

Summaries of July 2025 Community Engagement with the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

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DRAFT: Summary of Meeting with Kern County Black Farmers Association

Date: July 15, 2025

Task Force Members & Staff: Doria Robinson, Nelson Hawkins, Tessa Salzman (staff)

Host: Kern County Black Farmers Association

Participants: 19 farmers, technical assistance providers, community members

Summary Author: California Strategic Growth Council (SGC) Staff. *This is a summary of the ideas shared by participants and does not necessarily represent agreement by the Task Force or Strategic Growth Council staff.*

The participants were farmers, landowners, entrepreneurs, technical assistance providers, and advocates who shared their family and personal stories with food, farming, and land ownership. Many participants described the systemic ways in which land was taken from their families, their access was denied, or the rules were changed to eliminate housing or agriculture possibilities. One participant shared their story in the context of the systemic reduction in Black-owned farmland from more than 14 million acres in the 1920s down to 2.5 million acres in the 1990s due to discrimination by the USDA, land theft, forced sales, and lack of legal support.

The participants also shared the many projects and initiatives they are working on to increase land access and local food production, build on intergenerational legacies of

farming, reduce barriers to urban agriculture, and undo the systems that hold Black farmers back. They want a place to tell their stories and seek to change the system and find solutions to reverse centuries of discrimination.

The host closed the session with gratitude and a reminder of why they do the work they do: *“We are fighting to make farming a dignified path to prosperity.”*

Key Barriers and Context

- Many of the farmers operate on very small plots, in backyards or churches. Without a feasible path to scale up, they cannot grow their businesses.
- City and County level zoning codes, regulations, and permitting effectively prohibit community-scale agriculture.
 - Cannot grow and sell even if there is sufficient space in one’s backyard because land is not zoned for agriculture
- Contentious water rights and lack of access are key barriers to agriculture.
 - Even though one participant is a senior water rights holder, he is in court currently to litigate his access.
- Once land is acquired there are significant, unanticipated barriers including the following.
 - Participants shared that once local government found out their families were Black, they limited the allowable uses and water access from their newly purchased land.
 - When a farmer finally identifies a solution, the policymakers change the rules.
 - When facing access or legal challenges, there is no one available for support and advocacy.

Priorities and Solutions

- In the context of equitable farming, Black farmers should be acknowledged for their specific history. When using the “catch all” BIPOC / POC language, resources often don’t reach Black communities.
 - Use the term: “American descendants of enslaved people”
- In the Overview section of the report, add history specific to Black farmers and land loss in California including the racism in agriculture and the plantation economy that was imported here from the deep south. Add citations from: Dr. Michael Eissinger who writes about Black agriculture in the Central Valley

- Support farming programs for kids. One participant shared their program which helps children grow produce, sell it at market, and then save the profits in a college fund.
- Financing and funds to purchase land, hold on to it, and expand when ready.
- Establish land equity-related technical assistance
 - Provide one-on-one, long-term technical assistance specifically designed for Black families and farmers to resolve land access questions.
 - Technical assistance should include what is needed to acquire, access, maintain, and protect existing land, e.g. title and legal questions, long-term land retention, and resolving ownership issues.
 - Provide information to help people understand and navigate land ownership and access laws and to increase awareness of resources, requirements, protections, and restrictions on land and how to change them.
- Address City and County challenges specifically regarding urban agriculture zoning
 - The State should provide cities with technical assistance and pre-designed and pre-approved code for community gardens and urban agriculture and case studies
 - Encourage local governments to update their residential and industrial zones to allow for agriculture and reduce the permit burden, e.g., cost and time.
 - Ensure agriculture zoning allows for growing, storing, processing and selling agricultural products.
- Create local Grassroots Advisory Councils to advise and approve local government agency decisions related to technical assistance and resource distribution and to enhance local agencies' services for Black farmers and Black-led organizations
- Create a program for Black farmers in California to help resolve heirs' land ownership and succession issues on agricultural land, e.g., USDA's Heirs' Property Relending Program
- A resource that would help is a central hub with information, resources, and a directory of how much public land is available and where.

