

Conservation Easements in California

The law defining what constitutes a conservation easement in California is within the State's Civil Code, beginning with Section 815. *Fundamentally it is the voluntary conveyance of these easements, their perpetual nature, and how they are held and protected that make conservation easements a unique public-private conservation method.*

The California Farmland Conservancy Program¹ funds agricultural conservation easements which honor this statute.

The complete text of Civil Code Section 815 is below.

815. The Legislature finds and declares that the preservation of land in its natural, scenic, agricultural, historical, forested, or open-space condition is among the most important environmental assets of California. The Legislature further finds and declares it to be the public policy and in the public interest of this state to encourage the voluntary conveyance of conservation easements to qualified nonprofit organizations.

815.1. For the purposes of this chapter, "conservation easement" means any limitation in a deed, will, or other instrument in the form of an easement, restriction, covenant, or condition, which is or has been executed by or on behalf of the owner of the land subject to such easement and is binding upon successive owners of such land, and the purpose of which is to retain land predominantly in its natural, scenic, historical, agricultural, forested, or open-space condition.

815.2. (a) A conservation easement is an interest in real property voluntarily created and freely transferable in whole or in part for the purposes stated in Section 815.1 by any lawful method for the transfer of interests in real property in this state.

(b) A conservation easement shall be perpetual in duration.

(c) A conservation easement shall not be deemed personal in nature and shall constitute an interest in real property notwithstanding the fact that it may be negative in character.

(d) The particular characteristics of a conservation easement shall be those granted or specified in the instrument creating or transferring the easement.

815.3. Only the following entities or organizations may acquire and hold conservation easements:

(a) A tax-exempt nonprofit organization qualified under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and qualified to do business in this state which has as its primary purpose the preservation, protection, or enhancement of land in its natural, scenic, historical, agricultural, forested, or open-space condition or use.

¹ CFCP is governed under California Public Resources Code Sections 10200-10277.

(b) The state or any city, county, city and county, district, or other state or local governmental entity, if otherwise authorized to acquire and hold title to real property and if the conservation easement is voluntarily conveyed. No local governmental entity may condition the issuance of an entitlement for use on the applicant's granting of a conservation easement pursuant to this chapter.

(c) A federally recognized California Native American tribe or a nonfederally recognized California Native American tribe that is on the contact list maintained by the Native American Heritage Commission to protect a California Native American prehistoric, archaeological, cultural, spiritual, or ceremonial place, if the conservation easement is voluntarily conveyed.

815.4. All interests not transferred and conveyed by the instrument creating the easement shall remain in the grantor of the easement, including the right to engage in all uses of the land not affected by the easement nor prohibited by the easement or by law.

815.5. Instruments creating, assigning, or otherwise transferring conservation easements shall be recorded in the office of the county recorder of the county where the land is situated, in whole or in part, and such instruments shall be subject in all respects to the recording laws.

815.7. (a) No conservation easement shall be unenforceable by reason of lack of privity of contract or lack of benefit to particular land or because not expressed in the instrument creating it as running with the land.

(b) Actual or threatened injury to or impairment of a conservation easement or actual or threatened violation of its terms may be prohibited or restrained, or the interest intended for protection by such easement may be enforced, by injunctive relief granted by any court of competent jurisdiction in a proceeding initiated by the grantor or by the owner of the easement.

(c) In addition to the remedy of injunctive relief, the holder of a conservation easement shall be entitled to recover money damages for any injury to such easement or to the interest being protected thereby or for the violation of the terms of such easement. In assessing such damages there may be taken into account, in addition to the cost of restoration and other usual rules of the law of damages, the loss of scenic, aesthetic, or environmental value to the real property subject to the easement.

(d) The court may award to the prevailing party in any action authorized by this section the costs of litigation, including reasonable attorney's fees.

815.9. Nothing in this chapter shall be construed to impair or conflict with the operation of any law or statute conferring upon any political subdivision the right or power to hold interests in land comparable to conservation easements, including, but not limited to, Chapter 12 (commencing with Section 6950) of Division 7 of Title 1 of, Chapter 6.5 (commencing with Section 51050), Chapter 6.6 (commencing with Section 51070) and Chapter 7 (commencing with Section 51200) of Part 1 of Division 1 of Title 5 of, and

Article 10.5 (commencing with Section 65560) of Chapter 3 of Title 7 of, the Government Code, and Article 1.5 (commencing with Section 421) of Chapter 3 of Part 2 of Division 1 of the Revenue and Taxation Code.

815.10. A conservation easement granted pursuant to this chapter constitutes an enforceable restriction, for purposes of Section 402.1 of the Revenue and Taxation Code.

816. The provisions of this chapter shall be liberally construed in order to effectuate the policy and purpose of Section 815.

All California statutes may be found at the state legislative web site:

<http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes.xhtml>