CONCURRENCE IN SENATE AMENDMENTS
AB 1156 (Wicks)
As Amended August 27, 2026
Majority vote

SUMMARY

Allows additional Williamson Act cancellations that facilitate the development of a solar facility located within a critically-overdrafted basin or subbasin to qualify for reduced or eliminated cancellation fees provided those cancellations include a community-benefits agreement.

Senate Amendments
Revise and recast the bill to do the following:

1) Allow additional Williamson Act cancellations that facilitate the development of a solar facility for the purpose of collecting, storing, and distributing solar energy for electricity generation that is located within a critically-overdrafted basin or subbasin to qualify for reduced or eliminated cancellation fees.

2) Require, to qualify for reduced or eliminated cancellations, the landowner to enter into a community benefits agreement with the local government where the facility will be located that meets all the following requirements:

    a) Benefits community organizations, local agencies, tribal governments, or other groups that represent community interest and may include topics such as workforce development, job quality, and job access provisions and funding.

    b) The community benefits provided supplement, not supplant, resources that other laws require the developer to provide.

    c) The community benefits provided begin no later than the start of construction of the solar facilities.

    d) The developer must engage in meaningful outreach and engagement, including mailing notice to landowners, noticing the proposed community benefits in a newspaper, and conducting a public meeting on the proposed community benefits in the jurisdiction.

3) Provide that the community benefits agreement does not limit the authority or remedies a city or county has under other laws to require the developer to provide community benefits.

4) Shift responsibility for extinguishing Williamson Act contracts with a reduced or eliminated cancellation fee from the city or county to the Secretary of Natural Resources (Secretary), and require the landowner to apply to the Secretary for the reduced or eliminated fee.

5) Require, until January 1, 2037, the Secretary to approve a completed application for extending cancellation payments for solar use contracts when the landowner includes specified information demonstrating that the local government has approved the cancellation and that the land is located in a critically-overdrafted basin. The Secretary must extend the payment time for 10 years. If, before the extended time, the landowner attests and provides

proof that they have constructed a solar facility on the property, the Secretary must waive the payment of the cancellation fee.

6) Allow the cancellation of Williamson Act contracts on land in critically-overdrafted basins for solar use projects that qualify as Environmental Leadership Development Projects (ELDPs) if they enter into a community benefits agreement as described above.

7) Provide that, if after the approval of a certified solar ELDP where the Williamson Act contract was cancelled, the project owner determines that it will not actually locate a solar project on the land, it must notify the local jurisdiction and have the land reenrolled in a new Williamson Act contract, or an enforceable deed restriction, with terms at least as restrictive as existing Williamson Act contracts. The local agency must determine the duration of the restriction by subtracting the length of time the land was approved for solar project development from the years remaining on the original contract at acquisition. The measure also provides that the owner can seek reenrollment after the end of the useful life of the solar project.

COMMENTS

1) *Clean Energy Goals.* Existing state law requires the state to achieve net zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and a reduction of statewide anthropogenic GHGs to at least 85% below 1990 levels by 2045. This parallels the state's goals for 100% new zero-emission vehicle sales by 2035 and 100% clean electricity by 2045. Experts indicate these goals will require a significant buildout of clean energy infrastructure.

2) *Williamson Act***.** The WA is an agricultural land conservation program. Administered by the DOC, the WA allows a private property owner to sign a voluntary contract with their local government that restrict the land subject to the contract to agriculture, open space and compatible uses for the next 10 years. In return, the county assessor values the contracted land as agricultural use, instead of its fair market value. The contract renews automatically each year, so the contract is always for a 10-year period. The landowner may cancel the WA contract at any time, provided local officials make findings the cancellation is in the public interest and that cancellation is consistent with the purposes of the WA. Such a landowner must pay a cancellation fee that is equal to 12.5% of the "cancellation valuation" of the property. In 1998, the Legislature created the option of instead establishing a Farmland Security Zone (FSZ), which offers landowners a greater property tax reduction for a minimum 20-year contract.

   Rescission occurs when a county cancels a WA contract, but the landowner simultaneously puts an agricultural conservation easement or open space easement on other land of equal or greater value.