DRAFT: Summary of Engagement Session with Allensworth Progressive Association

Date: July 15, 2025

Task Force Members & Staff: Doria Robinson, Nelson Hawkins, Tessa Salzman (staff)

Host: Allensworth Progressive Association

Participants: 9 farmers, advocates, community members

Summary Author: California Strategic Growth Council (SGC) Staff. *This is a summary of the ideas shared by participants and does not necessarily represent agreement by the Task Force or Strategic Growth Council staff.*

The participants shared the history and current conditions in Allensworth. The conversation centered on water rights and access, large scale landowners who dominate the land market, the importance of ecological practices, and who is responsible for remediating the existing and possible future damage from input-intensive agriculture. Participants shared that TAC Farm in Allensworth is currently successfully piloting an arsenic treatment technology to filter the arsenic from their water supply.

Participants discussed how public programs and resources are too often directed to large scale agriculture in their region and discussed alternatives. The group emphasized the importance of streamlining the process of acquiring land, ensuring resources are distributed directly to impacted communities, and developing more feasible opportunities for small and beginning farmers to acquire land. Allensworth Progression Association seeks to acquire land to overcome many of the challenges and goals participants discussed including soil remediation, establishing a food hub, and installing agrivoltaics for energy.

Key Barriers and Context

- Racial discrimination by banks when seeking loans to purchase land
 - For example, one participant was denied long-term mortgage financing even though they were able to pay a down payment of one third of the land price.
- Water access challenges
 - Participants shared that before receiving support (e.g., a loan) to buy land, they needed to commit to digging a well which can cost \$100,000 or demonstrate sufficient water flow by paying to fix a broken well to test the water flow against the Farm Services Agency's (FSA) requirements.

- Landowners wield too much control over water usage, flow, and access. During the floods of 2023, Allensworth was flooded as neighboring large-scale landowners effectively redirected the water away from their fields.
- Lack of accountability for large-scale growers and ecological harm
 - For decades, concentrated, large-scale monocrop farms in this region have extracted nutrients, applied chemicals, and drawn down the water table.
 - The farmers export what they grow to other locations and leave communities with ecological damage and limited, contaminated water. The people who want to steward and remediate the land are burdened with these negative outcomes, including lack of water access.
 - There are high levels of arsenic in groundwater and soil in part from the intensive historic cotton production that used arsenic based chemicals through early 1990s.

Priorities and Solutions

Increase State funding for land purchase and remediation

- The State should create a new fund for communities and small growers to buy and remediate land that has been damaged by large-scale agricultural operations.
- Establish strong incentives for transition towards holistic, ecological, regenerative agriculture
 - For example, offer loan forgiveness in tiers related to the number of years regenerative practices are employed and soil health and water quality on site.
 - Consider parallel structure to State requiring employers to incentivize their employees to reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT). What does parallel system look like to reduce pesticides?
- Funding for land purchase should be paired with education and training about how to farm sustainably so public dollars are used to achieve its climate goals
- Ensure funding can be used for water access and infrastructure.

Improve design and implementation of State programs

- Offer longer term funding specifically for farmer training, marketing programs, and sustainable farming practices.
- Update and design State programs such as Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) and Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program (MLRP) to directly fund impacted communities for water, land, and community development projects.

- The community outreach component of MLRP often lacks a real community connection, is haphazardly implemented with limited accountability, and is conducted by entities such as irrigation districts which rarely have relationships with small farmers to fully understand community needs.
 - Instead of funding large growers to do community engagement, the disadvantaged communities this program is meant to benefit should receive the funds directly (e.g., small growers, farmworkers, community-based organizations with demonstrated experiencing meeting the needs, and Tribal communities, who are all most impacted by drought and lack of land access).
 - Instead of consulting community on established plans, the community should be able to come up with their own plans and dictate those back to the MLRP grant recipients.
- SGMA and MLRP should both more directly acknowledge the connection between land ownership and water access.

Accountability and regenerative agriculture

- Add to conservation section of report that extractive practices and monoculture are key causes of land degradation and distinguish between stewardship and extractive agriculture.
- Those who are responsible for causing damage to the land should be responsible for funding remediation and repaying the communities. There is a need to stop harmful practices and incentivize sustainable agriculture.
- More effectively regulate synthetic pesticides; specifically, spraying via airplane.
- Offer trainings and resources for established conventional farmers to transitions to regenerative agriculture.

