

California Land Conservation Act

The California Land Conservation Act, more popularly known as the Williamson Act, was created when the Assembly Agriculture Committee undertook a study in cooperation with the California Department of Food and Agriculture and others that eventually led to the passage of legislation in 1965.

Under the Williamson Act, an owner of agricultural land may enter into a contract with the county if the landowner agrees to restrict use of the land to the production of commercial crops for a term of not less than 10 years. The term of the contract is automatically extended each year unless notice of cancellation or nonrenewal is given. Certain compatible uses are also allowed on the property. In return, the landowner is taxed on the capitalization of the income from the land, and not on the Proposition 13 value. There are currently more than 16 million acres enrolled in the Williamson Act in 54 counties in the state. Over the past decade, there have been attempts to modify and strengthen the law as urbanization pressures have mounted in California.

A significant change was made in August 1998 when the law was amended to provide for the establishment of Farmland Security Zones. Under this Farm Bureau-sponsored Super Williamson Act, landowners can receive an additional 35 percent tax reduction in the land's value for property tax purposes. This additional tax reduction can be earned only if farmers and ranchers keep their property in the conservation program for at least 20 years. FSZ contracts are comparable to the Williamson Act contracts in that each year another year is added to the agreement unless the landowner or county nonrenews the contract.

Currently 19 counties in the state have adopted this FSZ program. The FSZ legislation prohibits the annexation of land enrolled in a 20-year contract to a city, or a special district that provides non-agricultural services, or for use as a public school site.

The policy of the California Farm Bureau not only reflects an understanding of the right of cities and counties to plan for future growth and development; it actually encourages more responsible planning to protect our members' right to farm," according to John Gamper, CFBF's director of taxation and land use.

According to Gamper, in the most recent poll of landowners who participate in the Williamson Act program, 85 percent of participating landowners are "satisfied" or "extremely satisfied" with the benefits brought to them by enrolling in the Williamson Act or a FSZ contract.

It is estimated that the Williamson Act can save agricultural landowners from 20-to-75 percent in property tax liability each year or approximately \$150 million statewide, according to Gamper.

"A survey of landowners in Williamson Act contracts concluded that one-in-three would not be farming or ranching without the act's benefits," said Gamper.

Additional information on the California Land Conservation Act is available from the California Department of Conservation at www.consrv.ca.gov/dlrp/index.htm

CFBF testimony

- [Maintaining Williamson Act land-conservation program](#) (PDF, 27 KB)
- [Budget for Williamson Act land-conservation program](#) (PDF, 14 KB)