



July 14, 2025

The Honorable Catherine Blakespear
Chair, California Senate Environmental Quality Committee
1021 O Street, Suite 7720
Sacramento, California 95814

Re: AB 1156, as amended July 7, 2025– Oppose Unless Amended

Dear Chair Blakespear,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a position letter **in opposition unless amended** to AB 1156 by Assemblymember Buffy Wicks.

We, the undersigned representatives of the environmental, agricultural, and land trust sector, are grateful to the California State Legislature for its continued commitment to protecting the state’s agricultural land. Safeguarding our working lands is essential to combating climate change, supporting smart growth, and securing a resilient, healthy food system for future generations. The Williamson Act remains an important tool for preventing the conversion of farm and ranch land. **For these reasons, we respectfully oppose the provisions outlined in AB 1156 unless amended, which threaten the intent and integrity of the Williamson Act and jeopardize California’s long-term land conservation goals.**

California’s agricultural lands are at the crux of our state’s economy and national food security. [The Williamson Act](#) or the state’s current-use law, is codified in California Government Code §§ 51200–51297.4 and provides property tax relief to landowners who commit to keeping their land in agricultural use. The Williamson Act protects California’s agricultural land by allowing local governments to enter 10-year contracts with landowners who commit to keeping their land in agricultural or open space use. In return, landowners receive a reduced property tax assessment. To exit a contract early, landowners must pay a fee—12.5% of the land’s fair market value, or 25% for Farmland Security Zone contracts—and go through a public review process that currently ensures transparency and public input.

Solar developers already have a pathway for siting projects on Williamson Act land through the [Solar-Use Easement Program](#) at the California Department of Conservation. This program allows landowners to voluntarily cancel their contracts and dedicate the land to solar energy production—provided the land meets strict criteria such as low agricultural productivity due to soil limitations, impaired water availability, or other physical constraints that render the land unsuitable for sustained agricultural use. The process for enrolling in the Solar-Use Easement Program requires

approval by the Department of Conservation and coordination with local governments, ensuring that solar development only occurs on land appropriate for non-agricultural use. Finally, the Solar-Use Easement Program already lowers the Williamson Act cancellation fees to 6.25% of the land's fair market value or 12.5% if the land is enrolled in a Farmland Security Zone contract.

AB 1156 fails to recognize that agricultural land is a finite resource

California must use every tool available to address development pressures on farm and ranch land including the Williamson Act. Between 2001 and 2016, [AFT's 2020 Farms Under Threat](#) report found that 465,900 acres of California farm and ranch land were converted to urban or low-density uses. If current trends continue, [AFT's Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future](#) expects that 797,400 acres will be lost by 2040. The report also warns that California, along with Texas and Florida, is projected to account for 40% of future farm and ranch land-to-solar conversion nationwide.¹ Additionally, according to a recent report released by [Virginia Tech](#), large scale renewable solar installations increase the value of nearby agriculture and vacant land by 19% on average. The researchers conducted a nationwide analysis of millions of real estate transactions and thousands of utility-scale solar developments to come to this conclusion.

However, recognizing that large-scale solar deployment is essential for states to achieve carbon neutrality, American Farmland Trust developed five [Smart Solar principles](#) to help guide responsible solar siting. These principles provide a framework for municipalities and solar developers to thoughtfully integrate solar projects into local land-use planning. They emphasize the importance of siting solar in a way that protects farmland, strengthens farm viability, promotes soil health, and incorporates inclusive community engagement. Upholding these principles is critical to balancing the urgent need for renewable energy with long-term farmland protection—and they should not be set aside simply because a landowner lacks current access to water rights.

At the same time, California's farm and ranch land values continue to rise, making agricultural land more vulnerable and less accessible. According to the [2024 NASS Annual Land Values Survey](#), California has the fourth-highest farm and ranch land prices in the country—averaging \$13,400 per acre, a 31% increase since 2020. The state must prioritize the protection of every acre of prime, unique, and statewide important irrigated farm and ranch land to ensure a secure, resilient food system.

AB 1156 undermines California's legacy of being a national leader in land protection

AB 1156 would amend the Solar-Use Easement program to allow any prime, unique, and important agricultural land protected by a Williamson Act contract to exit their contracts solely on the basis of claiming insufficient surface or groundwater available to support agricultural use, without clearly defining "insufficient water supply."

Additionally, AB 1156 would allow any agricultural land converted to a Solar-Use Easement to avoid paying the cancellation fee. The updated version of the bill does not adequately define "insufficient water supply" so that these changes in conditions can be accurately accounted for and measured before the Williamson Act contract is approved for termination.

