Research Results on State Land Access & Conservation Grant Programs for the Grants & Resources Subcommittee

This Summary Report of Research Results includes three main sections:

1. Background and Context for Program Analysis
2. Summary of Results
3. Key Insights in Relation to Hypotheses

Background and Context for Program Analysis

On July 10, 2024, the Grants & Resources Subcommittee (Subcommittee) of the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force (ALETF) requested research and analysis on the impact and outcomes of State of California grant programs to better understand whether and how existing programs contribute to equitable land access and acquisition.

From the "Resource List – Land Access and Equity Programs" spreadsheet, 12 programs were selected according to the following criteria:

1. Government-administered, with a focus on state programs,
2. Available to applicants in California,
3. Directly funds land access, as measured in "acres transitioned."

To meet Subcommittee members' request for information about program outcomes and impact, staff requested that program leads complete a questionnaire to share information on the most recent five years of program funding. Nine of the 12 selected programs responded with varying degrees of detail. Two of the Wildlife Conservation Board's programs were combined in a single response, which resulted in eight programs included in the analysis.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture's Urban Agriculture Grant Program was included to ensure there was a consideration of urban agriculture, but the program does not fund acquisition nor conservation and did not report on acres impacted. The differences between this program and the others are noted throughout.

Programs Included:

1. **Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program, Department of Conservation (SALC)** – Protects agricultural lands from development by funding conservation easements and planning projects to support sustainable farming and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
2. **California Farmland Conservancy Program, Department of Conservation (CFCP)** – Provides grants for agricultural conservation easements to permanently protect farmland from urban development and ensure long-term agricultural use.
3. **Agricultural Land Mitigation Program, Department of Conservation & High-Speed Rail Authority (ALMP)** – Supports farmland conservation efforts by mitigating the loss of agricultural lands impacted by high-speed rail and other infrastructure projects.

4. **Urban Agriculture Grant Program, California Department of Food & Agriculture (CDFA)** – Funds projects that promote urban farming, improve food access in cities, and support community-based agricultural initiatives.
5. **Conservancy Grants, California State Coastal Conservancy (SCC)** – Provides funding for projects that enhance coastal resources, restore habitats, and improve public access along California's coast.
6. **Strategic Land Conservation Grant Program, Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SSNC)** – Supports the acquisition and protection of lands in the Sierra Nevada region to preserve ecosystems, water resources, and rural communities.
7. **Land Acquisition Grants, Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB)** – Funds the purchase of land to protect wildlife habitats, enhance biodiversity, and improve public access to natural areas.
8. **Tribal Nature-Based Solutions Program, California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA)** – Provides grants to Tribal governments for conservation projects that incorporate traditional ecological knowledge and strengthen climate resilience.

For the three Department of Conservation Programs, the acronym for the program name is used throughout, while the acronyms for the agencies are used for agencies that only submitted data on one program only.

Summary of Results

Who is eligible for the programs and for what activities?

Eligible applicants: All of the programs include California Native American Tribes and Nonprofitorganizations as eligible applicants, while six of the programs include local, state, or federal agencies. Various programs listed other specific types of entities such as resource conservation districts, regional parks or open-space authorities, groundwater sustainability agencies, and councils of governments. CDFA's Urban Agriculture Grant Program is the only one which offers funding to for-profit farm businesses.

Of the 456 projects included in the analysis, an estimate of 57 grants were awarded to Tribal Nations and Tribal serving nonprofits. This is likely a low estimate in particular for the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) and the State Coastal Conservancy (SCC) which did not report data by entity type like the other programs. In some cases, Tribes are not the primary applicants and entities apply on their behalf. Seven awards were made to for-profit organizations or businesses via the Urban Agriculture Grant Program. The remaining 392 were awarded to nonprofits and public agencies.

The type of eligible projects across the grant programs include:

- agricultural conservation easements acquisitions,
- conservation easements acquisitions,
- fee-title acquisitions,
- project planning,
- organizational capacity building, and
- urban farming activities.

