

Appendix A: Focus Group Summaries

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Urban Agriculture Focus Group

Date: May 5, 2025

Facilitators: Laura Vollmer & Lucy Diekmann

Summary author: Lucy Diekmann

This focus group for urban growers was hosted in partnership with the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF). Fourteen growers from the Bay Area and Los Angeles and Orange Counties, who are part of CAFF's Growing Urban Agriculture Fellowship program, attended. Participants were split into two groups of seven on Zoom and each group conversation was facilitated by UCCE staff.

Land access challenges

Difficulty working with public landowners (e.g., City and County governments, school districts).

It can be very difficult to find the right people in local government to help you with an issue or to figure out the permitting process for an agricultural activity. When you don't have a champion in local

government to advocate for including agricultural space in parks, new developments, or other city properties, it's very hard to get access or increase space available for urban agriculture.

Challenges include difficulty working with local government to make repairs and upgrade infrastructure. Sometimes public entities want to take land back to use for their own programming once a farmer has improved it.

Urban lands that are not zoned for agriculture.

With lack of appropriate zoning, it is harder to engage in desired agricultural activities. Non-agricultural zoning can make it difficult to install needed infrastructure; building requirements that are not appropriate for agriculture are another barrier (e.g., dramatically increasing cost and the labor needed). For those who are looking for indoor space to grow, zoning laws may also create competition (that drives up prices) with warehouses/logistic industry.

A related challenge is a lack of awareness of urban ag among local government staff and a lack of understanding about what is needed to run an agricultural operation. As a result, staff do not prioritize urban ag and are not proactive about making beneficial changes when they update existing codes and plans.

High cost makes it difficult to access land or to dedicate it to agriculture

As a tribal entity, securing a reasonable purchase price is a challenge because once landowners hear the Tribe is interested, the asking price goes up since they assume the Tribe has lots of money. When the Tribe pays high prices, it is harder to use those lands for agriculture instead of other enterprises that generate more revenue.

Cost of land because it is being valued for housing and business development not agriculture.

Being forced out of one area because of competition and high land prices can have downstream consequences – for example, moving into an area with a different climate could increase utility expenses and require greater investment in infrastructure.

High cost of water

Lack of an agricultural water rate is a barrier for people growing in the city, especially because they are likely to be paying municipal water rates.

Marginal land

Poor conditions at sites that are underutilized, contaminated (e.g., brownfield sites, fire scars, lead in soil, industrial pollution), or have fallen into disrepair.

Complaint-based enforcement system

In a complaint-based system, neighbors have the potential to be a challenge.

Finding land is a social issue

Finding land is dependent on who you know. It can be hard to access land that does become available if you're outside the group that is offering it or looking for a new steward.

Limited resources

Volunteer-based groups and smaller nonprofits often have limited human and financial resources to do urban ag work, including looking for land. They could use more support.

Ideas for affordable, stable land access

Have a cooperative group of growers

Being part of a cooperative group of growers would assist with land access (e.g., make it possible to go after larger parcels) and other challenges that urban farmers face. They could work together to operate and steward land, build stronger networks, learn from each other (e.g., developing a business plan), provide mentorship, and cover for each other so that it's possible to take vacations

Create incubator programs

Incubator programs would help people overcome multiple initial barriers to agriculture, by providing training and giving time for new farmers to build their social networks and develop their skills in a supportive and affordable environment.

Develop centralized support for urban ag

Have a one-stop shop for resources and support, where farmers could get help with all of their administrative needs (like getting an FSA farm number, writing a business plan, applying for farm loans, and learning how to run a website and write grants). It would be helpful to have a central support system to remove some administrative burdens. Having to piecemeal all that information together on one's own is stressful and time consuming.

Would like each city to have an office of urban ag, so there was a place to go for assistance, to access resources, and to find dedicated government employees working on urban ag issues. These offices could also work on dedicated urban ag zoning and urban ag rates for water.

Use underutilized municipal land for urban farming and gardening.

Identify the publicly owned lots that are most viable for urban agriculture and then let the community utilize them for gardening and urban farming. Churches and schools also have underutilized land that could be dedicated to food production. This land could include centers for tool sharing and shared infrastructure (e.g., cold storage).

Come up with a system for quantifying how much farmers improve degraded, contaminated land.

If farmers were able to receive credit for their remediation/restoration work, it would make land more affordable, and it would make land available for agriculture that would otherwise go unused.

Streamline bureaucratic processes

Automatically approve permit applications.