Solar development on farm and ranch land doesn't need a shortcut—the path already exists

¹ Hunter, M., A. Sorensen, T. Nogeire-McRae, S. Beck, S. Shutts, R. Murphy. 2022. Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future. Washington, D.C.: American Farmland Trust

Under the Williamson Act, solar developers already have the option to terminate contracts by paying an exit fee. These payments support the California Department of Conservation’s Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program and are added to the state general fund, helping to ensure that the state’s investment in farm and ranch land protection remains strong and continues to benefit future generations. We recognize the need for large scale solar development to support the state’s clean energy and climate goals. However, this bill does not address the primary barriers around solar development, such as the need for transmission and grid infrastructure upgrades, interconnection backlogs, and local opposition.²

We request the following four amendments to strengthen the bill and maintain the integrity of the Williamson Act.

#1. We request that the committee considers amending the bill to clearly define “insufficient water supply.” Insufficient water supply should be based on the water requirements needed to maintain crop viability. [The University of California Cooperative Extension Cost and Return Studies](#) provide evidence-based indicators of minimal water requirements needed for farmers to sustain crop production. From UC Davis Agriculture and Resource Economics, these academic studies break down cost and return information by crop and region in California, including how much irrigation is required by each commodity. Given these studies, we recommend that, rather than relying on broad definitions of surface and groundwater needs, land should only be deemed unsuitable for agricultural production if its groundwater allocations, access, and surface water deliveries fall below the irrigation requirements identified for the least water-intensive crops in the most recent UC Cooperative Extension Cost studies. This protocol will help determine whether agricultural land has experienced changed conditions that make it unsuitable for continued farming.

#2. We support the California Farm Bureau’s proposal to maintain mandatory decommissioning bonds and mitigation fees in statute, rather than leaving them to the discretion of individual projects (Section 51191.3 Subdivision C). These funds are essential to ensure that solar infrastructure is fully removed and that land is restored to a condition suitable for productive agriculture upon decommissioning. While some developers may already furnish decommissioning funds, requiring these safeguards for all projects will provide landowners and local officials with the certainty and resources needed to return land to agricultural use should water resources become available in the future.

#3. Generally, we are supportive of the concept of Community Benefit Agreements, and appreciate the new language and additional provisions of what may be funded. However, unless the legislation clearly specifies the amount that solar developers are required to contribute, the provision will remain vague and difficult to enforce. To strengthen the statute, we recommend that the Legislature establish a defined financial contribution requirement for Community Benefit Agreements. In lieu of paying the Williamson Act exit fee, developers should be required to contribute to the Community Benefit Agreement. Below is proposed substitute language that could be adopted to ensure this obligation is clearly defined and enforceable:

(a) Notwithstanding any other provision of this chapter, if land previously enrolled in a Williamson Act contract is proposed for solar energy development through a contract cancellation or solar-use easement, the project proponent shall pay a fee equal to no less than 6.25 percent for Williamson act contracts or 12.5 percent of the land’s full market value if in a farmland security zone at the time of

² <https://www.ucs.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/Barriers-and-Solutions-Clean-Energy-CA.pdf>

project approval, as determined by an independent appraiser approved by the Department of Conservation.

#4. Given that the amendments to the Williamson Act Solar Use Easement Program will change the penalty requirements to the law and thus have impacts on funding availability for the Department of Conservation’s Farmland Mapping Program and the state’s general fund, we recommend amending the bill to create a pilot program. A pilot program will give the state time to determine if the amendments to the 1965 Williamson Act’s Solar Use Easement further agricultural land protection while simultaneously achieving the state’s clean energy goals. We recommend limiting the pilot program to 2-3 specific geographic areas where land has been determined to be both unsuitable for farmland and suitable for solar (i.e. [Westlands Water District](#)).

Smart Solar, Not Shortcuts: Protect California’s Working Lands

AB 1156 threatens the very tools and safeguards that have made farm and ranch land protection one of California’s most successful conservation strategies. Weakening the Williamson Act, bypassing existing Solar-Use Easement pathways, removing exit fees for solar developers, and failure to clearly define what is needed for removal—threatens the integrity and public trust in the state’s long-term farm and ranch land protection efforts.

Thank you for considering this letter. We urge you to oppose AB 1156 unless amended and work to address the issues outlined in our letter and in the California Farm Bureau’s letter. For any questions, please contact American Farmland Trust’s Senior California Policy Manager, Chelsea Gazillo, at cgazillo@farmland.org or (707) 495-8223.

With sincerity,

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