on farms. It is also clear that the need for technical assistance related to climate change adaptations and resiliency will continue to grow.

### ❖ Access to infrastructure

Stakeholders suggested that CAHNR could promote the use of certain facilities by producers. One stakeholder mentioned that producers were previously able to utilize the livestock and meat packing facilities on campus, and that perhaps a feasibility study could be conducted to identify a path forward to allow for this sort of partnership. Another producer suggested that CAHNR could facilitate the purchase and rental of certain machines and equipment commonly used by Connecticut farmers as farms do not need these supplies the whole year and buying them is very costly to small farms.

### ❖ Land Access

Land access, a difficulty noted in the previous GCAD (Piotrowicz, 2012) report, continues to be a challenge. Stakeholders identified a need for programs to help young farmers rent or own farmland, especially in urban areas. This could increase Connecticut customers' access to fresh

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produce and promote the entry of new farm operations and the expansion of existing small farms in the state. The importance of facilitating land conservation and donation was discussed, including connecting with individuals who are moving to rural areas but not actively farming their land.

### **❖ Forestry Support**

First and foremost, tree farmers would like to be able to access information from the state regarding qualified foresters they can reach out to with questions. They also expressed the need to develop a manual with guidelines on how to responsibly harvest trees, including technical issues, harvesting responsibilities, and sustainable forest management for farms that have forests on or near their properties, etc. Another idea concerned designing “field trips” that cover topics ranging from how to build a road to flagging and clearing trees. They also suggested an opportunity for on-farm training in best practices.

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## Appendix 1: Prior Efforts

### Grow Connecticut Farms

In 2012 the Governor’s Council for Agricultural Development (GCAD) undertook stakeholder interviews, listening sessions and a survey to identify priority areas and provide recommendations to the Department of Agriculture on how to diversify and promote agriculture within the state. The resulting report, [Grow Connecticut Farms](#), identified the following top five opportunities and obstacles, as well as 10 priority topics that warranted further study.

Opportunities	Obstacles
1. Market demand	1. Input Costs
2. Consumer Knowledge of Connecticut Grown Products	2. Regulatory Environment
3. Geography	3. Land Availability and Infrastructure Gaps (tied)
4. Market Supply	4. Market Competition
5. Access to Credit/Financing and Land Availability (tied)	
<b>10 Priority Areas</b>	
Farm to Institution	Labor
Infrastructure	Regulatory Environment
Marketing	Farmland Resources
Consumer Education/Training	Producer Education/Training
Input Costs	Urban Agriculture

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The report concluded with seven specific recommendations, and two subsequent reports (in 2013 and 2014) provided updates on work being completed. Each recommendation also had three sections: *Who will be better off*, which described the impacted stakeholders, *What will be measured*, which provided metrics that could be used to assess progress, and *How much can we do*, which consisted of actionable suggestions.

1. *Study infrastructure gaps and opportunities for the aggregation, light processing, and distribution of Connecticut Grown products.* In the short term, the report suggested that the Department of Agriculture collaborate with partner organizations in key cities to develop strategic plans on how to strengthen supply chains and develop food hubs. They specifically highlighted investing in the Hartford Regional Market and building facilities in strategic cities throughout the state. In the longer term it was suggested that the Department of Agriculture work with other state agencies to improve contracting language regarding local food. The 2013 report provided additional suggestions, such as investigating the potential for installing light processing facilities at strategic locations, survey stakeholders on this topic, and assess the potential of developing a broker or virtual model for distribution.
2. *Develop and invest in a comprehensive marketing strategy for Connecticut agriculture.* It was recommended that the Department of Agriculture invest in a CT Grown marketing strategy, with the goal of doubling the percentage of dollars spent on CT Grown to 5 percent by 2020. In the 2013 update specific steps were suggested to gather market data, develop messaging, and initiate a campaign. It should be noted that by 2023 the Department of Agriculture did [launch a new CT Grown campaign](#) after a comprehensive market research study.
3. *Create an agriculture-friendly energy policy that includes agricultural net metering for power production and transmission, and qualification of agricultural anaerobic digestion projects for zero-emissions renewable energy credits (ZRECs).* The report suggested that CT implement a policy that allowed CT agricultural producers to reduce their energy costs and extend their growing seasons. The 2013 update suggested collaborating with DEEP on topics including renewable energy credits or incentive funds for agriculture, anaerobic digestion, virtual net metering and renewable energy systems that don't use prime agricultural land.
4. *Strengthen the state Department of Agriculture and improve coordination among all agencies regulating agricultural businesses.* The 2013 report provided clear recommendations on how to achieve this, including improving how regulatory

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information is provided to farmers, map agriculture throughout the state to improve services, and improve coordination between all state agencies that impact agriculture.

