

Save the Williamson Act

A Coalition Committed to Protecting the California Land Conservation Act

The Williamson Act is the single most-effective agricultural land preservation program in California, and it's under attack. The Governor suspended subvention payments to local governments in the 2009-10 state budget and is threatening to do so again. Many of the 54 counties that participate in the program will not be able to continue the program without help from the state.

Given the Williamson Act's statewide benefits to the economy, agriculture and the environment, it is our hope that state leaders will demonstrate their commitment to the program by reinvesting in its long-term success through the restoration of \$38 million to the Williamson Act's subvention program.

BACKGROUND

Since its adoption 45 years ago, the California Land Conservation Act, commonly known as the Williamson Act, has grown into the state's most important farmland protection program. The program protects 16.5 million acres of farmland throughout the state by offering property tax relief in return for rolling contracts to keep land in commercial agricultural production for 10 or 20 years

Enacted in 1971, the Williamson Act subvention program sets forth a state reimbursement formula for allocating payments to local governments based on acreage enrolled in the program. This financial support from the state has provided a tangible incentive for local governments to stay in the program and initiate more contracts by partially replacing property tax revenues lost on enrolled land.

WHAT'S AT RISK

Farm and Ranchland Conservation

In the most recent poll of landowners who participate in the Williamson Act program, one-in-three landowners said they would be unable to continue farming or ranching without the benefits of the program. It is estimated that the program saves property owners 20-75 percent in property taxes.

Without the Williamson Act large-scale farmland conversions will no doubt reduce the production of California commodities and this in turn will affect local and even international food markets. California is the dominant producer of many specialty crops that provide diversity in our diets. With the loss of production, prices will rise for all consumers, not just those in California.

Environmental and Land Use Benefits

Roughly 16 million of the state's 29 million acres of farm and ranchland are currently protected by the Williamson Act. In addition to preserving our state's

agriculture, lands under Williamson Act contract help contribute to meeting California's AB 32 and SB 375 goals through carbon sequestration and effective land-use planning. Counties rely on the program to implement general plan conservation programs which address the growth of urban areas, the expansion of public infrastructure and the conservation of important agriculture and open space resources. The program also helps to maintain open space and critical habitat for many of California's most sensitive species.

Economy and Jobs

California farmers and ranchers are an essential part of our state's economy. Agricultural production is large, dynamic, and closely linked to many other industries; for example, the production of farm inputs, the processing of food and beverages, the textile industry, transportation and financial services. Considering the economic multiplier effects, California farm and closely related processing industries employ 7.3 percent of the state's private sector labor force and account for 5.6 percent of the state labor income. Also, for every dollar of value added in labor income, property income and indirect business taxes, farming and agricultural related industries generate an additional \$1.27 in the state economy. For every 100 jobs in agriculture, including the food industry, there are 94 additional jobs created throughout the state. Farm exports, so vital to our nation's balance of trade, constituted 40 percent of the total export value of \$10 billion through the Port of Oakland in 2008 and contributed to 22 percent of the Port's annual revenue of \$135 million.

Public Services

The subvention program assists counties in dealing with numerous other responsibilities and public services. The loss of one of the last sources of discretionary revenues for the counties equates to further erosion of county services including: public safety, land use, elections, road maintenance and various health and human services.

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