Seven of eight programs fund the acquisition of agricultural and conservation easements, and five of those seven programs include the acquisition of fee-title, excluding CDFA's Urban Agriculture Grant Program which was designed to support a wide range of other urban farming activities. Five of eight programs also fund planning or capacity building activities. These planning and capacity building projects were excluded from the table showing acreage and dollars awarded, but were included in subscription rate analysis due to the format of the data submitted.

Of the 456 projects included in the analysis, 125 funded planning, capacity building and urban agriculture activities. The 33 Urban Agriculture Grant Program projects supported two types of projects: 1) Systems Builder Community-Based Block Grant to increase staff capacity and support community-based organizations with grassroots involvement, and 2) Urban Agriculture Practitioner Grant to directly fund urban agriculture projects.

The remaining 331 projects were focused on acquisition, which includes the acquisition of fee title or an easement. Three of five programs that fund both types of acquisitions did not distinguish between the two in the data reported. The 24 Tribal Nature Based Solutions awarded projects included in this 331 total include acquisition and implementation projects as there was no distinction in the data submitted. In this case, implementation refers to projects that applied multi-benefit nature-based solutions on ancestral lands. These 331 projects were all associated with acres impacted.

What impact are the current programs having?

Table 1: Outcomes of the 331 awarded projects that supported acquisition activities and reported acres impacted

Program, Agency	Acres impacted	Dollars awarded	Projects Funded	Types of projects funded
California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP), California Department of Conservation (DOC)	1,686	$6,213,010	8	Acquisition: Agricultural Conservation Easement
Agricultural Land Mitigation Program (ALMP), DOC, High-Speed Rail Authority	3,476	$29,799,130	12	Acquisition: Agricultural Conservation Easement
Strategic Land Conservation Grant Program, Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC)	29,545	$18,529,107	20	Acquisition: Conservation Easement or Fee title
Tribal Nature-Based Solutions Program, California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA)	49,671	$102,626,283	24	Implementation; Acquisition: Easement and Fee title
Conservancy Grants, California State Coastal Conservancy (SCC)	73,689	$113,040,020	31	Acquisition: Conservation Easement or Fee title
Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program (SALC), DOC	157,920	$347,048,035	135	Acquisition: Agricultural Conservation Easements
Land Acquisition Grants, Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB)	243,607	$325,583,229	101	Acquisition: Conservation Easement or Fee title

Total	**559,594**	**$924,311,707**	**331**	

Are these programs adequately meeting the demand?

The demand for these programs can be demonstrated by measuring the number of applicants against the number of awardees (subscription rates). The data below shows the average rates of success by applicant type across the years indicated. These rates were calculated for all 456 awarded projects. Race and ethnicity data was collected by only one program on a voluntary basis for applicants.

Some programs offer a pre-application to ensure applicants are eligible and if not, can avoid the resource commitment associated with submitting a full application. While this is a positive practice for prospective applicants, the level of demand indicated by the total number of pre-applicants is not registered in the subscription rates below.

CFCP and ALMP both have subscription rates greater than 100% because all of the applicants were awarded and some received multiple awards. California Native American Tribes are eligible applicants, but none applied in the years represented in the data set.

California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP), California Department of Conservation

Applicant type	Total # awards 2015-23	Subscription rates
Nonprofit	13	130%

Agricultural Land Mitigation Program (ALMP), California Department of Conservation

Applicant type	Total # awards 2017-20	Subscription rates
Nonprofit	11	>100%
Government entity	1	100%

Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program (SALC), California Department of Conservation

Applicant type	Total # awards 2019-23	Subscription rates
Nonprofit	157	66%
Government entity	34	100%
Tribe (including tribal non-profits)	7	100%
Tribal-serving non-profit	3	100%

Urban Agriculture Grant Program, California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA)

Entity type	Total awards 2024	Subscription rates

Nonprofit	21	22%
Resource Conservation Districts	2	67%
Public or private colleges and universities	1	25%
California Native American Tribes	1	100%
Tribal Based Nonprofit organizations	1	100%
For-profit organizations/businesses	7	13%

Strategic Land Conservation Grant Program, Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC)

Entity type	Total awards 2019-2023	Subscription rates
Public Agencies	2	50%
Qualifying 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations	27	49%
Tribal Entities	2	40%

The Tribal Nature-Based Solutions Program of CNRA received 57 applicants and awarded 34 projects (about 60% subscription rate). Ten of the projects were planning awards.

California State Coastal Conservancy (SCC) has staff in regions across the state who track pre-applications and full proposals, which means state-level subscription rates would be a time intensive endeavor to compile. Wildlife Control Board (WCB) does not track the number of full applications but aims to vet projects in the pre-application phase so that most applicants which are asked to submit a full application are funded.

Are the programs prioritizing equity, and if so, how?

The program staff were asked about whether their program prioritizes equity related to 1) program design, 2) set-asides for priority communities, and 3) language accessibility.

Equity goals: The CDFA and CNRA programs analyzed were designed explicitly around equity in that eligibility depends on serving priority populations, defined in different ways. SCC and SALC overtime have developed clear frameworks for incorporating equity into their program goals and evaluation as indicated by their program goals, strong set asides, and strategic plans. The remaining four programs are in different places: one recently incorporated equity goals in response to Prop 68 funding requirements, one noted an internal scoring tool (not available online) and that their 2025 strategic plan will take a stronger equity focus, one noted equity is not their primary focus but does incorporate equity-based considerations, and the fourth does not incorporate equity at all.

Range of set-asides: The type of set-asides ranged widely across programs in size, motivation, and priority community. Across programs the value of the set-asides falls between 5% (i.e., 5% of funding for projects where a tribe, or a tribal non-profit, is either the applicant or a co-applicant) and 100% in the case of CNRA's program, which is designed to exclusively support Tribal land return efforts. The other set asides reported ranged between 10-20% (i.e., 20% of funding is reserved for projects that serve disadvantaged farmers, ranchers, or tribes).

Some programs' set asides are guided by their funding sources, such as Prop 68, which requires that 15% of funding must serve severely disadvantaged communities. Similarly, Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) (administered through California Climate Investments) allocates 35% of funds for projects that benefit priority populations. It is important to note that the GGRF funding target applies to all programs that receive those funds as a whole, rather than to each agency or grant program, which means targets vary by agency.

Three programs noted that they anticipate future Prop 4 funds, which will direct 40% of total funding to benefit systemically excluded communities.

Programs were not explicitly asked about how they define priority communities identified in their set asides, but between information online and responses to the question above, it is clear that programs use a number of definitions and guidance. Examples include:

- California Air Resources Board's California Climate Investments [definition of priority populations](#),
- [CalEnviroScreen](#)'s classification of disadvantaged communities,
- Severely disadvantaged community (SDAC) refers to a community with a median household income of less than 60% of the statewide average" as defined in [PRC § 80002(n)](#),
- Disadvantaged community refers to a community with a median household income less than 80% of the statewide average as defined in PRC § 80002(e),
- Socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers as defined Food and Agriculture Code Section 512.

The State Coastal Conservancy recognizes existing web-based tools as listed above while also recognizing some systemically excluded communities are not mapped and offering to provide guidance on other means of demonstrating benefit, such as direct participation by community-based organizations.

Language: Very few programs reported offering application materials in languages other than English. The exceptions mentioned include: technical assistance for grant applications in Spanish (one program), Spanish-language materials available online (one program), and making accommodations available upon request (one). SALC offers translation services and reimbursement for translation costs as an eligible expense for grantees once awarded.

How predictable is the funding?

Funding source: Six of the eight programs receive funding from multiple sources. Five programs rely on all or partial funding from the General Fund, four programs receive funding from Proposition 68, three programs utilize funding from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF), and three programs draw from older bond measures such as Propositions 12, 40, and 84. Multiple programs anticipate funding from Proposition 4.

Consistency: Just three programs (SALC, SCC, and WCB) reported distributing funding on a consistent, annual basis resulting in a mostly predictable funding cycle for applicants while the CFCP, ALMP, and SNC programs have been inconsistently funded over the past 5-10 years. CDFA and CNRA's programs are new and have each distributed a single round of funding, with the potential for additional funding in the future.

To what degree do solutions supported by existing programs address scale and tenure?

