

Groups advocate to restore Williamson Act

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By Steve Adler, *California Farm Bureau Federation*

Amador County winegrape grower Jim Spinetta says farmers and ranchers cannot afford to lose the Williamson Act. He notes that an estimated one-third of California farms wouldn't survive without the program.

Following a flurry of activity at the state Capitol last week, supporters of the Williamson Act farmland conservation program say they have renewed optimism that the state's financial support of the program will be restored this summer.

On April 28, the Save the Williamson Act Coalition held numerous meetings with legislative leaders, budget committee and subcommittee chairs, and other key legislators in both the Democratic and Republican caucuses of both the Senate and Assembly. The visits were the direct result of a Williamson Act Summit in Fresno in March that was hosted by the California State Association of Counties.

On the following day, the Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Subcommittee with jurisdiction over the county subvention program held a hearing on the matter. Nearly a dozen members of the Williamson Act coalition testified in support of the program.

"As always, there was strong bipartisan support for the Williamson Act subvention program," said John Gamper, California Farm Bureau Federation land use and taxation director, who participated in the discussions. "Despite the state budget crisis that continues to tighten its grip on the Capitol, there were very positive indications that the Legislature still supports the program."

The Williamson Act coalition is comprised of a diverse group of about 100 organizations and individuals, including CFBF, the California Cattlemen's Association, California State Association of Counties, Regional Council of Rural Counties, Sierra Club California, Audubon California and Nature Conservancy.

In addition to their legislative visits last week, the coalition has also had encouraging talks with key members of Gov. Schwarzenegger's staff, Gamper said.

"Although no commitments were made relative to including the funding in the governor's May revision of his proposed January budget, budget negotiations will get serious after the release of the so-called 'May Revise' on May 14," he said.

At the Senate budget subcommittee hearing, Sen. Tom Harman, R-Costa Mesa, proposed that a funding allocation for Williamson Act subventions be made anywhere in the range of \$28.7 million to \$40 million. This proposal will be considered at a subsequent hearing.

More than 16.5 million acres of California farmland, including the Charles Spinetta Vineyard and Winery in Amador County, is enrolled in the Williamson Act.

Subcommittee chairman Mark DeSaulnier, D-Martinez, suggested that Williamson Act funding be held open and that it be brought back later with the intent of getting the item to the budget conference committee.

The act, which was created nearly 45 years ago, protects more than 16.5 million acres of farmland. Farmers who enroll in the Williamson Act enter into 10-year or 20-year contracts with the county, by which they promise to keep the land in agriculture rather than opting for some other land use, such as commercial or residential development. In exchange, the land is taxed based on its agricultural income, its acquisition value under Proposition 13 or its current market value, whichever is lower. The contracts automatically renew each Jan. 1, unless counties vote not to renew them.

While the individual Williamson Act contracts are made between counties and landowners, the state has provided funds to help counties offset the reduced property tax revenues. That state "subvention" funding was cut to \$1,000 from a proposed \$27.8 million by the governor when he signed the state's 2009-10 budget. Talks currently revolve around restoring those funds for the next fiscal year beginning on July 1.

Jim Spinetta, an Amador County winegrape grower and member of the CFBF board of directors, was among the coalition members who visited with legislators and their staffs last week. Following the sessions, Spinetta said he was encouraged by the support expressed by the legislators with whom he met.

"Right now, the counties aren't receiving subventions from the state of California and the counties said they picked up the deficit this year but they cannot do it next year. There is only so long that they can carry that financial burden. On the other hand, farmers and ranchers cannot afford to lose the Williamson Act," Spinetta said, noting that one-third of California farms wouldn't survive without the program.

Spinetta said the coalition was effective in delivering a powerful message because of the diversity of the groups involved.

"Here you have Farm Bureau right next to the Nature Conservancy and Sierra Club. Everyone has different goals and ideas, but we've come together as one collective group," he said. "Just walking into the room, having this diverse representation that has the same common goal, the same target in front of you, that's what really sent the message."

Michael Endicott, the Sierra Club California participant in the coalition, said the Williamson Act plays an important role by preserving wildlife habitat and other ecological benefits, and helping landowners to resist development pressures. He said that if the subvention funds aren't restored, it could send the wrong message about where the state stands regarding sustainability.

"Even if this program's structure is in place, if there is no funding and people start taking their land out of the Williamson Act, then you begin a death spiral. And we want to avoid that," he said. "Also, we believe that this helps keep farms within families, which can be an important part of the community and the overall culture. Agriculture is definitely a part of California and California's culture."

Urban development has emerged as one of the biggest threats not only to wildlife but to preserving California's outdoor heritage, said another coalition member, Mark Hennelly of the California Outdoor Heritage Alliance.

"Our alliance supports the Williamson Act subvention funding because it helps landowners maintain their financial solvency and thus their ability to keep property as open space—much of which provides valuable habitat to game species and other wildlife. Many private hunting club lands are also enrolled

under the act, which helps ensure that they can continue to operate without interference from incompatible uses," Hennelly said.

County supervisors Steve Worthley of Tulare and Kim Dolbow-Vann of Colusa also participated in the meetings. As supervisors, they have had to wrestle with finding ways to absorb the loss of subvention funds, a task whose difficulty has been compounded by the worldwide economic downturn and subsequent reduction of revenue from all sources, they said.

"The Williamson Act subvention payments are 12.5 percent of our property tax revenue, so it is a huge economic impact for our county," Dolbow-Vann said. "Williamson Act payments go into our general fund to finance services like our law enforcement, our public works department and our planning department. So these are funds that we need for our county to be able to function."

Worthley pointed out that Williamson Act contracts are very important tools to preserve farmland and open space, with 52 of the state's 58 counties participating in the program. If the program is terminated, the entire Williamson Act infrastructure would be lost, he said.

"Once these contracts are gone, they are gone," he said. "If they don't fund these subventions, they are going to lose contracts and they are going to lose the ability to maintain what has been one of the most successful conservation projects in the state. And when you look at what they get for the money, it is tremendous. You would be hard pressed to find a government program that is more successful."

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

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