

System Indicators

Agricultural Lands and Ranches



**Preserving Working Landscapes
in the Sierra (2011)**

December 2013

Preserving Working Landscapes in the Sierra

Working landscapes are one of the most common land uses on private land in the Sierra, particularly in the foothills of the western Sierra and the valleys of the eastern Sierra. Farms and ranches contribute to the overall economic wellbeing and preserve the culture and aesthetic of the Region. They provide and protect habitats for a number of native species and impart valuable ecosystem services to the State.

Ranches are generally larger than farms and preserve a diversity of native landscapes. The ranches in the Sierra provide enormous ecosystem services beyond the calculated agricultural production reported. These working landscapes assist in preserving oak woodlands, store carbon, cycle nutrients, capture runoff, and provide habitat for many sensitive species. Ranches are of critical importance to the conservation of many habitats and the species dependent upon them in the foothills. Wetzal et al. 2012 found that 72 percent of the Williamson Act contracts in rangeland in California are critical for conservation, and the majority of these lands occur in the foothills that surround the San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys. Farms produce food and also provide critically important habitats such as ephemeral wetlands and streams for a number of rare, threatened and endangered species.

While many programs assist in the preservation of working landscapes (see Appendix D: Programs that Aid in the Preservation of Working Landscapes), working landscapes face significant threats. The Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) within the Department of Conservation monitors changes in agriculture and rangeland in counties in California where working landscapes make up a significant proportion of private lands. Chart 13 in Appendix D shows the conversion of farms and ranches to other land uses between 2002 and 2008 for the counties the FMMP monitors in the Region⁹.

Kern and Fresno counties experienced the largest change in acreage converted to other land uses during this time. However, Placer and El Dorado Counties had the greatest percent change in conversion. Mariposa and Sierra Counties are the only counties fully within the Region that are monitored by the FMMP and these counties uniformly experienced very little land use conversion from working landscapes (primarily ranches) since 2002. In contrast, Fresno, Tulare, and Kern Counties had more conversion of farms to other land uses than ranches to other land uses.

The largest working landscape conservation program in the Sierra and the State is the Land Conservation Act of 1965 or the Williamson Act, which allows local governments in California to enter into contracts with private landowners who agree to keep land in agricultural and related open space uses in return for a reduced property tax assessment. The State provided local governments with an annual subvention for the lost property tax revenues until Fiscal Year 2008/2009 when revenue shortfalls resulted in the program being reduced to \$1,000 per year, statewide.

Since California reduced the subvention funding to local governments for the Williamson Act, the Williamson Act has been continued by participating counties through Assembly Bill 1265 (2011). This law allows local governments to continue Williamson Act contracts while being able to collect some of the foregone tax revenues¹⁰. This law went into effect in 2011 and thus far all the SNC counties that

⁹ The first year the mapping program had a standardized system to consistently record change within and across the counties was in 2002; therefore, the 2002 to 2008 time period was used to evaluate the conversion of working landscapes to other land uses.

¹⁰ Counties may reduce contract periods by 10 percent and increase assessed value by 10 percent or the difference between Proposition 13 and the Williamson Act assessed land values.

operated Williamson Act programs have continued accepting new contracts with the exception of Modoc and Plumas Counties¹¹. It is unclear if Sierra counties will be able to renew their existing contracts once the contract periods end. If the counties who operate Williamson Act programs are unable to maintain their programs, some research indicates that ranchers who have low household income and are wholly dependent upon their farm operation for their income will likely feel compelled to sell their ranches. Researchers (Wetzel, Lacher, Swezey, Moffitt, & Manning, 2012) surveyed ranch owners regarding how the loss of the Williamson Act would affect whether they could continue to own and operate their ranches. The researchers concluded that 71 percent of ranchers who completed the survey had annual profits less than or equal to their Williamson Act tax savings in 2009. If the Williamson Act program were eliminated in their county, 37 percent of the ranchers who responded to the survey would attempt to sell some or all of their land.

Table 3 shows the acreage of Williamson Act contracts in participating counties within the Region and provides the change in prime (lands in crop production) and non-prime (lands in native pasture/rangeland) contracts between 2006 and 2011. In 2011, there were 994,201 acres or approximately 70 percent of the working landscapes in counties fully within the Region in Williamson Act contracts. In the counties partially within the Region, there were 5,972,286 acres or about 71 percent of the working landscapes in Williamson Act contracts.

Table 3. Williamson Act Program in the SNC, 2011 Department of Conservation

County	Total Williamson Act Acreage 2011	Change in Prime Acres, 2006-2011	Percent Change in Prime Acres	Change in Non-Prime Acres, 2006-2011	Percent Change in Non-Prime, 2006-2011	Program
Modoc	127,629	17,764 acres may not be renewed		109,865 acres may not be renewed		New Contracts Not Accepted
Lassen	315,031	472	3%	428,978	4%	Active
Shasta	187,179	6,846	41%	3,222	2%	Active
Butte	220,175	4,276	4%	155	<1%	Active
Plumas	78,400	5,576 acres may not be renewed		72,824 acres may not be renewed		New Contracts Not Accepted
Sierra	34,818	-1	<1%	-1,725	-5%	Active
Tehama	789,341	2,191	4%			Active

¹¹ Inyo and Yuba Counties do not participate in the Williamson Act program.

El Dorado	34,021	168	8%	451,228	-2%	Active
Nevada	4,237	18	1%	403	11%	Active
Placer	41,822	716	5%	26,559	-9%	Active
Yuba	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No program
Amador	92,777	266	5%	-2,369	<-1%	Active
Calaveras	144,018	-116	-20%	26,293	22%	Active
Mariposa	207,321	No acres reported	No change	-96,824	1%	Active
Tuolumne	121836 (2012 data)	2,221	2%; however 15,719 in non-renewal	736	1%	Active
Alpine	0	-	0%	-		Active-yet no existing contracts
Inyo	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No Program
Mono	13,110	No change	No change	No non- prime acres enrolled		Active
Fresno	1,465,277	-14,505	-1%	-14,971	<-1%	Active
Kern	1,540,204	-6,673	-1%	-70,908	<-1%	Active
Madera	476,070	-3,902	-2%	-95,043	-1%	Active
Tulare	1,086,331	-655	<0%	367	<1%	Active

Several counties in the Sierra are currently discussing whether they can afford to continue to operate Williamson Act Programs. If additional counties are unable to continue accepting new contracts or renew existing contracts, the Sierra could experience conversion of its working landscapes to other land uses, particularly ranches as they are the dominant working landscape and occupy large areas of private land.

In addition to the loss of State subvention support, Senate Bill 618 authorizes property owners in Williamson Act contracts, under specific circumstances, to rescind their contract and simultaneously enter into a Solar-Use Easement. This contract would require that the solar photovoltaic facilities are used on the property for a term no less than 20 years. The program is not yet in operation, the Department of Conservation is reviewing comments received and will be implementing the program soon. It is unclear how agriculture and rangeland contracts in the Sierra would be affected by this program.

The preservation and restoration of working landscapes is largely dependent upon the economic health of individual property owners. Without programs such as the Williamson Act and other preservation and restoration initiatives, many landowners cannot afford to maintain and sustain their working landscapes in the Sierra.