

California Climate and Agriculture Network

# Triple Harvest:

Farmland conservation for climate protection, smart growth  
and food security in California

Executive Summary

February 2013



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California's Mediterranean climate enables the year-round production of abundant and diverse crops and livestock and gives the state a significant economic and food security advantage globally. But because of an ongoing failure of public policy and planning, California continues to lose farm and rangeland to development at an alarming rate, imperiling this unique and vital resource.

As California's economy recovers from the most recent recession, traditional development pressures will again threaten California's farmland with conversion to urban sprawl, big-box stores and rural ranchettes. Meanwhile, new infrastructure developments present emerging challenges to farmland conservation. For example, large-scale solar energy projects intended to help the state meet its renewable energy goals and address climate change threaten to take some of California's most significant agricultural lands out of production. High-speed rail and the development that will result from it also put highly productive Central Valley farmland at risk. Finally, the country's boom in oil and natural gas extraction presents a new threat to both agricultural lands and the clean water upon which farming depends.

Old and new pressures to pave over the state's farmland come at a time of uncertainty for farmland conservation in the state. In recent years, the state eliminated funding for our primary farmland conservation program, the Williamson Act. Moreover, Governor Brown's proposed 2013/14 fiscal-year budget cuts funding for farmland conservation easements. And the federal government is not likely to take up the slack, as Congress is expected to cut funding for the farm bill.

Mounting evidence demonstrates the importance of protecting farmland as a method to limit urban sprawl and curb the associated increases in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions related to transportation and energy use. Consequently, just as we are learning the importance of conserving farmland as a response to climate change, we face continued reductions in farmland acreage and limited resources to slow this loss.

This report summarizes the current and emerging threats to California farmland and illustrates the role agricultural land can play in mitigating and adapting to climate change. It goes on to outline the limits of cur-

rent farmland protection policies and programs for preventing urban sprawl, and concludes with a set of policy recommendations for protecting California farmland and the climate in the 21st century.

In sum, the report finds that:

- California farm and rangeland is vital to advancing California's climate protection goals and critical to the state's adaptation to climate change and maintenance of its long-term food security.
- Existing farmland protection policy tools are outdated and underfunded.
- Current policy is failing to protect the very farmland that has the greatest potential to address climate change: lands at the urban edge.
- Farmland protection policies should be strengthened at the boundaries of our cities, where the greatest climate change benefits can occur.

## Key Recommendation:

Farmland conservation policies should be strengthened at the boundaries of our cities where the greatest climate change benefits can occur.

## Policy Recommendations

### 1. Develop farmland mitigation requirements based on cumulative impacts

The Natural Resources secretary in conjunction with the director of the Department of Conservation (DOC) should develop a stakeholder group of land trusts, agricultural interests and academic experts to recommend to the secretary and the director how to design a farmland mitigation program for large infrastructure projects. In addition, DOC and the Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) should conduct research documenting the cumulative impacts of farmland conversion, including the impact on future GHG emissions.

## **2. Clarify CEQA mitigation requirements for loss of farmland**

The state should clarify farmland mitigation requirements under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Consideration should be given to implementing graduated mitigation requirements based on the efficiency of development on converted farmland, and to regulatory streamlining or fast-tracking for urban infill developments as well as cumulative development impacts.

## **3. Re-envision and reinstate state funding of the Williamson Act**

A new Williamson Act should create an option for local governments to develop agricultural enterprise zones around our cities where farmers would have heightened tax benefits commensurate with development-associated land values. Farmers and ranchers on the urban edge face a series of unique challenges, and agricultural enterprise zones could provide additional benefits, such as regulatory streamlining and priority easement. Additional benefits could be provided to farmers utilizing sustainable practices. We also strongly recommend that the state reinvest in the Williamson Act with the restoration of subvention payments to the participating counties.

## **4. Direct a portion of AB 32 cap-and-trade revenues to farmland conservation**

A portion of cap-and-trade revenues should be invested annually in the California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP), targeting the creation of easements on farmland most at risk of development. The CFCP should identify and fund agricultural conservation easements that maximize AB 32, AB 1532 and SB 535 goals.

## **5. Shore up the California Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) to provide information for climate planning**

Alternative reliable sources of funding for FMMP should be identified so the program can continue to provide up-to-date information about the status of California farmland and farmland conversion. To tailor California's farmland protection strategies to address climate change, we need a comprehensive assessment of the community and eco-system values provided by farmland (beyond soil quality and irrigation use). We also need an inventory of the land most threatened by development and a study of the cumulative impacts

of farmland conversion. FMMP should collect the data necessary to identify the most important California farmland and re-assess conservation priorities.

## **6. Engage the Strategic Growth Council (SGC) in farmland conservation efforts**

The SGC should expand its mission to include farmland protection as a smart growth and climate change mitigation tool, and in its next grant cycle SGC should fund a comprehensive assessment of the future agricultural land and water needs of the state for both food production and ecosystem purposes. It should also fund a comprehensive assessment of the projected cumulative impact of urban development, infrastructure projects, energy development and climate change on the availability of farmland, all with a view to establishing farmland conservation goals.

## **7. Strengthen SB 375 to require farmland conservation strategies**

The legislature should strengthen SB 375 to require that regions assess the impacts on farm and rangeland from the region's land use scenarios and develop their Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) to protect priority farm and rangeland as a tool to help achieve regional greenhouse gas targets. The SCS should identify agricultural enterprise zones where farmland is protected and agricultural economic development is concentrated.

## **8. Require an agricultural element in OPR general plan guidelines**

The OPR should update its current guidelines to require that general plans contain an agricultural element that includes a specific, effective strategy for retaining sufficient farmland.

## **9. Require LAFCOs to establish baseline farmland conservation requirements**

State law should require that Local Agency Formation Commissions (LAFCOs) establish baseline requirements for annexation and spheres of influence. LAFCOs should require that local jurisdictions have reasonable urban growth boundaries and farmland mitigation policies before annexation of additional territory is allowed. Moreover, the law should be amended to allow cities to annex land for the purpose of permanently protecting it as farmland, thereby allowing cities to effectively create buffers between urbanized areas.

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A copy of the complete report is available at <http://calclimateag.org/triple-harvest>.

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This paper is the product of numerous interviews and a roundtable discussion with some of California's most respected experts in working lands conservation and sustainable agriculture. We are deeply grateful for the guidance, expertise and wisdom of the following colleagues:

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### About CalCAN

The California Climate and Agriculture Network (CalCAN) is a network of sustainable agriculture advocates, farmers, ranchers and agricultural experts that advances policy solutions at the nexus of sustainable agriculture and climate change.