Participant Feedback on Task Force's Draft Recommendations

Recommendation 3: Make agriculture a priority for land trusts and state conservation efforts

Likes: Participants generally thought these recommendations looked good and especially praised funding that would go to RCDs and Tribes to purchase agricultural land.

- **Concern: Limitations of conservation easements.** Participants noted ways that conservation easements can interfere with protecting land or selling protected land; farmers may not be willing to sell an easement or purchased protected land if they won't be able to make needed improvements.

Recommendation 4: Facilitate access to public land for agriculture

Likes: Feedback on these recommendations was positive, with participants expressing support for returning land to Tribal nations, paying producers and land stewards for their stewardship of public lands, expanding the California Surplus Land Act to include agriculture, and both strategies to encourage local governments to make public land available for agriculture.

Concerns/Comments:

- **Sale of food grown on public lands.** Participants discussed the importance of being able to sell food that is grown on public land. Not being able to sell food that's grown on publicly own land would limit what type of growers would be able to take advantage of opening up these lands to agriculture. However, other participants mentioned that if people receive low or no-cost access to public land, there should also be "some kind of reciprocity with the community."
- **Exploitation of more accessible agricultural lands by big corporations.** Growers were concerned that bigger agricultural operations would take advantage of low-cost access to public lands and requested that the Task Force include safeguards to prevent that from happening.

Recommendation 5. Help farmers who want to purchase or already own agricultural land

Likes: Participants liked the idea of greater transparency around who's purchasing land and all the strategies listed under "Develop a state-level succession strategy," especially the idea of creating a

producer pension fund. As one grower said, “As a farmer, I never, ever thought I would have a retirement... so that would be amazing.”

Concerns:

- **Effectiveness.** Participants wanted to know if the proposed strategies had been discussed with landowners to see if they would actually work. For instance, is a tax credit going to be more attractive to a landowner than the amount that a developer can pay? Urban Ag Incentive Zones came up as an example; landowners were supposed to receive a tax incentive to allow farmers to access vacant land, but it hasn’t worked out in practice.
- **Overreliance on government.** One participant was concerned about overreliance on government to mediate land access and provide funding in a moment when forces are actively trying to dismantle government. They wondered if there was a way to find a balance, where the important role that government plays is acknowledged, but there are also ways for people to find each other and make agreements without being so dependent on government.

Participant suggestions:

- **State the issues strategies are intended to address.** Multiple participants said it would be helpful to clearly state what systemic issues these recommendations and strategies are intended to address.
- **Incentives for first-time farmland buyers.** There are incentives to help first-time homeowners purchase a home. Participants suggested creating a similar incentive for farmers buying ag land for the first time.

Recommendation 7. Increase fair access to public funding for farmers who want to purchase land

Likes: The response to these strategies was very positive. One farmer noted that their project wouldn’t have been possible without the help of an in-house grant writer and they felt that providing greater access to those services could be a “game changer.” The idea of establishing a grant fund and a loan program, providing downpayment assistance, providing relief from student loans and other large expenses, and creating a debt forgiveness program were particularly popular. At least one participant felt that providing relief from large expenses would be helpful for youth thinking about a career in agriculture because it would reduce financial burdens, which can be a deterrent. Another farmer remarked: “Yes, these take a lot of the financial hurdles for beginning farmers out of the equation.”

Questions: What would debt forgiveness entail? Would it be like going into public service and having your student loans forgiven?

Concerns/Comments:

- **Avoiding exploitation.** How would you keep big producers from taking advantage of these programs? When they tried to make sure that permits for cannabis went to communities most impacted by the war on drugs, big companies hired local people as props and then used them to buy the license.
- **The commons.** One farmer was especially interested in agricultural commons and thought the commons should be part of the discussion when considering how to use state funds, so the land is held for more than a single generation.

Suggestions:

- **Expanding existing programs to include urban growers.** Some existing programs are for rural areas. For 5.2, it would be helpful to have a definition of urban that would allow those programs to be extended to urban areas.
- **Eliminating real estate fees.** For transferring farmland from one farmer to another, it would be good if you could cut out the real estate fees.
- **Link loan programs to debt forgiveness.** One participant was only in support of creating a loan program if it was tied to the debt forgiveness program. They noted that it's hard to pay down debt as a farmer and loans should be structured so that if you farm for a set period of time, your debt is forgiven.

Recommendation 9: Support changes in zoning and land use planning to ease development pressure on agricultural land and make it easier to develop housing for farmers and farmworkers

Likes: Urban growers felt that including housing is critical for both urban and rural areas. They called particular attention to enforcing fair leasing for tenants and minimizing regulations that limit or prohibit non-traditional forms of housing. One gardener expressed support for allowing more community-scale composting on urban sites to save money and conserve resources.

