

Williamson Act

The Open Space Subvention Act of 1971 was established to provide local governments an annual State subvention to fund the partial replacement of foregone property tax revenues resulting from county participation in the California Land Conservation Act of 1965 (commonly referred to as the Williamson Act).

The Williamson Act preserves agricultural and open space lands through property tax incentives and voluntary restrictive use contracts. Private landowners, in exchange for lower property taxes, enter into rolling 10-year or 20-year contractual commitments with participating counties to keep their land in agricultural and/or compatible open space use.

The Williamson Act has been very effective, protecting more than 16.5 million acres, or nearly one-third of all privately owned land in California. The Williamson Act was intended to be a partnership between the State, counties, and landowners. Counties, in exchange for implementing the State goal of farm and ranch land preservation, were to receive a partial replacement of their foregone property tax from the land enrolled in the program.

Unfortunately, State subventions were eliminated as part of the 2009-10 State Budget, and have not been paid to counties since 2009. The cessation of State support for the program, and the reduced property tax revenue burden now borne 100 percent by counties, impacts the ability of many counties, small counties in particular, to provide for needed services to county residents – many of which are mandated by the State.

State funding of the Williamson Act was one of California's most effective on-the-ground programs for encouraging the preservation of existing farmland, open space, and habitat, as well as protecting watersheds and reducing greenhouse gases. RCRC is once again working with agricultural, environmental, and local governmental organizations as part of a Task Force designed to explore sources of sustainable funding, as well as potential changes to the program itself.