Improve technical assistance for land transactions

- Provide land seekers with technical support to understand the deed and conditions of property, e.g., water or mineral rights.
- Require transparency in land sales.
 - Streamline and make transparent processes for people who want to purchase and permit land to grow food to ensure fees and treatment of everyone is the same.
 - Support prospective buyers by requiring current owner to disclose current status of water rights, water access, permit history of on-site structures, and

an estimate of what it would cost to remedy any violations due to pre-sale construction without proper permitting.

- Require realtors to disclose when they are working on behalf of both the seller and buyer.
- Improve coordination between agencies
 - When one participant finally bought the property with a Farm Service Agency (FSA) loan, the County told her the property wasn't zoned properly, which the FSA had not previously considered.

DRAFT: Summary of Meeting with African American Farmers of California

Date: July 16, 2025

Task Force Member & Staff: Nelson Hawkins, Tessa Salzman (staff)

Host: African American Farmers of California

Participants: 4 farmers

Summary Author: California Strategic Growth Council (SGC) Staff. *This is a summary of the ideas shared by participants and does not necessarily represent agreement by the Task Force or Strategic Growth Council staff.*

The participants who joined the meeting are members of the African American Farmers of California (AAFC) and work at and support the demo farm AAFC runs for beginning farmers. Participants discussed how public programs and resources must prioritize the future of farming by supporting beginning farmers, providing financial and technical assistance, and protecting agricultural land for the future.

Key Barriers and Context

- High costs of land and water infrastructure
 - Specifically, property taxes are a barrier to purchasing and then holding onto the land over time. The expense limits cash flow for developing the land as a productive farm.
- Investment firms are buying land as an investment tool and not for food production.
- Loan programs require farmers to demonstrate unrealistic, inequitable levels of collateral such as 200% of the total loan.
 - For example, to get a loan to purchase 10 acres, a farmer needs to use the 10 acres they own as collateral. If payments aren't made, the farmer could lose all 20 acres.

Priorities and Solutions

- Ensure land is affordable for young people. The goal is land ownership, but a long-term lease between 25-50 years is a good option as well.
 - Offer funding and technical assistance to buy land and water infrastructure, specifically for the next generation of farmers.
 - Create pathways for beginning farmers graduating from their program to get their own land or to farm on public land.

- Limit price of land and the ability of developers and other powerful interests to buy farmland as an investment
 - Support lease to own arrangements.
- Prioritize specialty and community-based crops (versus commodity) in all funding and policy supports
- Improve government programs and assistance to be more user friendly, streamlined, and readily accessible to everyone
- Update tax law to provide benefits for small farmers
 - For example, lower taxes on land held by small-scale farmers that feed local communities.
- Technical assistance
 - Needs specialists for crop production (e.g. pest control, etc.) and assistance for installing and maintaining infrastructure like wells.
 - Support for the formation of cooperatives so some farmers can focus on growing while others focus on selling and distribution
- Create a list to show farmers all the public farmland that is available.
- Make development plans public for transparency.
- Create a plan for implementing the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force's recommendations.

DRAFT: Summary of Meeting with San Diego Farmers

Date: July 22, 2025

Task Force Members & Staff: Tessa Salzman (staff)

Host: Greater San Diego Resource Conservation District (RCD)

Participants: 3 farmers; interpreter, host organization staff

Summary Author: California Strategic Growth Council (SGC) Staff. *This is a summary of the ideas shared by participants and does not necessarily represent agreement by the Task Force or Strategic Growth Council staff.*

This meeting was an opportunity to follow up with farmers who hosted Task Force members on site visits in May 2024. All three farmers began farming in San Diego in community garden plots and currently operate on small plots between 1/2 acre and 4 acres, each with aspirations to expand into additional acreage.

One farmer would like to expand into the public agriculture-zoned land across the street from where she farms currently, and the other two noted their interests in leasing or buying additional private farmland was limited by competition, cost and misaligned qualification criteria for public programs.

Key Barriers and Context

- The high cost of agriculture land
- Finding and accessing suitable public or private farmland to own or lease.
- Competition for land with large businesses and corporate agriculture.
- Competition with developers. Development pressure is strong and fully operating avocado orchards are being sold and then burned to clear way for construction.
- Public loan programs have a pre-set, misaligned set of qualification criteria including the need to document three formal years of land management experience that exclude farmers with other qualifications such as formal education, a business plan, and a community of support.
- Tenant farmers are subject to landowner preferences and decisions.