Scale: None of the programs state an explicit preference or priority for larger projects and there is a wide range in the size of projects funded. Three of eight programs reported acreage by each awarded project rather than total acres impacted per year (i.e. in a given funding cycle). Projects funded by these three programs range from as small as five acres to tens of thousands of acres. Considering all seven programs that reported acres, the programs' average project size ranges from 211 (CFCP) – 2,388 (WCB) acres.

The TNBS program is unique in that it gives high priority to applicants that are 1) landless tribes or tribes with 20 acres or less, or 2) tribes requesting funding for projects within current reservation boundaries that address "checkerboarding" issues or are directly adjacent to reservation or trust land boundaries, among other criteria.

Tenure: More research would be needed to determine to what degree the set of programs and projects included in this analysis benefit those without land versus those who already own land.

Key Insights in Relation to Hypotheses

This research was informed by California Land Equity Task Force members' observations and hypotheses about existing gaps in the available resources for agricultural land access and equity. Those hypotheses are listed below followed by relevant highlights from the research summarized above.

Hypothesis 1. Funds are disproportionately distributed to organizations which means fewer dollars for land stewards directly.

Research findings:

- All programs include nonprofit organizations and California Native American Tribes as eligible applicants.
- CDFA's Urban Agriculture Grant Program is the only program that offers funding to for-profit farm businesses and awarded seven for-profit businesses in the first round of funding.
- 392 of the 456 projects included in the analysis were awarded to non-profits or public agencies.
- An estimated 57 of the 456 grants were awarded to California Native American Tribes and Trial serving nonprofits.

Hypothesis 2. Programs are not consistently funded, and funding is insufficient to support demand across the State of California.

Research findings:

- Just three programs (SALC, SCC, and WCB) reported distributing funding on a consistent, annual basis while the CFCP, ALMP, and SNC programs have been inconsistently funded over the past 5-10 years.
- Subscription rates for these programs range widely.
  - ο CFCP and ALMP both have subscription rates of greater than 100% because all applicants were awarded and some received multiple awards.
  - ο The range on the remaining four programs that reported enough data to calculate subscription rates is between 13% -100%.

- o   The Urban Agriculture Grant Program (UAGP) received 56 applications from for-profit organizations and businesses and awarded only seven (13% subscription rate)
- o   Nonprofits who applied to the UAGP experienced a similarly low subscription rate of 22% while the two Tribal organizations that applied were both awarded (100%).
- o   SALC has similarly seen 100% subscription rates for certain applicant types: all seven Tribal applicants and all 34 government entities that have applied within the range of data included in this analysis were awarded. Meanwhile a much larger quantity of non-profits applied (238) and were awarded at a rate of 66%.
- o   CNRA received 57 applicants and awarded 34 projects (about 60% subscription rate).
- The pre-application phase that some programs utilize were not accounted for in the data. This process reduces the number of full applications, making it difficult to measure demand in relation to awarded projects.

Hypothesis 3. These programs favor larger projects thereby excluding small farmers from benefiting.

Research findings:

- In the data reported, it is difficult to discern who benefits and who ultimately stewards the land that is acquired or conserved.
- None of the programs state an explicit preference or priority for larger projects and there is a wide range in the size of projects funded.
- Project size within the data ranged from as small as five acres to tens of thousands of acres. The set of program's average project size ranges from 211 (CFCP) – 2,388 (WCB) acres.
- The TNBS program is unique in that it gives high priority to applicants that are landless tribes or tribes with 20 acres or less.

Hypothesis 4. Equity is an addition rather than a primary goal of program design.

Research findings:

- The CDFA and CNRA programs analyzed were designed explicitly around equity in that eligibility depends on serving priority populations, defined in different ways.
- SCC and SALC overtime have developed clear frameworks for incorporating equity into their program goals and evaluation.
- The remaining four programs vary: one recently incorporated equity goals in response to Prop 68 funding requirements, one noted an internal scoring tool and their upcoming 2025 strategic plan, one noted equity is not their primary focus but is given special consideration as one of many program priorities, and the fourth does not incorporate equity at all.