Questions:

- What's an urban growth boundary?
- Could tiny homes, which are currently used as temporary housing for unhoused people, be applied to urban ag land?

Concerns/Comments:**Opportunities for exploitation**

- Concern about ag land mitigation banking, which one grower felt won't work because developers will take the best land for building houses and set aside land that is not good for agriculture. See parallels to the implementation of requirements to develop low-income housing as part of market-rate developments.
- Can imagine that some of these strategies could actually be used to take land out of agriculture. These strategies need to be implemented together to work as intended.
- Landowners are incentivized to add housing because it increases the resale value of their property. So, when making it easier to add housing to ag land, it's important to make sure the intended beneficiaries are the ones to actually benefit.
- There's so much potential for exploitation. Worry about landowners using these to create company towns.

Consider urban zoning needs

- The zoning and land use planning strategies seem like they're written from a rural rather than an urban perspective. For instance, see strategies about maintaining agricultural zoning, but not anything about making it easier to rezone land for agricultural use.

Suggestions

- **Consider other models for creating affordable, accessible housing.** On public lands and lands owned by educational institutions, the same model that's used to create teacher and student housing should be used to make housing for land stewards too.
- **Create safeguards** so developers aren't free to develop ag land only for housing. It's important to have a mechanism to ensure that the land is still used for agriculture.
- **Add reviewing natural building codes.** One participant noted that there are restrictions currently on adobe structures and natural building (e.g., hay bale insulation). There are a valid set of practices that could be helpful for farmers too.

Messages for the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

It's not just about land for growing food. Urban agriculture also provides space for education, workforce development, food justice, and so many other social benefits.

Consider urban farmers and remember farmers in Southern California.

County and local governments also have to be involved with policies and zoning to make more land accessible for growing.

Make the bureaucratic process for acquiring land easier and make it more accessible in more diverse languages.

Central Coast Asian Growers, Session 1

Date: May 20, 2025

Location: San Martin, CA

Facilitator: Becca Xu

Summary Authors: Becca Xu & Cici Cui

The session included nine Chinese small-scale producers, primarily growing Asian specialty vegetables with greenhouse structures in Santa Clara County, CA. Some participants owned their farmland and others operated under leased arrangements. Becca Xu facilitated the focus group in Chinese.

Land access challenges

Participants described a number of persistent barriers that hinder their secure and affordable access to agricultural land:

- **Water scarcity and costly infrastructure:** Farmers reported severe water-related challenges. Drilling a new well has become prohibitively expensive (rising from \$40–50k to \$180k) and sometimes yields

no water. Even maintaining existing orchards is difficult when wells run dry. California's overall water scarcity means some crops (especially water-intensive trees) are no longer feasible.

- **High costs with low land returns:** The cost of holding farmland is high while its financial returns are relatively low. One participant noted that agricultural land in their area appreciates far less than land for housing or development, yet owners still face significant expenses (e.g. leases of a few hundred dollars per acre per year, property taxes). This makes it hard for farmers to justify or sustain land ownership purely for agriculture.
- **Burdensome and confusing permitting processes:** A major theme was frustration with local government regulations and permits required for farm structures. For example, even a modest greenhouse over 6 feet tall triggers a complex building permitting process. Farmers shared experiences of spending years navigating multiple agencies (planning, building, environmental health, etc.) to get approvals for structures like greenhouses and worker housing. The process is slow, uncoordinated, and subject to changing codes – one farmer invested six years and thousands of dollars trying to get permits, only to see requirements shift and ultimately face daily fines for non-compliance. Participants said there is “no clear path” for permitting agricultural projects and no single source of guidance. They feel over-regulated and under-supported by the current system.
- **Neighbor complaints and enforcement pressures:** Several farmers have faced challenges due to complaints from neighboring landowners. In a complaint-driven enforcement system, a neighbor's opposition to a farm structure or activity can trigger county inspections and penalties. Participants felt that some farmers (especially smaller or immigrant growers) may be unfairly “picked on” or penalized in these situations. One grower's neighbor's complaint about a greenhouse led to years of permitting hurdles and eventual orders to remove the structure. This dynamic creates uncertainty and discourages farmers from making improvements.
- **Difficulties with farmworker housing:** Obtaining approval to build on-farm housing for workers is extremely challenging. Participants cited “worker housing problems” alongside greenhouse permitting issues as barriers that can take **3–4 years** to resolve. Strict codes (e.g. septic system requirements) and procedural delays make it hard to provide needed housing on agricultural land. In some cases farmers felt requirements (like installing an expensive septic system even on fallow land) were excessive.
- **Lack of tailored support from agencies:** Farmers expressed that local agencies do not provide sufficient guidance or flexibility for small-scale and immigrant growers. They often have to rely on hearsay to figure out regulatory requirements. There is no dedicated county staff person to help navigate agricultural permitting, and no clear “checklist” of steps to comply. This absence of technical assistance leaves farmers at a disadvantage in dealing with bureaucratic systems. Participants also perceived inconsistencies and even bias in enforcement – noting that outcomes “depend on who the ag commissioner or inspector is,” with some officials being more lenient and others very strict. One participant bluntly stated that they find local government “really slow” and at times unresponsive or even discriminatory toward immigrant farmers.