5. *Perform a comprehensive review of agricultural labor issues and develop initiatives that provide an adequate workforce for Connecticut farm businesses.* The report suggested both developing a local workforce by integrating agriculture into current workforce development programs as well as working with Congress to improve federal guest worker programs. The 2013 update incorporated specific suggestions, including creating incubator farms to provide learning opportunities for beginning farmers, providing additional investments to the high school agriscience centers and developing agricultural internship programs through CT community colleges and universities.
6. *Increase weight limits on truck loads to be consistent with surrounding states.* While this was not discussed in the 2013 update, the weight limit remains at 80,000 pounds in 2023, compared to the 100,000 pounds suggested in the report that exists in neighboring states.
7. *Establish a bridge between the state departments of Agriculture and Education through a dedicated agricultural education coordinator and develop ways to integrate agriculture into Connecticut's K-12 curriculum.* The report highlighted the importance of hiring an agricultural education coordinator to develop curriculum and serve as a resource for farmers and educators. The 2013 update included a formal job description developed after reviewing positions in other states, as well as steps to pursue funding opportunities and develop a candidate selection process. As of 2023 it does not appear this position was ever created.

One final report, published in 2014, provided an updated set of five recommendations for future work.

1. Invest strategically in the state-owned Hartford Regional Market to revitalize this regional, state, and local food hub and provide code-compliant, modern facilities for aggregation, processing, storage, distribution, and sale of Connecticut Grown farm products.
2. Streamline implementation of the federal Food Safety Modernization Act by designating the Connecticut Department of Agriculture as the lead agency in the state responsible for regulating food production, processing, handling, and transport.
3. Enhance educational/training programs and Cooperative Extension for Connecticut agricultural producers.



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4. Plan, design, and create an agricultural innovation center to research, develop, and teach state-of-the-art controlled environment production models that will enhance Connecticut farmers' opportunities for long-term economic success and expand consumer access to fresh, healthy? Connecticut Grown foods year round.
5. Fortify the Department of Agriculture's existing Connecticut Grown marketing efforts to provide additional resources to both farmers and consumers.

### CAHNR 2019 Listening Session

In 2019 CAHNR underwent a visioning process to develop priorities for the College as a whole. In addition to listening sessions held at three Extension Centers, there was also a session with the CAHNR Dean's advisory board. Participants were asked for their views on CAHNR, what they feel CAHNR does well, where CAHNR needs improvement, and what CAHNR should strive for in the future. The listening sessions at each of the Extension centers yielded similar results. Overall, CAHNR is positively viewed outside the university, though there was a desire for CAHNR to have a larger presence throughout the state. Participants also suggested that CAHNR increase its program outreach, as well as to play a larger role in integrating agriculture into urban settings. Participants believed that CAHNR faced a shortage of agricultural educators, and that it should become a leader in agricultural education as well as providing more hands-on and mechanical skills for students. Similarly, there was a call to place more UConn students into Extension programs. Additionally, it was felt that CAHNR should further collaborate with other state agencies and the private sector in order to improve access of information to the public.

As a result of these listening sessions, the following [strategic vision areas](#) were created within CAHNR:

- Advancing adaptation and resilience in a changing climate
- Enhancing health and well-being locally, nationally, and globally
- Ensuring a vibrant and sustainable agricultural industry and food supply
- Fostering sustainable landscapes across urban-rural interfaces
- Promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion through anti-racist approaches.

## Appendix 2: Survey Instrument

### Q1. Consent Statement

You are being asked to be a participant in a research study.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources at the University of Connecticut will be conducting listening sessions to understand the needs facing CT producers and develop programming to provide support. The results from this survey will be used to inform the listening sessions. Survey results will also be included in a summary report that will be shared with CAHNR and Extension faculty and staff to develop actionable solutions to meet your needs.

#### **What will I have to do if I agree to be in the study?**

If you agree to complete the survey you must click consent before and then answer the survey questions. Answering this survey should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. You may skip any questions you like and stop the survey at any time.

Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with UConn in any way.

#### **Important Contact Information**

Additional information, including the full consent statement, can be found at <https://are.uconn.edu/listening-sessions/>. Please contact Cristina Connolly at [are.survey@uconn.edu](mailto:are.survey@uconn.edu) if you have any questions about the study, or if you believe you have experienced harm or injury because of being in this study. In addition, for any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the UConn IRB Office at [irb@uconn.edu](mailto:irb@uconn.edu) or at (860) 486-8802.

