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## Calif. bill requires developers to preserve farmland

By [TIM HEARDEN](#)

Capital Press

SACRAMENTO - A group that promotes farmland preservation is backing a bill in the Legislature that would force developers to compensate for their conversions of agricultural land.

Assembly Bill 823 would require builders to match the acres converted from farmland to development with conservation easements that would preserve other plots of land in perpetuity.

The bill would allow no exemptions for solar panels or state development projects, nor does it exempt land that was left fallow because of a lack of water.

"We're thinking about how to deal with that," said David Runsten, policy director for the Community Alliance with Family Farmers, which is promoting the bill. "There's been lots of objections raised about fallow land or degraded land as well as the solar stuff."

"I think everyone would like to see solar on degraded lands, but most of it seems to be going on prime farmland because it's close to transmission lines and power stations," he said. "Since most of the solar is going on good farmland, we didn't feel like we could exempt solar."

The bill by Assemblywoman Susan Talamantes Eggman, D-Stockton, is slated to be heard by the Assembly Natural Resources Committee on April 15.

The California Farm Bureau Federation has not taken a position on the bill but is working with the author to address concerns, spokeswoman Megan Alpers said in an email. For instance, the organization wants to be sure farmland is protected even in cases where some is converted for environmental restoration projects, she said.

The proposal comes as the state Department of Conservation reported last year that the loss of agricultural land in California, particularly prime farmland, happened at a record pace from 2006 to 2008.

Irrigated farmland decreased by 203,011 acres during that period, with the best land representing 49 percent of the decrease, or 98,471 acres, according to the agency. Such losses are typically caused by irrigation shortfalls, although urbanization totaled 72,548 acres.

The state Farm Bureau cited concerns over the loss of farmland when it sued Fresno County in late 2011 for canceling a Williamson Act farmland-conservation contract on 90 acres of prime land to allow a solar plant. A Fresno County Superior Court judge tossed the suit in December.

The Davis, Calif.-based CAFF, which advocates for family farms and sustainable practices, asserts that an average of 30,000 acres of California farmland is permanently converted to non-agricultural uses each year.

Under Eggman's bill, the presiding city or county would be charged with making sure a developer met compensation requirements, which it could do by either putting some of its own land into a conservation easement or contracting with a land trust, Runsten said.

The bill echoes ordinances enacted in some counties and cities, including Davis, which requires that 2 acres be set aside for every acre that's developed.

Asked if a landowner should have the prerogative of developing his own property, Runsten said the societal need to preserve agriculture must trump private property rights.

"We're not trying to stop real estate development, we're just saying you're not going to be able to pave it all over," he said. "There are some costs to doing it. You should have to save some land if you're going to pave it over."

Assembly Bill 823

Proposal: Require developers converting farmland to other uses to preserve an equivalent amount of land through a conservation easement.

Author: Assemblywoman Susan Talamantes Eggman, D-Stockton, <http://asmdc.org/members/a13/>

Proponents include: California Alliance with Family Farmers, <http://caff.org/>

Read the bill: <http://leginfo.ca.gov/>

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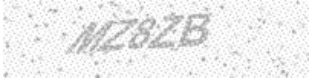
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