



MENDOCINO COUNTY EXECUTIVE OFFICE

NEWS RELEASE

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TO: MENDOCINO COUNTY NEWS MEDIA

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State Budget Proposal Threatens Farmland Preservation in Mendocino County

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More than 40 years ago, the State Legislature had the foresight to grasp that California's prime farmland and open space was facing threats from development, and these threats would only increase in the future. In response, the Legislature passed the California Land Conservation Act, commonly referred to as the Williamson Act.

Simply put, the Act calls for a voluntary contract between a property owner and local government. In return for agreeing not to develop the land for a minimum of 10 years, the property owner receives a tax break. The state reimburses the local government a portion of the difference it would have received if the property were taxed at its regular rate.

Since the mid-1960s, this program has been highly successful. More than 16.5 million acres of farm and ranch land, including nearly 6 million acres of California's prime farmland, are enrolled in this program. The Williamson Act is a key reason our state is one of the greatest agricultural producers in the world.

The Williamson Act isn't just a pro-agriculture program; it is a program that protects open space. In fact, it has been called the "most important environmental program in the history of California."

Mendocino County has been a strong supporter of and participant in the Williamson Act program. 487,463 acres as of last year were enrolled, ensuring the ongoing vitality of our county's agriculture and open space. The reimbursements we receive from the state have allowed us to continue participating in the program.

But now, farmland and open space preservation face another threat. This threat is not posed by pressures from a growing state population, but rather from the State Capitol where the Governor has proposed eliminating the reimbursements counties receive to participate in the Williamson Act.

In his zeal to present a balanced budget, the Governor is proposing to erase a key component of the farmland-preservation program. Without reimbursements, many California counties could no longer afford to participate in the program. When our county's leaders heard about the Governor's

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proposal to alter the foundation of this successful program, we were stunned and concerned. It would be a blow to 40 years of farmland and open space preservation.

Elimination of the Williamson Act subventions is not the solution to balancing the state's budget. While the state does reimburse counties approximately \$39 million annually (\$5 for each acre of prime agricultural land, \$1 for each acre of non-prime agricultural land covered by a Williamson Act contract), this amounts to a mere .036 of 1 percent of the proposed state budget.

Furthermore, subventions do not fully reimburse counties. If Williamson Act acreage were taxed at a regular rate, Mendocino would receive 30% percent more in property tax revenues. Now the Governor proposes to take it one step further and eliminate subventions all together. Is it fair to ask our county to fully subsidize a state program?

There have been arguments made by the Governor's administration that counties are flush with increased property taxes, providing extra revenue to cover any loss of Williamson Act reimbursement. This is simply not true; in fact, property tax revenues have gone flat across the state – and even decreased in some regions.

Agricultural preservation should not solely be a county priority; it is – and should remain – a state priority, as well. By eliminating subventions, the state would essentially be saying, "preservation is a local issue, a local responsibility."

Even with the Williamson Act in place, the state continues to lose more than 50,000 acres each year. We can expect this figure to climb throughout the state if program reimbursements are eliminated. Many California counties, particularly those in rural areas, will simply not be able to afford to participate in the program. Fiscally, they will have no choice. And, in turn, many landowners – faced with significantly higher property taxes – will be forced to sell their land. Precious farmland and open space will be lost forever.

On the occasion of the Act's 40th birthday in 2005, California Secretary for Resources Mike Chrisman stated, "The landscape throughout California would look dramatically different without the Williamson Act. (It) has proven to be a tremendous deterrent to leapfrog development and poorly planned growth, and is a boon to agriculture."

The Williamson Act has been a highly successful program in Mendocino County. It has been a foundation to the ongoing success of our agricultural economy. After more than four decades of success, it would be bad public policy to discontinue an integral part of this program.

We are hopeful that when the budget is signed, the Governor and State Legislature will share the same vision expressed by their predecessors 40 years ago – a vision that protects California's valuable agricultural heritage.

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