

TESTIMONY ON THE WILLIAMSON ACT SUBVENTION PROGRAM
SENATE BUDGET AND FISCAL REVIEW SUBCOMMITTEE #4
DECEMBER 11, 2008

Mr. Chairman and Members:

My name is John Gamper and I represent the California Farm Bureau Federation. The Williamson Act is a law that has served California very well for the last 43 years. Permanently eliminating the state's backfill for the counties' foregone property tax will kill the program. Conserving California farmland benefits the state's environment and its economy. The Williamson Act is the original smart growth program because it encourages communities to make more efficient use of existing developed land to accommodate our growing population, while assuring safe, affordable, reliable food for that population.

In addition to protecting one of our state's most valuable resources, our farm and ranch land, the Williamson Act has also enhanced our quality of life by protecting our precious watersheds and wildlife habitat, as well as the working landscapes that are so important to all Californians. Whether it is our oak savannahs, big fields of sunflowers, or rows and rows of citrus trees, these are landscapes that we all treasure.

But most importantly, the Williamson Act has kept these fertile agricultural lands producing food for our state, our nation and the world. It is a crucial program to many family farmers and ranchers who could not have sustained their businesses without it.

In addition to its significant impacts on the state and local economies, the Williamson Act is widely appreciated as one of the most important environmental laws ever adopted in California. It has encouraged forward-thinking land use planning and prevented leap-frog developments that can be so devastating to farmland and other natural resources.

For all these reasons, my organization has worked hard to promote participation in the Williamson Act, both by individual farmers and by county governments. In fact, Farm Bureau was instrumental in encouraging five new counties to adopt the Williamson Act in recent years.

We have also worked in both the Legislature and the courts, to assure that the act remains a helpful alternative for farmers and local governments alike. Our members are passionate about protecting the integrity of the Williamson Act because the law protects them incompatible land uses in agricultural preserves

Our rural counties simply cannot afford to continue to offer the Williamson Act without the subventions to backfill for the foregone property tax revenue and the program is crucial to the viability of many farms and ranches. The subventions can be a significant

contributor to rural county coffers yet it is only .036 of one percent of the state's budget. Also, if the counties decide to withdraw from the program, more land will be subdivided for homesites, many in critical watershed areas, thus driving up the cost of fire protection in the State Responsibility Areas.

Finally, due to the constitutional requirement that the state reimburse cities and counties for revenues lost due to the homeowners' exemption (\$70 per home), if just one percent of the Williamson Act's 16M acres of protected land converts to residential subdivisions at five units to the acre, the state would be required to pay an additional \$56M in the Homeowner's Property Tax Relief subvention. So by eliminating the \$34.7M in Williamson Act subventions, the state could actually lose hundreds of millions of dollars and that doesn't even consider the potential significant negative impact on the \$36B in farm gate value and its contribution to the gross state product.

We urge you and the Administration to seriously consider all of the ramifications that would result from the elimination of the open space subvention funding.

Thank you for taking public testimony on this landmark law that has protected California's family farmers and ranchers for nearly half a century.