Ideas to Improve Land Access

When asked what changes they would make to ensure farmers have affordable and secure land access for the next generation, participants focused on reducing regulatory burdens and improving support:

- **Adopt agricultural-specific building standards:** Farmers strongly recommended creating separate, appropriate building codes for agricultural structures. They felt that facilities like greenhouses should not be held to full commercial construction standards. For instance, requirements to use expensive fire-proof materials or commercial-grade foundations on simple farm greenhouses add unnecessary cost. Having an “agricultural track” in building codes – with lower-cost standards suited for farm use – would make it feasible to construct needed infrastructure.
- **Streamline and expedite permitting processes:** Participants want the county and other agencies to simplify the permit process for farms. Specific suggestions included developing a clear checklist or roadmap for obtaining permits, consolidating multi-department reviews, and setting faster timelines. They also suggested dedicating specialized staff or a “point person” within the county who understands agriculture and can guide farmers through permits. Overall, the message was to cut red tape so that farmers don’t spend years in bureaucratic limbo.
- **Lower the cost of compliance:** High fees and required infrastructure upgrades (e.g. costly septic systems or utility hookups) often put projects out of reach. Farmers proposed that counties could either relax certain standards for farms or offer subsidies/grants to offset these costs. For example, if an agricultural building still needs to meet some safety standards, there could be grant programs to help growers pay for permits or engineered plans. One participant gave the example that a septic system was initially demanded (at over \$100k cost) for a farm structure where it ultimately wasn’t even needed – better communication and flexibility on such requirements could save farmers significant expense.
- **Allow more mixed-use and on-farm residence:** To improve practicality of farming, participants wanted the ability to have both a residence and agricultural structures on the same parcel without excessive barriers. They noted interest in living on or near their farms and in providing farmworker housing, which current zoning and permit rules often constrain. One farmer wanted to place an RV on their ag land for seasonal housing, but regulations prohibited it (an RV can be stored but not occupied on farmland). Easing zoning to allow temporary or additional dwellings for farmers and workers – with reasonable health and safety rules – was seen as critical for sustaining farming operations.
- **Improve water infrastructure support:** Given the water challenges, participants would welcome policies to assist with water access – for instance, technical or financial support for well development, irrigation systems, and water efficiency. Even though no single solution can solve regional water scarcity, acknowledging and addressing water access as part of land access was important to the group. One farmer suggested the need for government inspection or assistance programs to deal with issues like algae in irrigation lines that affect food safety.
- **Strengthen farmer protections and guidance:** Participants wanted formal guidelines that protect growers from capricious enforcement and provide clarity on rules. For example, instituting a policy that agricultural code violations would first receive a warning and guidance, rather than immediate fines, could help. They also want authorities to proactively educate farmers in their own languages about regulations and best practices, rather than relying on neighbor complaints to prompt action. Overall, the

group desired a more supportive, advisory approach from government agencies as opposed to the current punitive, reactive stance.

Participant Feedback on Task Force's Draft Recommendations

Recommendation 7: Increase Fair Access to Public Funding for Land Acquisition

Likes: Participants strongly supported efforts to make farmland purchases more financially attainable for farmers. They agreed with strategies like offering low-interest loan programs and grants for land acquisition. Several noted that buying equipment such as tractors sometimes comes with 0% financing, whereas purchasing land involves prohibitively high interest rates – they liked the idea of leveling the playing field by reducing interest on farmland loans. The group was also enthusiastic about creating assistance similar to first-time homebuyer programs, but for first-time farm buyers. They felt that providing down payment support or favorable loan terms for new and socially disadvantaged farmers would be a “game changer” for land access.

