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Meredith Johnson, Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy and Brian Bourdages, Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy
Testimony in Support of HB 4666
June 16, 2011

Thank you Chairman Hune and members of the committee.

My name is Meredith Johnson. I am the Policy and Program Coordinator for Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy, a statewide organization representing approximately 30 regional land conservancies who work with private landowners to voluntarily protect lands with natural, recreational, scenic and agricultural value.

Heart of the Lakes' member land conservancies help landowners permanently protect some of Michigan's most important, privately-owned lands. Land conservancies are often instrumental in local farmland protection efforts, working with local, state, and federal government to leverage programs and funding while assisting landowners. Because of this work, we strongly support House Bill 4666.

I have with me today Brian Bourdages, Farmland Protection Specialist for the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, a member of Heart of the Lakes, who can tell you more about the work that they do with farmland preservation.

Thank you Chairman Hune and members of the committee. My name is Brian Bourdages. I am the Farmland Protection Specialist for the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, a regional land conservancy based in Traverse City and serving Grand Traverse, Antrim, Kalkaska, Benzie and Manistee Counties. We work with private landowners and local units of government to voluntarily protect lands with natural, recreational, scenic and agricultural value. Since our inception in 1991 - 20 years ago this summer - we have protected nearly 35,000 acres of land through the acquisition of over 200 conservation easements on private land, 34 of our own nature preserves, and dozens of projects assisting local units of governments in

acquiring parklands and preserving private farmlands through the purchase of development rights – sometimes called the purchase of agricultural conservation easements.

The Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy strongly supports HB 4666. We are fortunate, in the Northwest Lower Peninsula, to see first-hand the growth created by the agricultural sector – especially with the continued growth of the dried tart cherry industry and fresh apple markets. As many of you are aware, our region is also home to thriving and growing winery and tasting room businesses who contribute greatly to our tourism economy. We know first hand that our farmland preservation work has a positive impact on the agri-business environment of our region. Just last week, the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy received a thank you letter from the CEO of Shoreline Fruit – a tart cherry processor in Grand Traverse County that is one of the world's largest producers of dried cherries and red tart cherry juice concentrate. Specifically, the letter was in thanks for our assistance in their recent procurement of a state Agricultural Processing Renaissance Zone designation. This designation will allow the company to make new investments totally some $8 million dollars in processing capacity and leading to the creation of at least 45 new jobs in the county. This letter specifically mentions the amount of permanently protected fruit producing acreage and the continued investment in farmland protection as a motivation for the expansion to happen – and to happen here in Grand Traverse County. A copy of this letter is attached as a part of this testimony.

The Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy has had the good fortune to assist in the development and implementation of two local farmland preservation programs in Grand Traverse County – in Peninsula Township and in Acme Township. In each of these townships, the local residents have created a dedicated funding stream for farmland preservation through the establishment of local millage dollars for that purpose. The Peninsula Township Farmland Preservation Program on the Old Mission Peninsula is widely recognized as one of the most successful township-level programs in the country. Since its creation in 1994, it has permanently protected over 1/3 of all active agricultural land in Peninsula Township – these dollars spent on this program has allowed for considerable re-investment in agriculture on Old Mission as anyone can witness by the dramatic increase in wine-grape vineyards, new wineries and other new infrastructure such as fruit cold storage and packing facilities.

The Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy also serves, by contract, as operators of the Acme Township Farmland Preservation Program ,which was established by the citizens of Acme in 2004. This program has already permanently preserved 3 family farms covering more than 220 acres and is on track to protect approximately 820 acres by the end of 2012. Additional demand far exceeds the available dollars for the program.

Because the State of Michigan's Farmland Program has insufficient revenue to conduct an application round, state dollars are not currently available to either of these local programs and the only source of matching funds for these programs are through the federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program and the goodwill of participants who have been willing to sell their agricultural conservation easements at less than full fair market value in order to support the program's success.

Having a solid source of funding to match local and federal dollars is critical to the continued viability of the farmland preservation programs I just described to you as well as the other farmland preservation efforts of our organization.

Further, increased funding for the State of Michigan's Farmland Program would insure that the department has sufficient funds for staffing their programs. While the funding available through the state program has been woefully lacking, the expertise and partnership offered by their staff is invaluable to me as a practitioner, and the funding of their program staff has tremendous value to organizations such as the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy.

The Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy wholeheartedly supports this bill and is thankful for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

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shoreline FRUIT

Growers | Processors | Marketers

June 1, 2011

Mr. Glen Chown
Executive Director
Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy
3860 N. Long Lake Rd.
Traverse city, Michigan 49684

Dear Glen,

I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you for the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy's support of Shoreline Fruit's effort to establish an Agricultural Processing Renaissance Zone at our processing facility in Yuba (Williamsburg) Michigan. Particularly, I want to recognize the efforts of your Farmland Protection Specialist Brian Bourdages in his dedication to educating the local municipal officials as to the importance of expanded processing capacity on the viability of our local farms. An array of factors influence an agricultural processing expansion project like the one we have proposed but one factor that I feel is important to note is the existence of significant local acreage under easement that will remain in productive agriculture.

The proposed expansion at the Shoreline Fruit facility in Yuba will take our grower/owners from representing 65% of the tart cherries used for our dried cherry business to about 30%. This type of change requires not only a substantial investment on the part of our grower/owners but also a stable, long term environment for cherry production in the region. The ongoing farmland protection efforts of the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy and the development of additional processing opportunities like Shoreline Fruit Yuba continue to provide options for local growers to plant cherry trees with confidence that there is a supportive structure in place from farm to processor.

Again Glen, thank you for your efforts and the efforts of your staff. Your continued work is vital to the maintenance of a long term, sustainable environment for agriculture in our region and is helping to truly make Traverse City the "Dried" Cherry Capital of the world.

Ken Swanson
CEO
Shoreline Fruit, LLC.

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Jason Warren - CFO Shoreline Fruit, LLC
Nels Veliquette – Cherries-R-Us
Brain Bourdages - Farmland Protection Specialist Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy