

PA 490 WORKGROUP MEETING NOTES

April 14, 2026

The meeting was called to order by Office of Policy and Management (OPM) Undersecretary Martin Heft at 9:33 AM at 450 Columbus Boulevard, Hartford.

Working Group Attendance:

Undersecretary Martin Heft, Commissioner Bryan Hurlburt (Department of Agriculture DoAg), Christopher Martin, David Beers, Paul Larson, Damon Braasch, Nicholas D'Addario, Mark Walter, John Emmanuel, Keith Bishop, Francis Whelan, John Hall, Ben Freund, Joseph Orefice, Mike Gilman, Bonnie Burr, John Casertano, Ella Kennen, and Jennie Kapszukiewicz

Guests (online):

Howard Rosenthal, Representative Doug Dubitsky, Jerry Grabarek, Shannon Chatfield, and Representative Steve Weir

State Agency Staff:

Kayleigh Royston (DoAg), Rebecca Eddy (DoAg) and Nathan Wilson (DoAg)

Undersecretary Heft provided opening remarks noting that today's meeting will focus on other methodology considerations. He noted we have a clean slate for recommendations, and this is the start of the process, and we will go back through the comments submitted previously. He added that we will have some extra time today as no public has signed up to comment and that this conversation will roll over into the next meeting.

Commissioner Hurlburt hoped members found time to review materials in advance and started thinking about how we can put together a program that's going to be more reflective of the values and a process that ensures the confidence of the public throughout the course of these recommended land values.

BUSINESS

Undersecretary Heft remarked that members asked for additional methodologies at the last meeting. He thanks Mr. Braasch for researching Pennsylvania and providing documents as well as Mr. Bishop of the report "Northeast US Farmland Current Use Valuation Methods." He added that we would not do a full review, as Mr. Bishop has a presentation which includes aspects of the report as well as his methodology recommendation suggestions.

Ms. Kennen inquired if it was better to establish evaluation criteria first rather than reviewing methodologies. Undersecretary Heft stated we would have the presentation first, as there will be plenty of time to discuss. He added that they both go hand in hand, and no right order of which to do first.

Undersecretary Heft called on Mr. Bishop to provide his presentation "Straw-Man Proposals and Presentation to the PA 490 Working Group". The presentation is attached to the notes.

Proposal A – The PPI Index Plan

- Mr. Braasch noted there is a leveling process in change of assessment. A counteraction happens with mill rate along with assessment change. Revaluation increases values, and lowers mill rates.
- Ms. Kennen stated that we can look at each methodology separately, not just in a bundle.
- Mr. Freund would like to have noted which is allowable under current legislation versus needing legislative change.
- Commissioner Hurlburt reminded us that the statutory goal is to preserve the land and legislation is silent on methodology. State agencies do not have staff or expertise to run calculations; thus, they need to hire consultants or outside resources.
- Mr. Orefice stated the need to decide on categories, base line prices, adjustments to base lines, options for additional use reductions.
- Mr. Braasch inquired if other considerations will be presented. Undersecretary Heft noted there will be time after the presentation.

Proposal B – Rewards for Results

- Mr. Orefice noted issues if you lease your land as an LLC that this could be an issue.
- Mr. Freund feels this is too complex and beyond the scope.
- Ms. Burr noted ecosystems and environmental services that agriculture provides.
- Mr. Orefice liked the idea of incentivizing.
- Commissioner Hurlburt noted that the Governor has expressed interest that if you have a permanent conservation easement, such as development rights through state agencies, there should be a tier that protects your property taxes.

Proposal C – The Farmer-First Contract

- Ms. Kennen noted that land can be productive without being economically viable. We need to think about who we are leaving out when we tie active production to income.

