



Fresno County Farm Bureau Williamson Act 2009



BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

- The California Land Conservation Act of 1965, commonly known as the Williamson Act, creates a partnership between the local and state governments and agricultural landowners by enabling counties and cities to contract with landowners to voluntarily restrict their use of the land to agricultural, scenic, and open space purposes for a minimum of 10 years.
- In exchange, the land is assessed based on "use value" rather than "market value" and the state reimburse local governments (an annual subvention) to partially defray the loss of property tax revenue, via the Open Space Subvention Act of 1971.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES:

- The Williamson Act is a means to restrict the uses of agricultural and open space lands to farming and ranching uses during the length of the contract period. The Williamson Act Program also was envisioned as a way for local governments to integrate the protection of open space and agricultural resources into their overall strategies for planning urban growth patterns. **The three principal program objectives are:**
 - **Protection of agricultural resources**
 - **Preservation of open space land**
 - **Promotion of efficient urban growth patterns**
- The Williamson Act is an important growth management tool for local governments and the agricultural community because it provides certainty to landowners that they will be able to farm without encroachment of incompatible non-farming uses.
- The \$35 million program has approximately 16.5 million acres in California enrolled in Williamson Act contracts, which represents more than 50 percent of the state's cropland. Currently, 17 million of the state's 30 million acres of farm and ranch land are enrolled in Williamson Act contracts.
- If a county discontinues the Williamson Act, the landowners' only recourse is to file a written protest. By doing so, they are allowed to continue to receive property tax relief for three years, or 13 years in the case of Farmland Security Zone contracts. Under the protest provisions, counties do not receive any subvention payments during the last six years of either type of contract.
- Counties do have a choice of "non-renewing" the Williamson Act contracts. Typically, this is an option for those counties that have a contract with a grower whose property sits in an area where new development is to take place.
- By not renewing the contract, counties receive no subvention payments during the non-renewal period of about 10 years, while growers continue to receive the Williamson Act property tax relief for four years, or 14 years in the case of Farmland Security Zone contracts.

FRESNO COUNTY IMPACTS

- With 1.48 million acres enrolled in the program in Fresno County, Williamson Act subvention funds bring approximately \$5 million to the County's general fund that supports such expenditures such as law enforcement (i.e. 60-65 deputy sheriff positions) and fire protection countywide.
- Fresno County is the largest agricultural-producing county in the state.
- Approximately 7,400 Williamson Act contracts have been established in Fresno County since the 1960s when the program began.

STATEWIDE IMPACTS

- With almost 50% of the land conservation contracts, the San Joaquin Valley stands to lose the most if the proposed budget reduction remains in tack. However, the State and the nation stand to lose even more as agricultural land loses this protection.
- It is one of the few sources of discretionary funding that is received by counties from the state. And, although the \$35 million program seems to be a drop in the bucket as compared to the State's entire budget, it is proportionally a much more significant percentage of the counties' budgets that hold the largest amount of Williamson Act land contracts.
- Agricultural lands benefit the state economically - - California provides more than half of the nation's fresh fruits and vegetables. The agricultural lands also act as a critical buffer between remote lands and urban zones and offer wildlife benefits.
- The Williamson Act enables local governments to integrate the protection of open space and agricultural resources into their overall strategies for planning urban growth patterns. About 50,000 acres of farmland are lost to urban uses every year
- Environmental protection and economic growth must go hand-in-hand working with business and industry to craft environmental policies that are balanced and fair, yet built upon our state's long-standing respect for our natural resources.
- The Williamson Act has always been a partnership between; state and local governments and private landowners. The subvention represents the state's good faith incentive for counties that continue to offer the program to landowners.
- Williamson Act funding assists in maintaining the high quality of California products and expands opportunities for farmers and ranchers.
- Those counties most adversely affected by the proposed funding reductions include; Fresno County (\$5 million), Kern County (\$4 million), Tulare County (\$3.4 million), Kings County (\$2.2 million), San Joaquin County (\$1.8 million) and Merced County (\$1.2 million).