



May 10, 2017

The Honorable Bill Dodd  
State Capitol, Room 5063  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**RE: SB 435 (Dodd) – Williamson Act Subventions -- SUPPORT**

Dear Senator Dodd:

The Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) is a statewide organization that represents both farmers and non-farm residents who support sustainable food and farming policies. CAFF is pleased to support your SB 435, which would reinstate Williamson Act subvention payments to counties but with new conditions.

California's main farmland protection program since the 1960s has been the Williamson Act, which offers farmland owners the opportunity to enter into 10 or more-year contracts with their county governments to keep the land in agricultural uses instead of developing it. In exchange, the land is assessed for property tax purposes at its agricultural value only.

Reduced property tax assessments, of course, result in a revenue loss to the counties that enter into Williamson Act contracts. This is why the state began making up part of the lost revenue through subvention payments to the counties starting in the early 1970s. In FY 2009-2010, however, as a result of the financial crisis of 2008-09 and the ensuing state budget crisis, the state eliminated the subventions, creating a big disincentive for counties to continue entering into contracts and thus imperiling the state's most important farmland protection program. While only Imperial County has abandoned the program, other counties are not renewing Williamson Act contracts.

SB 435 re-establishes subvention payments, but with some changes. It pays counties 50% of prior per acre subvention rates for lands in Williamson Act, but makes the other half available if the county takes a number of steps to adopt a robust program, including:

- Map all agricultural land, open space and watershed land resources in the county

- Adopt an agricultural general plan element that sets forth policies and programs to protect and enhance the county's agricultural and open space land
- Adopt a specific plan to protect significant agricultural areas of the county
- Develop a threshold for agricultural land conversion to non-agricultural uses for the purposes of determining significant effects under CEQA
- Adopt an ordinance that requires specific mitigation measures to apply to projects that involve converting agricultural land, such as granting agricultural conservation easements
- Demonstrate land use and zoning programs that insulate farmland on the urban periphery from nuisance impacts of non-agricultural development.

CAFF has participated in recent years in numerous discussions and legislative proposals related to the Williamson Act and other means for counties preserve farmland. We believe that the state needs to resume subvention payments at some level if the state wants local governments to continue participating in the Williamson Act. The rural counties that contain a large proportion of agricultural land are also the counties with the most limited tax base and budgets. Just because most of them have not yet abandoned the Williamson Act does not mean they will not do so in the next economic recession. If the Williamson Act is abandoned, large ranches will be broken up and ranchettes and urban sprawl will plague agricultural areas of the state.

CAFF believes that SB 435 is a step in the right direction by restoring half of subvention payments to all participating counties and then rewarding those counties that take further steps to preserve farmland.

Sincerely,



David Runsten  
Policy Director