



Agriculture, Environment, and Natural Resources

The Williamson Act

What is the Williamson Act?

The California Land Conservation Act of 1965, commonly known as the Williamson Act, is an effective on-the-ground tool for the preservation of farmland and agricultural land. Private landowners contract with local governments (cities and counties) in rolling 10-year contracts that restrict their land use in return for a reduction in their property tax liability on the lands by 20-75 percent. Property tax rates are based on generated income as opposed to the potential market value of the property. These property tax reductions are intended to support local farmers and ranchers while maintaining the county agricultural and open space values.

Why was the Williamson Act created?

Assembly Bill 2117 (Williamson, 1965) came at a time when farmland in the state was being converted to urban uses at an accelerated rate. Along with conversion to urban uses, the market value of farmland on the urban fringe (edge of developed communities) became more valuable, and thus incurred higher property tax rates. This created an incentive for the farmer or rancher to sell or develop the land, further reducing farmlands in key areas of the state. The Williamson Act pairs with Article 13 of the State Constitution that “declares the interest of the state in preserving open-space and provides a constitutional basis for valuing property according to its actual use.”

More than two-thirds of the state's agricultural land—over 16 million acres—is protected and preserved under the Williamson Act. The Williamson Act greatly

assists in the preservation of the agricultural industry in California which is second only to tourism in its economic impact. California is the nation's No. 1 agricultural producer and exporter, of the market value of agricultural products sold in California totaled more than \$59 billion in 2022.

In addition to preserving California's vital food-producing farm and grazing land, the Williamson Act benefits the state in other important ways. It preserves open space and wildlife habitat, protects watersheds, and helps reduce greenhouse gases.

The Williamson Act has significantly reduced leapfrog development through the preservation of contiguous areas of agricultural land. This is especially true of farmland at the urban fringes of our State and areas with prime agricultural lands.

“Merced County is the fifth-largest agricultural county in the state. The Williamson Act helps our farmers and ranchers stay in production while contributing to global food security and conservation goals. We support the Williamson Act and encourage the reintroduction of state subvention payments to counties”.

Supervisor Daron McDaniel, Merced County

State Support Ended in 2009: Counties Are Making Tough Choices

The state was an invested partner in the Williamson Act for decades—providing support to local governments by subsidizing the difference in property tax revenues. Payments to local governments through the Open Space Subvention averaged over \$20 million per year between 1972 and 2008, reduced to \$1,000 in 2009. Subventions were not renewed after 2009 despite efforts by counties to reinstate the important partnership. These funds were used to provide core services at counties including law enforcement, health and human services, planning and core government functions.

New Pressures on the Williamson Act

Development on valuable agricultural land is at a premium, as regional housing needs assessments impact land use decisions. Rural and farming regions face serious challenges due to lack of available water, overdraft of groundwater, and the need to move into more sustainable water practices. At the same time, the state is dramatically increasing renewable energy production and siting. These together provide incentives for farms and ranches in marginal water stressed areas to convert farmland into renewable energy production (mainly solar). Proposals to allow more land use types on Williamson Act contract lands continue to be proposed in the California Legislature.



The Bottom Line: The Williamson Act remains a key tool for counties to preserve agricultural and range lands.

Counties support revisions to the California Land Conservation Act of 1965, also known as the Williamson Act, that provide property owners greater incentives to continue participation under the Act. Additionally, counties are committed to support other reasonable legislative changes which preserve the integrity of the Williamson Act and eliminate abuses resulting in unjustified and premature conversions of contracted land for development. Counties support the restoration of Williamson Act subventions. The state subventions to counties also must be revised to recognize all local tax losses and the strain this loss of revenue puts on critical human services being provided by local governments.

For an electronic version of this issue brief, visit the Legislative Resource Library on the CSAC website or scan the following QR code:

