



**Williamson Act: A
Not So Brief History**

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California Land Conservation Act of 1965 (John Williamson, AB 2117)



- Rapid population and economic growth in CA post WWII
- Economic incentive to facilitate transition ag lands to higher-density uses
Annual valuation increases of Farm and Ranch lands were inconsistent with ability to pay
- CLCA (WA) off ramp to redirect valuation of ag lands at true agronomic value in exchange for long term restrictive contracts
 - Slow start—only 200,000 acres in Year 2 as assessment strategies were debated
 - Article 13 of the CA Constitution—interest of the State to preserve open space and constitutional basis to value property according to actual use, not potential use
 - Open Space Subvention Act (1971)—created a formula for allocating subvention payments to local government based on acreage enrollment
 - Proposition 13 (1978)—CA Tax Revolt and restricted property assessments
- Average tax savings 40-90% (1978-1981)

Williamson Act Objectives



- Voluntary agreement of restricted to use for:
 - Ag use (farming and ranching purposes)
 - Open space (scenic corridor, wildlife habitat area, saltpond, managed or submerged wetland, or USDA Conservation Reserve Program)
- AND
- Compatible uses (within limits)
- GOALS
 - Recognizing the importance of ag lands as economic and social resource (prime and non-prime) and open space
 - Encourage local governments integrate open space and ag resources into urban growth planning
- Private landholders voluntarily enter annually renewing 10-year contracts to restrict development of unrelated uses in exchange for property tax reductions

Williamson Act Obligations



- Local Government Obligations:
 - Establish Ag Preserve (area dedicated to ag or open space use) of at least 100 acres with special exceptions
 - Establish uniform rules for contracts, procedures, and fees
 - 10 acres prime and 40 acres nonprime minimums parcel size
 - ~50% of parcel for qualifying use
 - Set annual income requirements per acre or GFI for ag use
 - Determine compatible uses with guidelines
 - Conduct restricted value assessments
- State Obligations:
 - Appeals and contestations (assessor's valuations, cancellation, (in)compatible uses)
 - Guidance on compatibility determinations to Counties
 - Subvention payments to Counties (previously)
- Landholder Obligations:
 - Restrict land use to explicit allowances in uniform rules
 - Return annual Reporting Statement to Maintain Ag Preserve Eligibility
 - Initiate cancellations (rescission fee=12.5% nonrestricted value) and non-renewals

Recent Adjustments



- Open Space Easement [1974]
- Timberland Production Zones (TPZ) [1982]
 - Iterative process to transition WA to TPZs
- Farmland Security Zones (within Ag Preserve) [2000]
 - 20-year contracts assessed at 65% of the Williamson Act value with 25% rescission fee
 - Prime, unique, statewide importance, local importance farmland
- Cancellation of Subvention Payments (2008-2009)
- Solar Use Easement [2011]
 - Allow for simultaneous exit of WA and entrance into 10/20-year solar use easements with 10% rescission fee
- Contract Terms [2011]
 - Can be adjusted to 9 years (not 10 for WA) and 18 years (not 20 for FSZ)

Current Status

- Imperial County in Nonrenewal
- Low reporting but relatively high enrollment
- Total Acreage=12,923,108 acres (2018)
 - 2/3rds nonprime, 1/3 prime
- Mendocino County=465,181 acres
 - Roughly 10% County acre base
- Statewide Efforts to Reform
 - Reframe as consistent with Administration priorities (climate change, biodiversity, economic development)
 - Potential impact from affordable housing influx on land conservation
 - Reformed subvention payments and amended contract terms

