

Save the Williamson Act

A Coalition Committed to Protecting the California Land Conservation Act

April 27, 2010

The Honorable Arnold Schwarzenegger
Governor, State of California
State Capitol
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Governor Schwarzenegger:

On behalf of the coalition to SAVE THE WILLIAMSON ACT, a broad-based coalition of agricultural, environmental and local government interests, we write to strongly urge you to restore the \$38 million in funding of the Williamson Act subvention payments to local governments for property tax losses incurred by enrolling agricultural land in Williamson Act contracts.

Enacted in 1965, the Williamson Act is a voluntary program that provides lower property taxes to agricultural landowners in exchange for their contractual commitments with participating cities or counties to keep their land in agricultural or open space uses for at least 10 years. In 1971, state funding was provided which created a 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.

Today, nearly one-third of all the privately owned land in the state is enrolled in a Williamson Act contract. Those 16 million acres constitute more than one-half of the state's 29 million acres of farm and ranchland. 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 use 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.

In addition to being one of the most effective land conservation programs, the Williamson Act is arguably the most cost effective program in California. At just \$38 million, the program constitutes less than 0.03% of the State's general fund. However, the return for this amount is invaluable. California's economy ranks the eighth largest in the world and the agriculture and its associated industries comprise a significant portion of that. Eliminating a program that helps to protect close to half of our state's agriculture would have long-term, irreversible effects.

The ramifications of eliminating funding for this program are simply disastrous. Similar to the State, counties are also being faced with making tough decisions due to declining revenues and significant budget shortfalls. The loss of already limited discretionary dollars may be the last straw for some counties struggling to provide essential public services many of which are provided on behalf of the state. Imperial County was the first to non-renew contracts this year, and several other counties have indicated they too may back away from the Williamson Act if no state funding is forthcoming. A domino effect will then ensue, farmer's tax bills will increase and expendable income will decrease, potentially leading to a weakening of local agricultural-based economies where few alternative industries exist.

Lastly, we believe that the Williamson Act has proven to be an effective tool for encouraging the preservation of existing farmland and the preservation of open space in an ever increasing urban California. The Williamson Act is a nominal investment relative to the numerous benefits that it provides statewide. On behalf of California's local governments, agricultural community and environmental interests, we strongly request your support for restoring the full \$38 million to the Williamson Act subvention program.

Respectfully,

Partners of the Save the Williamson Act Coalition

California State Association of Counties
Regional Council of Rural Counties
Sutter County
American Planning Association, California Chapter
California Council of Land Trusts
Resource Landowners Coalition
California Association of Wine Grape Growers
California Women for Agriculture
Sacramento Valley Landowners Association
California Rangeland Trust
Audubon California
California Cattlemen's Association
California Outdoor Heritage Alliance
Agriculture Council of California
Western United Dairymen
California Farm Bureau Federation
Monterey County
California Thoroughbred Breeders Association
California Horse Council

cc: Speaker of the Assembly, John A. Pérez
Senate President pro Tem, Darrell Steinberg