Priorities and Solutions

- Subsidize the cost of agricultural land for small producers at 50% of the price in order to protect farmland from development, to increase access, and to entice people into farming who otherwise wouldn't see a viable path into the career.

- Establish pilot loan program for small, young or beginning farmers to purchase working farms. The managing agency should experiment with different eligibility criteria and qualifications and use the pilot to generate data on alternative models. One farmer shared a 20-acre avocado orchard listing he anticipated would be sold for housing and noted, if provided a loan, he would be able to keep it in production and produce co-benefits such as counteracting development of agricultural land and climate benefits through diversifying the monoculture cropping system.
- Support finding available land – both private and publicly owned farmland.
- Technical assistance for accessing publicly owned land and navigating leasing with government agencies. Some farmers in the region are working on a lease with the City of San Diego, but the participants also noted other publicly owned farmland that should be made accessible to small farmers. Strong technical assistance is needed with finding, accessing and negotiating leases on these lands.
- Funding for essential equipment and infrastructure like tractors.
- The State should strengthen its voice for small businesses and farmers by helping connect producers to large scale retailers and requiring large scale grocery stores to sell a certain percent of local produce from small farmers.
- Support for a producer pension fund.

DRAFT: Summary of Golden Eagle Farm Tribal Engagement Session

Date: July 23, 2025

Task Force Members & Staff: Vice Chair Emily Burgueno, Thea Rittenhouse, Tessa Salzman (staff), Meagan Wylie (facilitator)

Host: Golden Eagle Farm, Mesa Grande Band of Mission Indians

Participants: 24 Tribal leaders, Tribal staff, and Tribal members from multiple Nations (21 in person, 3 online)

Summary Author: California Strategic Growth Council (SGC) Staff. *This is a summary of the ideas shared by participants and does not necessarily represent agreement by the Task Force or Strategic Growth Council staff.*

Following welcoming remarks by Essence Oyos, host from the Mesa Grande Band of Mission Indians, SGC staff provided an overview of the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force (ALETf) and walked through draft report recommendations. The session created space for Tribal leaders and members to reflect on the recommendations and share their lived experiences, questions, and proposals for improving land access, return, and stewardship. Below is a summary of key themes and insights that emerged during the discussion.

Barriers & Solutions to Tribal Land Access and Use

Conservation Easements & Zoning Restrictions

- State conservation tools prohibit economic development and Tribal sovereignty.
 - One participant shared their plan for a horse trail park was blocked due to Williamson Act restrictions and they had to wait 10 years until the end of the contract.
 - State-supported land return and acquisition programs often require conservation easements that restrict land use and do not align with Tribal sovereignty.
- California State zoning and land use regulations conflict with Tribal sovereignty and limit Tribal Nation's ability to pursue economic development.
 - One example provided is when land is zoned for agriculture, structural development can be entirely restricted.

Lack of True Land Return

- The State's current approaches to returning land to Tribal Nations comes with limitations, high costs, and the need to waive sovereignty immunity. Tribes often have to purchase back degraded lands. Participants questioned whether true "land return" is possible if the land must be bought, the soil health resuscitated, and/or comes encumbered with restrictions.
- Participants urged that any return of land should come free of encumbrances and with State assistance for stewardship, especially when land is in poor condition due to previous activities.

Sovereignty and State Overreach

- Concerns were raised about draft recommendation #4, which was perceived as infringing on Tribal sovereignty by involving the State in zoning.
- A participant emphasized the need to avoid the appearance and reality of subordinating Tribal authority to State planning bodies or climate offices.
- Suggestions were made to shift conservation strategies toward federal jurisdiction or allow Tribes to hold and define easements, such as through the idea of "cultural easements."

Fee-to-Trust Process

- Participants shared that the fee-to-trust process is costly and often takes 10 years or more, creating significant delays, expenses, and barriers to land stewardship.
- Participants suggested that if land is returned in trust, the state should work with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to expedite transfers.

Loss of Ancestral Village Sites

- Several participants raised the issue of ongoing destruction and development over ancestral village sites, especially in San Diego County.
- Recommendation that the State intervene with municipal governments to protect and preserve such sites particularly in the face of new housing developments – another state priority.
- The State should return land to Tribes as a form of repatriation. One participant emphasized that "This is what will help us heal and make us stronger."

