



# BOARD OF SUPERVISORS AGENDA LETTER

**Agenda Number:**

**Clerk of the Board of Supervisors**  
105 E. Anapamu Street, Suite 407  
Santa Barbara, CA 93101  
(805) 568-2240

**Submitted on:**  
**(COB Stamp)**

**Department Name:** Agricultural Commissioner  
Planning & Development  
Clerk-Recorder, Assessor

**Department No.:** 051

**Agenda Date:** June 10, 2025

**Placement:** Departmental Agenda

**Estimated Time:** 20 minutes

**Continued Item:** No

**If Yes, date from:**

**Vote Required:** Majority

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

**FROM:** Department Directors:

Jose Chang, Agricultural Commissioner/Sealer

Lisa Plowman, Planning & Development Director

Joseph Holland, Clerk-Recorder, Assessor and Registrar of Voters

Contact Info: Stephanie Stark, Deputy Agricultural Commissioner &  
Agricultural Preserve Advisory Chair

**SUBJECT:** Williamson Act Overview

## County Counsel Concurrence

As to form: Yes

## Other Concurrence:

As to form: Yes

Departments required to concur: Planning and Development and Clerk-Recorder-Assessor

## Recommended Actions:

That the Board of Supervisors:

- Receive and file the Williamson Act Overview presentation; and
- Find that the proposed action does not constitute a "project" within the meaning of California Environmental Quality Act, pursuant to 14 CCR 15378(b)(5), as it consists of organizational and administrative activities.

## Summary Text:

This item is on the agenda to provide a Williamson Act overview presentation to the Board of Supervisors. The presentation responds to the Board's request during October 15, 2024, hearing, when Planning and Development staff brought forward six County initiated Notice of Non-renewal for lands enrolled in the program. At that time, the Board asked for more information to better

understand the purpose, history, and implementation of the program and directed staff to return with a presentation about the Williamson Act and the County's Agricultural Preserve program. As administrators of the County's Agricultural Preserve program, members of the Agricultural Preserve Advisory Committee will present the overview to the Board and answer any questions. The Committee consists of five members, including representatives from the County Agricultural Commissioner's Office/Weights & Measures, County Planning and Development Department, County Clerk-Recorder-Assessor, County Public Works/Surveyor's Office, and the University of California Cooperative Extension.

#### **Discussion:**

The presentation will provide an overview of the Williamson Act, Uniform Rules requirements, how Williamson Act land is taxed, program compliance and program enforcement.

#### **Background:**

The California Land Conservation Act of 1965, a.k.a. "Williamson Act", was enacted when California's agricultural and open space lands began to face dramatically increasing conversion pressures from population growth, new commercial enterprises, and rising property taxes. Valuable farmland began disappearing at an alarming rate as conversion to urban uses became the only financially viable alternative for many landowners. In 1965, an interim committee of the California Assembly generated Assembly Bill 2117 (authored by John Williamson) proposed using contracts between landowners and local governments to voluntarily restrict development on parcels for a minimum of ten years in exchange for lower tax assessments. In 1967, Santa Barbara County joined when only six counties and 200,000 acres were enrolled under contract.

With support from agricultural interests, the Williamson Act was further strengthened through an amendment to the California Constitution, Article 28 (now part of Article 13). Article 13 declares the interest of the state in preserving open space lands and provides a constitutional basis for allowing preferential tax assessments for recreational, scenic, and natural resource areas, as well as areas devoted to the production of food and fiber.

In 1971, the Open Space Subvention Act created a formula to allocate payments to local governments based on acreage enrolled in the program. These funds were intended to offset the cost of property tax losses and payments to counties ended in 2010.

In 1978, the passage of Proposition 13 changed tax assessment practices and many assumed this would severely limit the effectiveness of the Williamson Act and enrollment would plunge. However, a study found that Proposition 13 had a negligible effect on participation in the Williamson Act program and the program remained stable and is an effective tool for protecting agriculture and open space from premature urban development. More than 16 million of California's 31.4 million acres of farm and ranch land have participated in the program. Of California's 58 counties, 52 have executed contracts with landowners. Non-participating counties include Alpine, Imperial, Inyo, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Yuba<sup>1</sup>.

The Williamson Act requires that each participating local government have a set of uniform rules for administering Williamson Act and Farmland Security Zone contracts within its jurisdiction. The *Santa Barbara County Uniform Rules for Agricultural Preserves and Farmland Security Zones* (Uniform Rules) are the set of rules by which the County administers its Agricultural Preserve Program. The Williamson Act establishes certain minimum requirements and encourages participating local

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Conservation, [Williamson Act Program Overview](#)

governments to establish additional requirements (which may be stricter than the Act but not more lenient) to tailor the program to better reflect local characteristics and objectives.

Land enrolled in the Agricultural Preserve Program is to be used principally for commercial agricultural production, with the exception of land enrolled for open space or recreational purposes. However, the Board has recognized it may be appropriate to allow secondary uses on contracted land that are either incidental to or supportive of the agricultural operation on the property. The Uniform Rules provide guidance and criteria for evaluating specific land uses and activities that the Board has determined must be met for the use or activity to be considered compatible with agriculture and consistent with the Williamson Act.

Both the County's Uniform Rules and the Government Code provide that agricultural preserve contracts secure an enforceable restriction on real property to further the public interest of preserving agricultural use in exchange for reduced property tax assessments to the landowner. Today, approximately 505,155 acres, 67% of agriculturally zoned land in the unincorporated portions of the County (excluding federal lands, state lands, and the Channel Islands), are enrolled in the Williamson Act. This includes 2,093 Assessor's Parcel Numbers and 1,281 individual contracts.

**Fiscal and Facilities Impacts:**

None

**Special Instructions:**

None

**Attachments:**

Attachment A – Williamson Act Overview Presentation

**Contact Information:**

Stephanie Stark

Deputy Agricultural Commissioner and Agricultural Preserve Advisory Chair

sstark@countyofsb.org