3) *Solar Use Easements*. SB 618 (Wolk), Chapter 596, Statutes of 2011 (SB 618), authorized an alternative to the then-existing avenues for exiting a WA or FSZ contract, in response to the state's renewable energy goals and a desire for alternative uses for marginally productive or physically impaired agricultural land. Under SB 618, a property owner and a county or city may mutually agree to rescind the WA or FSZ contract on marginally productive or physically impaired land and enter into a SUE that restricts the use of land to photovoltaic solar facilities. Such a rescission requires a payment of a rescission fee of 10% of the fair

market value of the land, half of which goes to the county and half of which goes to the state General Fund.

The DOC, in consultation with the Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) must review and approve all solar-use easements. Under SB 618, to be eligible, a parcel must not located on lands designated as prime farmland, unique farmland, or farmland of statewide importance. The land must also consist predominantly of soils with significantly reduced agricultural productivity, or have severely adverse soil conditions that are detrimental to continued agricultural activities and production.

4) *Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA).* SGMA requires local agencies to form GSAs for high- and medium-priority water basins. GSAs must develop and implement groundwater sustainability plans to avoid undesirable results and mitigate water overdraft within 20 years. The requirements of SGMA have strained the viability of large sections of agricultural land. Compliance with SGMA necessitates that some agricultural land come out of production to achieve groundwater sustainability.

5) *SB 618 - Limited Use.* SB 618 recognized the opportunity for solar development on constrained agricultural land, authorized local governments and landowners to transition existing WA and FSZ contracts while simultaneously entering solar-use easements. Though this authority sunset in 2020, it was revived in 2022. According to the DOC, solar-use easements were not widely pursued during the nine years before the authority lapsed in 2020, and it is unclear if any easements have been granted since the law was reauthorized.

According to the Author
"California must reckon with an uncomfortable truth: we face a significant lack of access to water across many rural counties, with up to one million acres of farmland possibly being fallowed. AB 1156 provides a voluntary, locally driven option to communities and farmers that are wrestling with this stark reality, accelerating solar energy deployment on farms currently under the Williamson Act in critically overdrafted basins. The legislation balances our state's renewable energy and food production needs while prioritizing the repurposing of agricultural lands that don't have adequate have access to groundwater.

"As amended, AB 1156 reduces barriers associated with exiting Williamson Act contracts, helping to overcome a cumbersome and lengthy cancellation process and prohibitively high cancellation fees. The bill provides two pathways to address these challenges. The first path permits Solar Environmental Leadership Development Projects in critically overdrafted basins with a streamlined exit from a Williamson Act contract or Farmland Security Zone contract, if they have entered into a qualifying community benefits agreement. The second path extends the authority of the Secretary of Natural Resources to waive Williamson Act cancellation fees for solar projects in critically overdrafted basins or subbasins, if those projects have entered into a qualifying community benefits agreement.

"AB 1156 will not be the Williamson Act's undoing. It will provide private landowners and local governments in water-constrained regions of the state, with a choice—entirely voluntary—to adapt to a harsh economic reality: either let land sit fallow because it's not agriculturally viable or generate clean energy and revenue for landowners and local governments. California's nexus between clean energy goals, water sustainability, and land scarcity present a rare opportunity to craft a policy that achieves multiple statewide goals. AB 1156 can help fulfill the promise of a carbon free future and mitigate the worst impacts of climate change on our communities and economy."

Arguments in Support
A coalition of supporters state, "As SGMA implementation requires reductions in groundwater use, some agricultural land will inevitably need to be fallowed. California should provide appropriate pathways to keep suitable land in productive use where continued agricultural production is no longer sustainable. AB 1156 provides a voluntary and carefully limited mechanism for transitioning qualifying Williamson Act land to solar energy development.

"AB 1156 addresses this challenge by streamlining the cancellation of Williamson Act contracts and eliminating cancellation fees for a narrowly defined category of qualifying lands. Importantly, the recent amendments significantly narrow the scope of the bill by limiting eligibility to projects located in critically overdrafted groundwater basins. This focuses the bill on those areas facing California's most significant groundwater sustainability challenges and where agricultural land is most likely to face pressure to transition out of irrigated production.

"The recent amendments also maintain key priorities reflected in the previous version of the legislation. In particular, the amended bill would:

1) Preserve local discretion and land-use authority, ensuring that local governments retain their role in determining whether and where individual projects are appropriate;

2) Require a community benefits agreement, helping ensure that communities hosting qualifying projects share in the benefits associated with new clean energy investment; and

3) Further restrict project eligibility to critically overdrafted basins, substantially narrowing the universe of lands and projects that may utilize the streamlined Williamson Act cancellation process.

