

The Williamson Act



What is the Williamson Act (WA)?

The WA is a land conservation program. Private landowners sign contracts with counties, promising to keep their land in agricultural use for set periods of time. In exchange, they receive a significant reduction in property taxes. The state subsidizes individual counties, paying them for some of the property tax base they lose by having landowners enrolled in the program. The WA protects more than 10 million acres in CA classified as “non-prime” land. This “non-prime” land is predominantly used for cattle grazing.

CA Budget Crisis and the WA

The state’s WA subsidy payments to counties were cut from the state budget in 2008 and 2009. In October of 2010, Assembly Bill 2530 was signed into law, allowing counties to voluntarily implement new contracts that are 10% shorter in return for a 10% reduction in the landowner’s property tax relief. AB 2530 is a tool to help counties recoup property tax revenue and allow them to stay in the WA; but it does not ensure the continuation of the WA beyond 2015.

This study

To understand rancher responses to the loss of the WA, researchers at UC Davis surveyed 700 members of the California Cattlemen’s Association.

What would happen to ranchers and the environment... if the WA were permanently eliminated across the state?

23% of ranchers said they were likely or very likely to end their entire ranching enterprise if they lost the WA.

“If we lose the Williamson Act, it would be devastating to our ranching operation.”

“The continuation of the Williamson Act is extremely important to us and our family - and also is important to the economy of California.”

~Statements by anonymous CA ranchers

Ranching is a vulnerable low-profit industry

•Surveyed ranching operations reported that in 2009:

38%
lost
money

19%
broke
even

42%
made a
profit

•Of the ranches that made profit in 2009, 70% made less than \$10,000.

•72% of ranchers considered the WA to be “extremely important” to their operation.

California ranching without

The Williamson Act



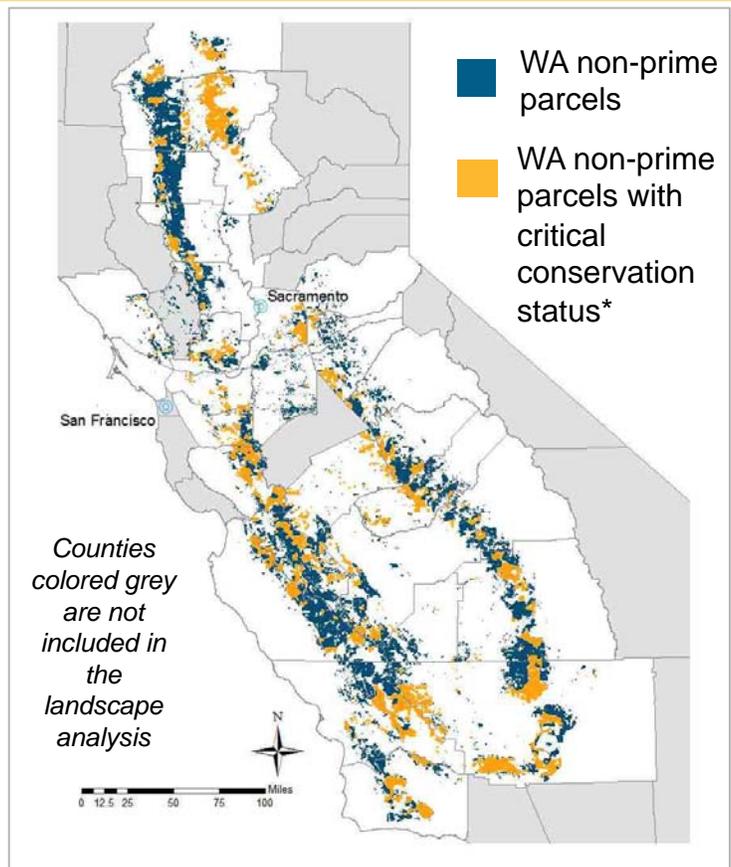
43% of WA non-prime parcels are designated as critical for statewide conservation goals*.

California rangelands encompass unique and beautiful ecosystems that include many threatened and endangered species. Maintaining these privately owned lands as working rangeland and preventing them from being developed further are important steps in preserving our healthy watersheds, our state's biodiversity and our rural heritage.

The loss of WA funding at the state level would put critical habitat across California at risk for development.

- 42% of surveyed ranchers said they would sell some or all of their rangeland without the support from the WA.
- 56% of ranchers predict their sold land will be developed for non-agricultural uses.
- Rangeland ecosystems, rural economies and California's cultural heritage may suffer significant losses if the WA is abolished.

*Rangeland conservation status was researched and designated by the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition.



(Above) Map of all non-prime WA parcels in the landscape analysis (counties colored white). WA parcels that fell within areas designated as critical for statewide conservation goals* are orange; all other non-prime WA parcels are blue and do not have a critical designation.

This policy brief is intended to convey pertinent data to Californian policymakers.

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