



CALIFORNIA FARM BUREAU FEDERATION

Williamson Act: Land program earns county support for now

Issue Date: October 14, 2009

By Steve Adler



Recognizing the important role of the Williamson Act to California's farmers and ranchers—and to maintaining open space and assuring food security—county governments from Siskiyou to San Diego have picked up the nearly \$28.8 million funding shortfall created when state support of the program was suspended for this year.

At the same time, though, county supervisors from throughout California have sent notice to the state Legislature and Gov. Schwarzenegger that they will be forced to issue contract non-renewals to Williamson Act participants if the state doesn't restore funding by 2010.

The act, which was created nearly 45 years ago as a land conservation program, protects more than 16.5 million acres of farmland. Under its provisions, landowners agree to maintain their land in agriculture for at least 10 years and the counties agree to tax the land based on its agricultural income, its acquisition value under Proposition 13 or its current market value, whichever is lower.

Cattle rancher Casey Stone and other landowners received letters from Yolo County, warning that the Williamson Act land-conservation program could be eliminated in the county if state funding isn't restored.

Of California's 58 counties, 54 participate in the Williamson Act and nearly all remain in strong support of the program.

Although there was virtually unanimous agreement among county supervisors throughout California to cover the funding shortfall this year, they also indicated very strongly that this should not be construed as a long-term arrangement because non-renewal notices will become

commonplace if state funding isn't restored.

The most vociferous message to Gov. Schwarzenegger and the Legislature comes from the Yolo County board of supervisors, which in late September mailed letters to all of the county's Williamson Act contract holders cautioning them that the program is in imminent danger of being eliminated if the state does not restore funding.

At a spirited meeting last Wednesday at the Heidrick Agricultural History Center in Woodland, nearly 350 farmers and ranchers showed up to voice their concerns and get answers. Four of the county's supervisors

were in attendance, as was state Sen. Lois Wolk, Assembly Members Jim Nielsen and Mariko Yamada, and the county assessors for both Yolo and Glenn.

One of those on the panel at the Woodland meeting was Matt Rexroad, a Yolo County supervisor. He explained that the county decided to send the letters to Williamson Act participants so they would gain a better understanding of the issue.

"Hopefully those in attendance walked away with a better understanding of the situation," he said. "All we did was signal our intent to non-renew. We didn't actually pull the trigger. People were saying, 'Well, you can't pull the trigger,' but yes we can, actually. There is a very real possibility that we may non-renew."

John Gamper, California Farm Bureau taxation and land use director, stressed that Yolo County isn't alone in feeling the repercussions of the funding cut.

"Even though the counties are willing to hold the line this year, it is very clear from the discussion that I've heard at various boards of supervisors meetings around the state that the Williamson Act is hanging in the balance with respect to its ongoing viability," Gamper said. "The county supervisors are taking the governor at his word that this is a one-year suspension and that the funding will be restored in the 2010-2011 state budget."

Rexroad said it has become necessary to cut other county programs to cover the Williamson Act this year. He noted that while the program is mandated by the state, the actual contracts are between the individual landowners and the counties. While the counties are obligated for 10 years under the terms of the contracts, state funding is determined only one year at a time.

"There are lots of people who think the Williamson Act just benefits big farming operations, multi-million-dollar companies. I represent a ton of people who are family farmers, who work very, very hard and who don't make much more than people who work in offices all day. And they are just busting their hump out there getting it done. They are directly impacted by this," he said.

One of those family farmers is Casey Stone, who along with his father, Henry, and brother, Scott, run a 500-cow beef operation in Yolo County. Their ranch has been under a Williamson Act contract since they purchased it in 1976.

"I've done the math based on the calculator and spreadsheet that the county has placed on its Web site to show how the Williamson Act, if it's not renewed, would impact us," Stone said. "It will result in about a 38 percent increase in our property taxes. You figure that for a ranch of this size, which has a carrying capacity of roughly 500 cows, that adds up to about \$8 to \$10 per cow that we have to generate just to pay that increase in property taxes."

But it's not just about the money, Stone emphasized.

"On our ranch we have taken a lot of steps over the years to do environmental restoration to improve the uplands watershed," he said. "Our burden is to try to make this financially compatible for our children to be able to continue the ranch. Programs like the Williamson Act have made that possible over the years and certainly eased the burden for producers. Ultimately on this thing, not only the landowner but the tenants are going to have to pay the price."

Gamper, who also participated in last week's meeting in Woodland, said it was pretty obvious to everyone in attendance that there is a great deal of apprehension on the part of landowners as to what the future may hold for their contracts.

"This has been a stable program for decades and now to think that they could lose the entire land conservation program for an amount that is so minuscule in a budget of the magnitude of \$80 billion to \$100 billion. The state share of Williamson Act funding is \$28.8 million, which is less than three hundredths of 1 percent of the state budget," he said.

Rexroad said he is not overly confident that the Legislature will restore the funding next year.

"Unfortunately, we elect people to the Legislature based on the number of people they represent who tend to live in large cities, and dirt clods don't get to vote. If dirt clods got to vote the state Legislature would be a lot different and I might be a little more confident," he said. "But I don't have a lot of confidence in these people understanding how important the Williamson Act is to California. They are looking in their largely suburban and urban areas and for them, the best way to make more food available is to build more grocery stores."

(Steve Adler is associate editor of Ag Alert. He may be contacted at sadler@cfbf.com.)

Permission for use is granted, however, credit must be made to the California Farm Bureau Federation when reprinting this item.