"This legislation represents a common-sense approach to a problem California must confront. If state policy requires some farmland to be fallowed because there is not enough sustainable groundwater to farm it, state policy should also allow that land to transition efficiently to an appropriate productive use."

Arguments in Opposition
The Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC) write, "RCRC previously supported Assembly Bill 1156 because it struck a delicate balance between preserving agricultural lands and ensuring that truly water constrained land could be temporarily used for solar generation facilities. As a result of the August 27, 2026 amendments, RCRC must now regretfully oppose your measure.

"The Williamson Act is one of the simplest and most effective mechanisms for promoting the long-term conservation of agricultural lands. Under the Act, local governments and property owners can enter into contracts under which the landowner agrees to voluntarily restrict their land to agricultural and compatible uses in exchange for a reduced property tax assessment that is based on actual use rather than potential market value.

"While AB 1156 previously protected prime farmland and ensured that the bill would only apply to truly water-constrained lands, the bill no longer includes those safeguards. Recent amendments strike provisions exempting the bill's application from prime farmland and allow cancellations to move forward on any lands in vast swaths of the state, regardless of the actual availability of water. Under AB 1156, a landowner with access to long-standing and senior water rights could walk away from their Williamson Act contracts on prime farmland simply because it is more profitable to lease those lands to a solar developer.

"While we appreciate that waiver of cancellation payments under Section 2 of the bill is contingent upon the local government's approval of the cancellation, we are concerned that the waiver process outlined in Section 3 lacks that safeguard and uses a new and legally suspect process to deem those contracts entered into with local governments null and void."

FISCAL COMMENTS

Unknown

VOTES:

ASM LOCAL GOVERNMENT: 9-0-1
YES: Carrillo, Ta, Hoover, Pacheco, Ramos, Ransom, Blanca Rubio, Stefani, Ward
ABS, ABST OR NV: Wilson

ASM UTILITIES AND ENERGY: 16-0-2
YES: Petrie-Norris, Boerner, Calderon, Chen, Davies, Mark González, Harabedian, Hart, Kalra, Papan, Rogers, Schiavo, Schultz, Ta, Wallis, Zbur
ABS, ABST OR NV: Patterson, Irwin

ASM AGRICULTURE: 6-1-1
YES: Soria, Alanis, Connolly, Hadwick, Irwin, Ransom
NO: Jeff Gonzalez
ABS, ABST OR NV: Aguiar-Curry

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 11-1-3
YES: Wicks, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Elhawary, Fong, Mark González, Hart, Pacheco, Pellerin, Solache
NO: Tangipa
ABS, ABST OR NV: Sanchez, Dixon, Ta

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 66-5-8
YES: Addis, Ahrens, Alanis, Alvarez, Arambula, Ávila Farías, Bains, Bauer-Kahan, Bennett, Berman, Boerner, Bonta, Bryan, Calderon, Caloza, Carrillo, Chen, Connolly, Davies, Dixon, Elhawary, Flora, Fong, Gabriel, Garcia, Gipson, Mark González, Hadwick, Haney, Harabedian, Hart, Hoover, Irwin, Kalra, Krell, Lee, Lowenthal, McKinnor, Muratsuchi, Nguyen, Ortega, Pacheco, Papan, Patel, Pellerin, Petrie-Norris, Quirk-Silva, Ramos, Celeste Rodriguez, Michelle Rodriguez, Rogers, Blanca Rubio, Sanchez, Schiavo, Schultz, Sharp-Collins, Solache, Soria, Stefani, Ta, Valencia, Wallis, Ward, Wicks, Zbur, Rivas
NO: DeMaio, Ellis, Gallagher, Macedo, Tangipa
ABS, ABST OR NV: Aguiar-Curry, Castillo, Jeff Gonzalez, Jackson, Lackey, Patterson, Ransom, Wilson

SENATE FLOOR: 25-8-7
YES: Allen, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Cervantes, Durazo, Grayson, Laird, Limón, McGuire, McNerney, Menjivar, Padilla, Pérez, Reyes, Richardson, Rubio, Smallwood-Cuevas, Stern, Umberg, Wahab, Weber Pierson, Wiener
NO: Cabaldon, Caballero, Cortese, Dahle, Hurtado, Niello, Strickland, Valladares
ABS, ABST OR NV: Alvarado-Gil, Choi, Gonzalez, Grove, Jones, Ochoa Bogh, Seyarto

UPDATED

VERSION: August 27, 2026

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