Concerns: A challenge discussed was that many immigrant or elder farmers have difficulty accessing traditional loans due to language barriers and credit documentation. One participant pointed out that the older generation may not have clear or extensive financial records (tax returns, credit history) to qualify for loans. There was concern that without tailored assistance, these farmers could still be left out of public funding opportunities. Additionally, some noted that farmland with existing infrastructure (like a house or well) is priced much higher, making it hard to afford; zoning rules can force farmers to buy more land or facilities than they need. They worried that unless programs account for these factors, simply offering loans might not fully solve the problem. Finally, the group emphasized that any low-cost financing programs must be safeguarded so that large corporate interests cannot exploit them – funds should be targeted to small and socially disadvantaged producers.

Suggestions: Participants had several ideas to strengthen Recommendation 7. They suggested establishing a **guarantee or support program for immigrant farmers** – for example, a union or foundation that could co-sign or back loans for those with limited credit history. They also advocated for **down payment assistance scaled to farming experience** (e.g. a farmer who has been cultivating for many years would qualify for a lower down payment requirement). To address high interest rates, the group proposed that the government subsidize farm land loans or closing costs to achieve lower effective interest rates. One idea was to create a special “first farm” buyer program mirroring first homebuyer incentives, including tax credits or interest buydowns. Overall, farmers stressed the need for flexible financing options that recognize the unique economic realities of agriculture (slower, seasonal returns) and the circumstances of immigrant growers.

Recommendation 8: Update Policies and Regulations to Remove Burdens on Farmers

Likes: The group was pleased that the Task Force is addressing regulatory burdens, as these are among their most severe challenges. They appreciated the recognition that one-size-fits-all regulations (on things like food safety, water, and labor) can have uneven impacts and need revisiting. Participants supported the idea of revising rules to better align with on-the-ground realities for small farms and to advance agricultural

land equity. In particular, they agreed that providing more technical assistance to navigate regulations would be beneficial.

Concerns: Participants described numerous regulatory pain points, underscoring why changes are needed. One concern was that current **food safety standards don't account for cultural practices** – Chinese growers noted that their customers typically cook vegetables before eating, yet regulations treat their produce like salad greens eaten raw, and rules such as “produce boxes must not touch the ground” add cost and labor for small farms even when the actual food safety risk is low in their context. Another concern revolved around **farm infrastructure rules** – requirements for using certain materials (e.g. expensive piping to avoid algae growth) or obtaining numerous inspections, which small operations struggle to afford. Participants also highlighted inconsistent enforcement across jurisdictions, which creates uncertainty and a sense of unfairness – in some counties rules are applied very strictly, while others are more lenient. They noted that government agencies often do not communicate regulations clearly, and without multilingual outreach well-intentioned rules can end up excluding those with limited English proficiency. Finally, there was an emotional concern about the relationship with regulators – one participant felt that the government can come across as “irresponsible” and even biased against minority farmers, reflecting a breakdown in trust that needs to be addressed.

Suggestions: To make regulatory policies more equitable, the focus group offered several suggestions. They urged **greater cultural and practical tailoring of regulations** – for instance, revising food safety protocols for crops destined to be cooked, or providing exemptions/alternative compliance methods for small farms where appropriate. They recommended **grant programs or cost-share assistance** to help farmers meet necessary standards (such as upgrading equipment or facilities to comply with water and food safety rules). Improving the **consistency and training of inspectors** was another key idea: participants want inspectors who are knowledgeable about farming (ideally familiar with Asian crop systems) and to standardize interpretations of regulations so that farmers get the same guidance no matter who shows up. Several farmers said that regulatory processes should not be solely complaint-driven; they prefer a system of scheduled inspections or consultations that doesn't rely on neighbor complaints, to reduce conflict and uncertainty. Crucially, the group advocated for **better communication in multiple languages** – having documents, applications, and workshops in the languages spoken by farmers (such as Mandarin and Spanish) and hiring bilingual staff to assist farmers would greatly improve compliance and trust. By making the regulatory environment more understanding and supportive of small, diverse farms, the Task Force can ensure these policies truly remove barriers instead of inadvertently creating them.

Recommendation 9: Support Changes in Zoning and Land Use Planning to Ease Development Pressure on Farmland and Enable Farmworker Housing

Likes: Participants were in favor of measures that keep farmland from being lost to urban development and that expand options for on-farm housing. They noted that some positive changes are already underway – for example, one farmer mentioned that rules in their area had recently changed to allow more than one dwelling on a farm parcel if used for farmworker housing (in one case, up to 3 units or 18 rooms were now allowed, versus the old limit of one house). This kind of flexibility was seen as a step in the right direction. The group agreed that encouraging multi-use zoning (so farms can have both agricultural activities and necessary housing) would address a critical need. They also appreciated discussions about limiting non-ag development pressure, as rising land values for housing put extreme stress on farmers.

