



March 21, 2023

The Honorable Robert Rivas
Chair, California State Assembly Agriculture Committee
1020 N Street, Room 362
Sacramento, California 95814

RE: AB 1197 (Hart) -- SPONSOR

On behalf of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers, we are pleased to sponsor AB 1197 (Hart), legislation that would authorize the Department of Conservation to provide grants to identify and map local food producers in California and increase the outdated grant limits for the planning related to the protection of farmland used for local food production.

Many Californians treasure the unique opportunities California offers to build year-round relationships with local farmers by purchasing food directly from farmers at farmers' markets, through subscribing to community supported agriculture (CSA) boxes, or by visiting farms or field stands. These direct market opportunities are important parts of the fabric of California's local communities and culture. These experiences are amplified by food stores and restaurants that also buy directly from local farms. California agriculture still includes tens of thousands of small-scale farms, many of which grow produce consumed locally by diverse cultural communities. Local food production is also important for the economic well-being and food security of those communities.

For example, Certified Farmers' Markets provide a great opportunity for small farmers to market their products without the added expenses of commercial preparation and selling to a distributor. This increases their net income and makes it possible for them to stay in business. Currently there are 655 certified farmers' markets and 2700 certified producers in California, but this is down from 800 markets and 4,000 producers just ten years ago.

These farms are increasingly under stress from multiple sources: the COVID-19 pandemic reduced in-person interactions and led to substantial increases in the prices of farm inputs; climate change has increased weather variability, leading to drought, wildfire, and flood impacts; consolidation of farms has proceeded rapidly in recent years and unintended consequences of Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) implementation has amplified pressure on small-farmers, as the prospect of reducing irrigated agriculture becomes a reality and the price of land with multiple sources of water is bid up.

In California, we have paved over about 50,000 acres of agricultural land each year for decades, but now we have the added pressure of outside investment in farmland. The acreage of nuts increased by more than a million acres in the 20 years from 1997-2017 and now occupies more than a quarter of irrigated

farmland,¹ and much of this increase was fueled by financial investment. With 50 percent of California cropland owned by five percent of the total landowners, and 37 percent of land owned by non-farmers and rented or leased, it is evident that the foundations of our agricultural system are less and less owned by individuals in our rural communities and increasingly by absentee non-farmer investors.² The flow of financial capital into California agriculture to plant perennial crops has also led to the drilling of deep wells that have negatively affected small farms and rural residents who depend on groundwater.

Many agricultural producers who engage in direct marketing operate on relatively small parcels near urban areas. The Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) program was created to protect such land and limit urban sprawl. However, the program is dependent on land trusts and local government to develop projects. The land trusts often say that it costs them as much to save 100 acres as to save 1,000 acres and so they are inclined to prioritize larger parcels of agricultural land.

AB 1197 provides support to the mapping of local food producers so that organizations that support farmers can assist in their protection and success, which will help ensure their viability and benefits to Californians in the future.

AB 1197's definition of local food producer would complement, and not replace, the "socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher"³ or "limited resource"⁴ definitions currently in the food and agriculture code. The definition also aligns with many existing programs by limiting the farm size to 500 or fewer acres, which captures medium- and small-scale farms that are experiencing the greatest economic pressures and are most in need of support.

California has been actively developing a local direct marketing food system since certified farmers' markets legislation was passed under Governor Brown in 1977. There has been subsequent legislation on such things as CSAs, farm and field stands, and urban gardens. AB 1197 will help to continue developing this local food system and for this reason, we strongly support the bill.

Sincerely,



Jamie Fanous
Policy Director
Community Alliance with Family Farmers

¹ Hoy Carman, "California's Changing Land Use Patterns for Crop Production, 1959-2017," *ARE Update*, 23 (2), 2019, pp 9-11, University of California Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics

² Luke Macaulay and Van Butsic. "Ownership characteristics and crop selection in California cropland." *California Agriculture* 71.4 (2017): 221-230

³ Food & Agriculture Code Section 955.50

⁴ Food & Agriculture Code Section 955.40