Additional Reflections

- Participants raised concerns about big agriculture and water monopolies, citing the political power of large agricultural producers (e.g., Wonderful Pistachios).

- Several participants noted that even within federal definitions, updates to Tribal land status (fee-to-trust) have recently changed and should be addressed in the report.
- Participants emphasized the importance of repatriation and urged action to return ancestors and burial sites currently housed or neglected across California.

Relationship Between Land, Culture, and Healing

- Many participants spoke about the deep emotional and cultural healing that occurs when Tribes regain access to ancestral lands.
- Stewardship of land is intergenerational and deeply rooted in cultural practices. There is an expectation that returned land will be cared for, but Tribes need financial support and capacity to rehabilitate degraded ecosystems.
- Participants stressed that land return is not just about access but also about the capacity to thrive on that land.

Participant-Proposed Changes to the Draft Recommendations

- Define “return” and ensure it includes unencumbered transfers.
- Review zoning-related language in Goal #4 to specify how and when it does and does not apply to Tribal lands and ensure recommendations do not suggest State control over Tribal sovereignty.
- Expand definition of the term "veteran farmer or rancher" in the glossary to reflect broader service definitions, including Space Force and National Guard members. Remove reference of time restrictions related military service to qualify one as a veteran.
- Ensure “priority” is always included before “producers and land stewards” throughout the document to ensure the intended beneficiaries of these recommendations is clear (e.g., pages 19 and 26).
- Clarify terms like “entities that support these communities” to avoid exploitation by non-Tribal third-party organizations.
- Include stronger protections and preservation strategies for ancient village sites.
- Propose a separate funding pool to assist Tribes with restoration and stewardship of returned lands.
- Support Tribal-defined public access and conservation standards, such as cultural easements.

DRAFT: Summary of Engagement Session with Project MILPA

Date: July 30, 2025

Task Force Members & Staff: Irene de Barraicua, Dorian Payan, Tessa Salzman (staff)

Host: Project MILPA – Líderes Campesinas (LC), Mixteco Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP), Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE)

Participants: 16 farmworkers; 2 interpreters; host organization staff

Language: Spanish and Mixteco

Summary Author: California Strategic Growth Council (SGC) Staff. *This is a summary of the ideas shared by participants and does not necessarily represent agreement by the Task Force or Strategic Growth Council staff.*

The conversation began with one participant sharing that, to them, land equity means that every person should have access to land independent of their social class or economic conditions. The participants then talked about their challenges and different resources that could support their transition from farm employee to farm operator, business owner, or landowner. The participants shared their passion for growing food and interest in both renting and purchasing land if given the opportunity. They were interested in starting small with between 2-10 acres, working collaboratively to share resources and knowledge, and investing in land over time, little by little.

Key Barriers and Context

- The landowners don't provide the opportunity to their employees to rent or purchase the land.
- Farmworkers have limited financial and other resources to be able to acquire land and transition from farm employee to farm owner.
- Language barriers from Mixteco to Spanish and from Spanish to English limits what they are able to do.
- We have to start from zero while established companies have all the necessary and expensive tools, systems and capital to be successful.
- The systems are designed to benefit large scale landowners.

Priorities and Solutions

- Support small farmers to start cooperatives in which they can share land, knowledge and resources. Co-management of land and business allows for those

who are comfortable and able to navigate government processes to do so, and for others to fill other roles best suited for them.

- There was interest expressed in both purchasing and renting land depending on available resources.
- The support organizations like the hosts of this event are very helpful and supportive to their success.
- Financial and technical support for beginning farmers and for farmworkers to transition to farm operators and owners. Examples include:
 - Funding to purchase land and equipment
 - Technical support to share knowledge and resources about growing practices for specific crops, install and manage irrigation systems, and to navigate relevant laws, regulations and bureaucracy.
 - Permitting and marketing channels to sell their harvest
- The participants shared that groups like Project MILPA are so important to share knowledge, receive support, and work towards their goals little by little.
- Give small farmers opportunities to gain access to land, give them the right to start a business and ensure water access to allow them to grow over time.
- First opportunity to purchase program would be helpful to give farmworkers the chance to acquire land where they have worked,
 - A program like this would need to include financial support to actually purchase the land that is offered
 - The participants were interested in working and collaborating with Tribal Nations