Concerns: Despite supportive policies being proposed, participants pointed out significant hurdles that remain in practice. A recurring concern was the **difficulty and cost of actually building farmworker housing** even when it is permitted in theory. Manufactured homes or modular units could be a cheaper solution, but if those are sourced internationally (e.g. from China) local authorities reject them for not meeting U.S. codes – often without clear guidance on how to get them approved; even domestic manufactured housing requires extensive approval processes, so although up to five units might be allowed on paper, each unit could cost around \$250k and still face complex permitting. Another concern was the prohibition on temporary housing like RVs – if a parcel has no existing house, farmers cannot live on-site in an RV or tiny home while they farm – a rule participants felt was impractical and kept them from staying on their land. They also mentioned ongoing requirements like proving the number of farm employees (via tax records) to justify worker housing and dealing with septic system limitations, which add red tape and uncertainty. In summary, the existence of zoning allowances for farm dwellings doesn't automatically translate into attainable housing – the process and costs remain a major concern.

Suggestions: The focus group emphasized the need to turn well-meaning zoning policies into reality on the ground. They suggested that the state and counties provide **greater technical and financial assistance for farm housing projects** – for example, grants or low-interest loans specifically to build farmworker housing. To address the code compliance issue, participants proposed creating a pathway for **pre-approved designs or certified structures** that farmers could use. One idea was to allow farmers to import affordable modular homes (including from overseas) as long as a licensed engineer or inspector certifies they meet safety standards. This would require state/local agencies to be open to new building methods and possibly to establish equivalencies for alternative building codes. Participants also advocated for **relaxing certain restrictions on temporary housing**, such as permitting seasonal use of RVs or trailers on farms (without arbitrary time limits or onerous moving requirements) as interim solutions. Additionally, they would like to see **smaller minimum parcel sizes or zoning variances** that enable family farmers to purchase and live on modest plots – current rules often tie housing approvals to large acreage (e.g. 20- or 40-acre minimums) which is a barrier for new farmers. Finally, the group echoed that implementation matters: they urge involving county governments in crafting model ordinances and ensuring that local planning departments treat farm housing proposals with urgency and understanding, rather than skepticism. Providing clear statewide guidance on these zoning changes would help local officials embrace them and help more farmers actually build housing on their land.

Messages for the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

At the conclusion of the focus group, participants shared key messages they want the Task Force to hear as it develops its final recommendations:

- **Make the process fair and accessible for immigrant farmers.** “It’s hard to farm,” one participant stated plainly, explaining that many Chinese and Latino farmers struggle with English and face extra hurdles in paperwork and communication. The Task Force should ensure that any new programs or policies come with translation support, multilingual education, and culturally competent staff. Government processes need to speed up and be **user-friendly for those with language barriers**, because “time is money” and delays can be devastating.
- **One size does not fit all in regulations.** Participants urge regulators and policymakers to recognize that **Asian vegetable growers have different practices and crops**. As one farmer noted, “Asian

vegetables [are] different – more varieties – should not use Western standard on Asian vegetables.” They want standards (for example in food safety and pest management) that account for diverse farming traditions and crop types, rather than blanket rules that may not be appropriate. They also emphasized the need for greenhouses and other infrastructure to grow certain culturally preferred crops (like ong choy/water spinach) in changing climate conditions, and stressed that regulations should support, not hinder, such adaptations.

- **Support on-farm infrastructure and legalize what farmers have built.** The group stressed the importance of greenhouses and other structures for their farming success – especially with changing climate and specialty crops. They ask the Task Force to push for ways to help farmers construct needed facilities and to **bring existing informal structures into compliance**. One idea was government-subsidized programs to help legalize currently “illegal” structures without punishing the farmers. This could involve funding or technical help to retrofit structures to meet basic safety standards.
- **Ensure consistent and fair enforcement (stop complaint-based crackdowns).** Farmers feel that inspections and code enforcement should be consistent, transparent, and not driven by neighbors’ complaints. They want an oversight system where minor infractions don’t lead to harsh penalties and farmers have a chance to correct issues. The Task Force should encourage mechanisms that protect growers from being unfairly targeted and that foster cooperation between farmers and regulators. For example, having a dedicated agricultural permitting and inspection unit that understands farming – “a separate group of county workers” focused on agricultural projects – and using inspectors who are more understanding of farm conditions would be welcomed.
- **Include local agencies and farmer organizations in solutions.** Participants noted that county-level implementation is crucial – policies on paper mean little if county agencies cannot execute them. The Task Force should involve county agricultural commissioners, planning departments, and local farm bureaus or associations in developing solutions. Additionally, supporting farmer cooperatives or networks in a fair manner is important. (One participant pointed out problems in a local farmer association that made it hard for new growers to join, suggesting a need for better models of shared land ownership or resource pooling that can include beginning farmers.) By working closely with local entities and ensuring new initiatives reach the community level, the Task Force can make its land equity goals a reality.

