

# Leading the Charge

## The fight to keep Williamson Act intact

As the treasurer of the California Cattlemen's Association (CCA), I will begin my column with a quick discussion of the CCA's current financial condition. I am pleased to say that our income and expenses for the current fiscal year (beginning Oct. 1, 2009) point to covering the costs of operation again this year.

While doing everything necessary to represent our members' interests, CCA officers and staff have been prudent with expenditures. We are also well on our way toward our goal of setting aside reserves equaling one half of our annual operating budget.

We are fortunate during these critical times to have an outstanding, dedicated, effective staff protecting our industry's interests across California, in Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

As I am preparing this column, both the stock market and most segments of the cattle market are doing well thanks to good rains and reasonable feed prices in most areas of the state.

While there are important, ever-present environmental and resource issues, the financial challenges facing our local governments and the state are enormous and should be on the front burner for all of us. They will require a heightened level of involvement for CCA staff and officers as well as each member.

These challenges are further complicated by a federal administration and a U.S. Congress that have proven to be the most difficult we have experienced in recent history. Financial resources at the state and local level are extremely limited, causing deep cuts in programs and services while requiring governments to explore any and all opportunities to increase revenues.

It is critical that our staff, leadership team and members continue to be engaged in the debate over what

programs will be funded and which will be dropped. Every special interest, from public employees to environmental groups and social interests, is lobbying intensely to protect its own priorities. If we do not commit our resources to this effort, we will surely lose.

Of all the budget issues at the state level, the one that has received the most attention from ranchers and farmers is the elimination of Williamson Act subvention funding to counties to offset lost tax revenue for Williamson Act contracted lands.

While the amount of the subvention funding, \$30 to \$40 million, is relatively small in relation to the total state budget of nearly \$95 billion, it is of great importance to counties, ranchers and farmers around the state. With approximately 16 million acres protected statewide – representing close to one-third of the private land in California and nearly one-half of the farm land in the state – it is easy to see that the act is successful and a bargain for the citizens of California.

The Williamson Act also represents a long-standing commitment by the state to local governments. Considering the dire financial conditions of some counties, the continued elimination of the subvention funding will surely result in non-renewal of existing contracts (Imperial County has already given notice), which will be the death knell for this enormously successful program.

A strong coalition of CCA, farm and ranch, environmental and local government groups has been working diligently to garner legislative and administrative support for funding the subvention.

This coalition has gained excellent bipartisan support in the legislature for the act and funding and has been heard by the Governor and his staff. However, because of the poor outlook for the state budget next year, the

fate of the subvention funding and consequently for Williamson Act contracts remains in jeopardy.

Please continue to work with your state legislators and county supervisors to share the importance of the contracts to your own ranch, your county and the state.

This issue is but one of many that promise to challenge the staff and the officer team in the coming months. It is only through your grassroots support and membership that CCA will be successful in protecting the interests of cattle producers across the state.

One thing is guaranteed, the future will continue to bring added pressure for some combination of increased taxes and fees, reduced services and increased regulations at all levels of government. Only as an organized group will we have a chance to derail some of these initiatives.

Continue to support CCA through your membership and active participation. Your commitment and involvement have never been more important!



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