
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Anna Caballero, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

AB 524 (Wilson) - Farmland Access and Conservation for Thriving Communities Act

Version: August 18, 2025

Urgency: No

Hearing Date: August 25, 2025

Policy Vote: N.R. & W. 6 - 1, AGRI. 4 - 0

Mandate: No

Consultant: Ashley Ames

Bill Summary: This bill would establish the Farmland Access and Conservation for Thriving Communities Program to provide financial and technical assistance to support land acquisition and protection by providing financial assistance to nonprofit organizations, public agencies, farmer cooperatives, tribal governments and tribal entities, agricultural land trusts, and community land trusts, and providing long-term leases to beginning farmers or ranchers or socially disadvantaged farmers or ranches.

Fiscal Impact:

- The Department of Conservation (DOC) notes that the fiscal impact would be dependent on the amount of funding allocated to the program. Assuming an appropriation of \$20 million in local assistance for the purposes of this bill, DOC estimates ongoing costs of \$5537,267 in the first year and \$500,514 annually thereafter (General Fund, Proposition 4 bond funds, or other special fund) for state operations costs of standing up a new program. DOC notes that it may require additional resources to implement and manage the program.
- The Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI) estimates limited-term costs of approximately \$525,000 per year for two years (General Fund, Proposition 4 bond funds, or other special fund) for staffing, potential outside facilitator costs, and meeting facilitation costs to support the Task Force for the two years it anticipates the work would take to complete.
- Ongoing cost pressures of an unknown but significant amount, likely in the tens of millions of dollars (General Fund, Proposition 4 bond funds, or other special fund) to provide funding for the new program that would be created by this bill.

Background: The DOC's Division of Land Resource Protection (DLRP) serves as the state's leader in conserving California's agricultural lands. DLRP provides information, as well as technical and financial assistance, to partners to protect California's agricultural land and promote sustainable growth. Some of the grant programs administered by DLRP include:

- *Agricultural Land Mitigation Program* which provides funding for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements on farmland within Fresno, Madera, Merced, Kern, Kings, or Tulare counties.
- *California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP)* is a statewide grant program that supports local efforts to establish agricultural conservation easements and land improvement projects for the purpose of preserving important agricultural

land resources and enhancing sustainable agricultural uses. The CFCP was created to:

- Encourage voluntary, long-term private stewardship of agricultural lands.
 - Protect farming and ranching operations in agricultural areas from nonfarm or nonranch land uses that may hinder or curtail such operations.
 - Encourage long-term conservation of productive agricultural lands to protect the agricultural economy of rural communities, as well as that of the state, for future generations of Californians.
 - Encourage local land use planning for orderly and efficient urban growth and conservation of agricultural land.
 - Encourage local land use planning decisions that are consistent with the state's agricultural land conservation policies.
 - Encourage improvements to enhance long-term sustainable agricultural uses.
- *Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program* which supports agricultural land conservation, economic growth, and sustainable development by providing grants for:
 - Land Use Planning grants that support the development of local and regional land use policies and economic development strategies to protect critical agricultural land.
 - Agricultural Conservation Acquisition grants to permanently protect croplands, rangelands, and lands utilized for the cultivation of traditional resources from conservation to non-agricultural uses.
 - Capacity and Project Development grants to expand organizational capacity to develop agricultural conservation acquisition projects.

California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force. In 2022, in order to address the historical challenges facing socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in California, the Legislature authorized the Strategic Growth Council to establish the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force (Task Force). AB 179 (Ting, Chapter 249, Statutes of 2022) requires the Task Force to develop recommendations to equitably increase access to agricultural land for food production and traditional tribal agricultural uses. The Task Force consists of a regionally diverse group of individuals, up to 13 members, including native and tribal liaisons, a land trust representative, individuals with expertise on issues affecting socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, an individual with expertise in agricultural land acquisition and finance, a State Board of Food and Agriculture member, a farmworker representative, a beginning farmer, the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) Farm Equity Advisor, and an individual from the CDFA Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) Producer Advisory Committee. The task force meets quarterly and is required to deliver a full report of recommendations to the Legislature and Governor by January 1, 2026.

The Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (Proposition 4). The Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (SB 867 (Allen, Chapter 83, Statutes of 2024)) (Act) authorized a \$10 billion bond to be placed before the state's voters for approval. The Act became Proposition 4 on the November 5, 2024 statewide ballot and passed with a vote of 9,055,116 to 6,086,414 (59.8% to 40.2%).

Proposition 4, upon appropriation by the Legislature, provides \$3.8 billion for safe drinking water, drought, flood, and water resilience programs; \$1.5 billion for wildfire and forest resilience programs; \$1.2 billion for coastal resilience programs; \$450 million for extreme heat mitigation programs; \$1.2 billion for biodiversity protection and nature-based climate solution programs; \$300 million for climate-smart, sustainable, and resilient farms, ranches, and working lands programs; \$700 million for park creation and outdoor access programs; and \$850 million for clean energy programs.