Overall, the focus group reinforced that **equitable land access** is not just about acquiring acres – it requires removing systemic barriers, tailoring resources to diverse farming communities, and building a supportive policy environment where small farmers can thrive. Their insights will help the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force craft recommendations that are grounded in the lived experiences of immigrant farmers working to steward California’s agricultural land.

Korean Farmers, San Bernardino County

Date: June 2, 2025

Facilitators: Hung Kim Doan and Jiana Choi

Summary Author: Jiana Choi

The focus group convened at the Lucerne Valley Seventh-Day Adventist Church, engaging members of the Lucerne Valley Jujube Cooperative. It included 25 Korean small-scale producers, primarily cultivating jujubes alongside select Asian specialty vegetables. While the majority of participants owned their farmland, a small number operated under lease arrangements.

The focus group began with the reading of a consent form, to which all participants agreed. The session lasted approximately four hours and involved 25 participants, who were divided into two groups of 12 and 13 individuals, respectively. One group was facilitated in Korean by Jiana Choi, while the second group was led by Hung Kim Doan with the assistance of a volunteer translator.

Data collection was conducted primarily through written responses, supplemented by audio recordings. Given cultural norms within the Korean community, where participants may be less inclined to share opinions openly in group settings, written response forms were provided for each question to encourage more candid and thoughtful input.

Findings

Several key issues emerged during the focus group discussions, reflecting the shared challenges and concerns of small-scale Korean farmers in the Lucerne Valley Jujube Cooperative.

1. **Water Rights and Access**

The most frequently cited issue was the cost and difficulty of obtaining water rights. Many participants expressed frustration over having to pay for access to water despite actively farming the land. There was unanimous agreement that water rights should be automatically granted to those engaged in agricultural production.

2. **Environmental Challenges**

Environmental factors—including wildlife, climate, and soil quality—pose significant threats to crop production. Farmers reported consistent damage from rodents, birds, and insects. In addition, extreme weather conditions such as high winds and intense heat were noted as contributing to reduced yields. Soil quality was also a major concern, particularly the lack of organic matter. Several farmers expressed the need for support in improving soil health through organic amendments and other practices.

3. **Electricity and Infrastructure Barriers**

Due to the rural nature of Lucerne Valley, some farms are located far from utility poles, making it prohibitively expensive to establish electricity connections. This lack of basic infrastructure continues to limit farming operations and growth.

4. **Challenges Faced by Leasing Farmers**

Leasing farmers reported high rental costs and lack of protections, despite their active stewardship of

the land. One participant shared a personal story of being exploited due to poor credit, paying \$65,000 for 20 acres with fruit trees. He also experienced harassment from county authorities regarding building codes and zoning regulations and was unable to defend himself due to language barriers and a lack of understanding of the policies affecting leased land. On his previous rented land, he planted over 1,000 trees, built a road and infrastructure, but once the property value went up because of his work, the owner wanted to sell or increase rent.

5. **Language and Digital Literacy Barriers**

Language and digital literacy were significant obstacles for many participants. The majority are over the age of 60 and are first-generation immigrant farmers with limited English proficiency and little to no formal higher education. These barriers make it difficult to access critical information about regulations, funding opportunities, and technical assistance.

6. **Support for Land Ownership and Succession**

Participants supported increased funding and technical assistance for both acquiring land and maintaining existing land ownership. Given the aging population of farmers, strategies that support land succession were seen as vital. Several also emphasized the need for transparency in the land purchase process, requesting a clear, concise summary of property details—including climate risks, soil conditions, and pest issues—before purchase.

7. **Overregulation and Policy Misalignment**

There was strong consensus that existing agricultural policies are heavily tailored toward medium- to large-scale operations and do not consider the unique circumstances of small producers or specialty crop growers. Many reported difficulties complying with regulations without adequate financial or technical support. Language barriers further compound these challenges, leaving producers unable to fully understand or meet compliance requirements.