- Mr. Emmanuel inquired if it may adversely impact people that have 80 acres of open space that can't productively use it or get a farmer to productively use. If a developer purchase land at extreme value, there is no incentive to preserve it.
- Mr. Larson commented that to test the production value for the whole farm, the number should be tied to quality of land.
- Mr. Orefice noted was noted there is a current \$2,500 income threshold and PA 490 threshold is different than tax threshold.
- Commissioner Hurlburt noted there is discretion on how assessor qualifies the land and the definition of farmer would benefit from this. It would need legislation clarity.
- Mr. Orefice liked the idea of giving PA 490 some teeth when use change.
- Mr. Braasch noted that regarding penalties, currently a ten-year period from date of application/ purchase is in statute. It starts at 10% in the first year, 9% second year and goes down to zero for change of use/ownership. Conservation easements, value should be reduced as development rights limit use. Idea to have easement classified as farmland.
- Mr. Gilman inquired if solar energy is added, does this change the use? Mr. Braasch responded technically it is an active use/utility production.
- Mr. Freund commented that we need to stay in our bucket in overall review. PA 490 has worked well, and needs to keep simple approach
- Ms. Kapszukiewicz agreed that we need to stay focused on our task.
- Mr. Larson discussed the declassification and future ownership, as well as penalizing landowners.
- Mr. Braasch provided an East Haddam example regarding zoning and open space, that preserves the land for a longer period by slowing the process down.
- Mr. Beers agreed to stay away from looking at penalties.

Proposal D – The Strategic Toolkit

- There were no comments on this section.

Undersecretary Heft thanked Mr. Bishop for the presentation and the ideas. He noted that we will begin looking at individual recommendations and asked members to submit their suggestions for the next meeting. A list will be compiled and sorted by areas (i.e. criteria, categories, incentives).

Ms. Keenen wants to make sure we are clear on the criteria, and judging things based on some sort of criteria. She reviewed some key captured thoughts from the presentation and her thoughts on categories.

Mr. Braasch noted some of the points in the presentation. A required lease provides vitality and information needed. Indexing could work, but income thresholds have not been updated. He asked about thoughts on the solar use of farmland.

Mr. Orefice commented on solar use of farmland and what he has seen in other states. Need to establish what categories, base line and incentives. One of the categories we don't have is "farmyard". Mr. Braasch added that an assessor will value the entire lot, and some will include a building lot value for farm buildings.

Mr. Larson has seen solar proposals and noted that the income from that is not farming – not producing food but some ecosystem services.

Mr. Orefice would push back as it is a competing business.

Mr. Braasch added that farms being used as "venues". Utilizing a commercial application on farm land for events (agritourism).

Mr. Braasch presented recommendations of enhanced data collection and valuation methodologies. The presentation included a state-by-state comparison of process. A copy of his notes are attached.

- Ms. Kennen commented on rental rates versus income. Would income be a better baseline as aggregate vs individual. Mr. Braasch noted assessment is on "highest and best use" assessed at highest value as most productive.
- Mr. Freund stated this should be a required self-reporting process with minimal categories, rental rates. Only issue is the reporting problems, not current methodology.
- Mr. Casertano agreed that PA 490 is a privilege and way to connect current reporting systems to collect needed information. Concerns on penalizing concept. The data is available already, just need to obtain.
- Ms. Kennen inquired on how to get lease data from farmers. Mr. Freund noted that landowner files PA 490 and needs to report. Undersecretary Heft noted that PA 490 is attached to the landowner, not the lessee. We collect rental rates mostly from the farmers rather than the landowner.
- Mr. Braasch emphasized the need to have a copy of the lease agreement filed to establish formal structure.
- Ms. Kapszukiewicz noted that handshake agreements are allowed, so no paperwork.

- Ms. Burr commented on not having buyers and is challenged by the income approach. Rental rates based on who has most money. How to value our own farm land, and what is an appropriate rental rate.
- Mr. Gilman noted that the income base will be impacted by weather conditions and other variables. Don't want the farmer to have to decide to grow less to be taxed less.
- Ms. Burr inquired about the assessor's standpoint on maritime heritage land. Mr. Braasch noted that underwater farming (right to harvest), has lease agreements in place with state. There has not been direction on this category in the past and no sales for comparison. Undersecretary Heft added that the 2025 values did include Maritime Heritage for the first time and was based on the lease agreements.
- Mr. Bishop remarked about the income approach and certain criteria and incentives.
- Mr. Hall agreed that the financial information is a slippery slope. Categories should be based on soil types and establish a baseline.
- Mr. Orefice stated that we could discuss flat rate approach.

The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, May 12th. Undersecretary Heft asked members to submit their recommendations to OPM.PA490@ct.gov by May 5th so a listing can be provided in advance of the meeting. We will push the Outreach and Engagement Improvements and Taxation of PA 490 Lands to a future meeting.

Public Comment – Representative Doug Dubitski inquired how to submit comments. Undersecretary Heft provided the OPM.PA490@ct.gov email.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:39 AM.