Of these funds, Proposition 4 allocates \$30 million to the DOC, in consultation with the Task Force, to improve land access and tenure for socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, tribal producers, and beginning farmers and ranchers. Proposition 4 authorizes the DOC to make low-interest loans to qualified entities, which shall include land trusts, nonprofit organizations, public agencies, farmer cooperatives, tribal governments, or tribal entities, for the purpose of acquiring agricultural lands to transfer or provide long-term leases to socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers and beginning farmers and ranchers.

The 2025-26 State budget, as proposed by SB 101 (Wiener) and enrolled on June 13, 2025, does not appear to appropriate any moneys, including Proposition 4 moneys, for the improvement of land access and tenure for socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, tribal producers, and beginning farmers and ranchers.

Proposed Law: This bill would:

1. Enact the Farmland Access and Conservation for Thriving Communities Act (FACT CA).
2. Require DOC, in collaboration with the Task Force, to establish the Farmland Access and Conservation for Thriving Communities Program (Program) in the DOC to provide financial and technical assistance to support agricultural and land acquisition.
3. Require DOC, through the Program, to provide financial assistance to “qualified entities” for the purpose of acquiring agricultural lands to transfer or provide long-term leases to “qualified farmer participants,” as defined.
4. Specify that activities eligible for funding through the Program include, but are not limited to:
 - a. Acquisition planning and development, including support to assist with land identification, determining zoning and land-use restrictions and verifying water rights and access to irrigation, inspecting soil quality, amongst others.

- b. Purchase of fee title to agricultural land.
 - c. Purchase of easements such as conservation easements, reserved interest conservation easements, and cultural access easements.
 - d. Technical assistance, including retaining services of various professionals such as attorneys, real estate brokers, and farmer cooperative management consultants.
 - e. Land improvements that will directly benefit the lands and the individuals managing the land and their commitment to conservation and sustainable land use including, but not limited to, farmer and farmworker housing, on-farm infrastructure improvements, and space for cultural practice.
5. Require DOC, in providing financial assistance pursuant to the Program to:
- a. Prioritize financial assistance for activities that benefit socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers and activities that primarily benefit farms or ranches that are 500 acres or less.
 - b. Prioritize financial assistance to qualified entities who have clearly demonstrated experience working with socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers.
 - c. Prioritize technical and financial assistance to tribal governments and tribal entities to secure agricultural land or reclaim ancestral lands for sustainable food production and stewardship of cultural resources.
 - d. Provide reasonable per diem and resources to members of the Task Force to ensure proper oversight over the development of the Program.
 - e. Ensure that the proceeds of future resale of land continue to be used for purposes of the Program.
 - f. Ensure that no more than 15 percent of financial assistance awarded under the Program is used for the land improvements described above in paragraph 4).
 - g. Allocate at least 33 percent of financial assistance awarded under the Program during each grant cycle to tribal governments and tribal entities.
6. Require a qualified entity that receives a grant under the Program to do either of the following within five years of acquiring agricultural land:
- a. Transfer the agricultural land to a qualified farmer participant, as specified.
 - b. Enter into a long-term lease of the agricultural land with a qualified farmer participant, as specified.
7. Establish the Farmland Access Fund (Fund), to be continuously appropriated to the DOC for Program expenditures. Require the following moneys to be deposited into the Fund:

- a. Moneys that may be appropriated by the Legislature pursuant to Proposition 4, as specified.
 - b. Any gifts, grants, or endowments from private sources or the federal government received by the DOC for purposes of the Program.
 - c. Any moneys collected by DOC as proceeds from repayments of loans issued under the program.
8. Authorize DOC to contract with nonprofit organizations to administer the Program if the DOC:
 - a. Determines that each nonprofit organization that it selects is a qualified entity that has demonstrated substantial experience serving socially disadvantaged farmers or ranches.
 - b. Consults with the Task Force to select each nonprofit organization to administer the Program.
9. Make various findings and declarations regarding various challenges faced by small scale, beginning, and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and tribal communities and the need to support them in accessing land for farming.

Related Legislation:

AB 179 (Ting, Chapter 249, Statutes of 2022): Appropriated \$1 million to the Strategic Growth Council to establish the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force to develop recommendations on how to equitably increase access to agricultural land for food production and traditional tribal agricultural uses. These funds are available for expenditure or encumbrance through June 30, 2025, and for liquidation until June 30, 2027.

AB 1348 (Aguiar-Curry, Chapter 620, Statutes of 2017): Required CDFA to ensure the inclusion of socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (SDFR) in the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of food and agriculture laws, regulations, and policies and programs.

Staff Comments: While this bill does not directly appropriate Proposition 4 moneys, it does identify Proposition 4 moneys as a potential source of funding.

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