#### **Consent Agreement**

If you click "I agree" it means that you read this consent form and agreed to participate in this study.

- I agree (1)
- I do not agree (2)

*Skip To: End of Survey If Consent Statement You are being asked to be a participant in a research study. What is the purpose... != I agree*

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Q2. Indicate with numbers the most important (1), second most important (2), and third most important (3) enterprises of your farm operation.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Aquaculture and commercial fishing
- \_\_\_\_\_ Dairy
- \_\_\_\_\_ Eggs and poultry
- \_\_\_\_\_ Fruit, berries, and nuts
- \_\_\_\_\_ Grains, hay, and miscellaneous field crops (corn, soy, silage, etc).
- \_\_\_\_\_ Horses
- \_\_\_\_\_ Meat animals (except poultry and dairy)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Nursery, greenhouse, and sod
- \_\_\_\_\_ Vegetables (including potatoes and mushrooms)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify):

Q3. In general, if you had a question or needed assistance for your farm operation, who would you contact for help and information? Indicate with (1) the most important, (2) the second most important, and (3) the third most important.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Commodity organizations
- \_\_\_\_\_ Connecticut Department of Agriculture
- \_\_\_\_\_ Connecticut Farm Bureau
- \_\_\_\_\_ County-based UConn Extension Center
- \_\_\_\_\_ Local board of agriculture or ag commission
- \_\_\_\_\_ Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station
- \_\_\_\_\_ UConn College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources faculty
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other (please write name of group):

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Q4. With respect to your farming operations, how do the following negatively affect your farm operation (if at all)?

	No Effect	Minimal Effect	Moderate Effect	Serious Effect	Extreme Effect (May give up farming)
Access to credit/financing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of consumer knowledge of Connecticut Grown products	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Geographic constraints	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Infrastructure gaps	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
High input costs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of labor availability/skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of land availability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of processing facilities for my products	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Market competition	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Trouble accessing markets or customers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Weather variability and climate change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Pests or pest management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Federal regulations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
State and local regulations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Marketing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Q5. In terms of needs, we would like to understand how UConn's College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources can be helpful to the viability or expansion of your operation? How important or useful would each of the following services be?

	Not important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important	Extremely Important
Labor training and development	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Business and strategic planning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accounting and financial planning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Product development and commercialization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Marketing and communications	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Crop or animal production technical assistance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Obtaining licensing and certifications	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Legal and regulatory compliance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Navigating federal, state, & local resources	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (specify):	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Q6. How many years have you been actively farming?

- Less than 5 (1)
- 5-10 (2)
- More than 10 (3)

Q7. What is your farm's Gross Cash Farm Income?

- Less than \$10,000 (1)
- \$10,000-\$150,000 (2)
- \$150,000-\$349,999 (3)
- \$350,000-\$999,999 (4)
- \$1,000,000 or more (5)

Q8. What is the approximate size of your operation?

- Total acres:
- How many of those acres are rented/leased:

Q9. In what county is all or most of your farmland located?

- Fairfield County (1)
- Hartford County (2)
- Litchfield County (3)
- Middlesex County (4)
- New Haven County (5)
- New London County (6)
- Tolland County (7)
- Windham County (8)

Q10. Is there anything else you would like us to know?

## Appendix 3: Listening Sessions Script

### ***Producer Listening Sessions***

- We have conducted producer surveys to understand the top obstacles you face. We would like to know your thoughts on the results and what support CAHNR can provide to your operations.
- You will be split into groups to discuss the questions below. Each group will then be asked to report out on their takeaways. We are providing sticky notes for you to put all your ideas.
- These were the top obstacles that CT farmers/agribusinesses reported facing
  - High input costs
  - Lack of labor availability/skills
  - Weather variability and climate change
  - Infrastructure gaps
  - Lack of processing facilities for my products
  - Pests or pest management
  - State and local regulations
- We would like you to consider these findings and then answer the following questions as a group.
  - What about these obstacles is so challenging for you? Are there important obstacles missing?
  - What resources do you lack to combat or overcome these obstacles?
  - What projects, services or support would you like to see from CAHNR?
  - What connections do you use to get information or identify service providers?

### ***Stakeholder Listening Session***

- We have conducted producer surveys and will be presenting initial results.
- We have some questions for you about these results. We would like to hear from all of you since you have such diverse perspectives.
  - Do these results reflect your own experiences? Are we missing something?
  - Are there obstacles that your members are coming to you about that you don't have solutions for?
  - Are there programs or resources that your farmers aren't utilizing?
  - What projects, services or support would you like to see from CAHNR?
    - What about outreach or research projects or informational needs specifically?



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- What connections or resources do your members use when they need information?

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