8. **Housing and Land Use Regulations**

Participants who own farmland but lack housing on-site identified housing regulations as a major barrier. Current building codes and permit requirements were described as burdensome. Many agreed that easing restrictions would not only reduce stress but also increase the functional and economic value of the land.

Recommendations and Group Consensus

Participants were asked to vote on a series of proposed recommendations. The most highly supported were:

- **Recommendation 5:** Funding and technical assistance for land acquisition and ownership support.
- **Recommendation 8:** Culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach, education, and regulatory support.
- **Recommendation 9:** Easing housing restrictions to allow on-farm residence for small producers.

Recommendation 8 received the most votes, with participants strongly emphasizing the need for accessible information and policy guidance in their native language. There was also strong support for comprehensive assistance to help small farms navigate regulations and remain in compliance.

Overall, the group expressed enthusiasm for the proposed strategies and a strong desire to see them implemented. They emphasized the importance of financial and technical support across policy access, infrastructure development, land use flexibility, and succession planning, particularly for immigrant and aging farmer populations.

Insights

The focus group revealed that Korean small-scale farmers in Lucerne Valley face a complex set of interrelated challenges. Many of these producers originally relocated from urban areas such as Los Angeles and Orange Counties, drawn by the affordability of rural land in Lucerne Valley. However, the lower land costs come with significant trade-offs, including poor soil quality, limited utilities (water and electricity), and increased vulnerability to environmental stressors such as extreme weather and wildlife intrusion.

In addition to these agricultural challenges, nearly all participants reported difficulties in accessing critical information due to language barriers and limited digital literacy. These factors severely restrict their ability to navigate regulatory systems, access resources (including loans to purchase land), and advocate for themselves—placing them at a systemic disadvantage. Despite their dedication to farming, these producers are often left out of mainstream support systems and are in urgent need of culturally appropriate assistance and infrastructure improvements to sustain their operations and livelihood.

Conclusion

The focus group highlighted the distinct challenges faced by Korean small-scale farmers in Lucerne Valley. Many of these producers relocated from urban areas with the hope of building a sustainable farming livelihood, only to face new obstacles in rural settings—such as poor soil quality, limited water access, high infrastructure costs, and environmental pressures. In addition, they encounter ongoing barriers related to language, digital literacy, and navigating complex agricultural regulations that are often not designed with small or specialty crop producers in mind.

Throughout the discussion, not only were practical issues raised, but a deep sense of frustration, isolation, and perseverance emerged. Despite these ongoing challenges, participants demonstrated a strong commitment to farming and a desire to continue building their lives around agriculture. Many also expressed hope for passing their farms on to the next generation, although they acknowledged that the path forward remains uncertain under current conditions.

The most widely supported recommendations reflect the need for targeted, culturally appropriate support—especially in land access, policy education, regulatory assistance, and flexible housing options. With thoughtful policy changes and increased access to resources, these farmers could not only sustain their livelihoods but also play a critical role in strengthening California's rural communities.

Central Coast Asian Growers, Session 2

Date: June 4, 2025

Location: San Martin, CA

Facilitator & Summary Author: Lucy Diekmann

The UCCE Small Farms Team in Santa Clara County hosted a focus group, attended by 8 English-speaking, small-scale, specialty crop growers from the region. The group was a mix of Asian growers and other priority producers.

Farmers had a range of agricultural experience, from a few years to several decades. The group included farmers who owned land, leased land, or had informal arrangements to access land. Most were farming 10 acres or less, two owned properties of about 20 acres, and one owned more than 50 acres. Growing approaches included organic production and greenhouse production.

Land access challenges

Overregulation

There was a consensus that regulations and permitting requirements were not designed for small-scale agriculture and posed serious financial and administrative burdens for small-scale farmers. The quantity and complexity of regulations along with the cost of compliance were all obstacles. There was a strong sense that rulemaking was done without awareness of how farms operate. At the local level, one farmer was barred from having an RV or to adding shipping containers for storage because the property lacks a septic tank, a requirement that seems excessive from her perspective when she is not proposing to build a house. She has spent 2-3 years trying to get the permit to install a septic tank, but there has been no progress.

Limitations of leasing

Farmers who leased mentioned several challenges related to finding or staying on leased land. Typically, there was little interest when they contacted landowners, who often didn't want to deal with farmers who wanted to farm only a very small acreage. Landowners were also not interested in leasing because of liability concerns and because their focus was on land appreciation, not agriculture.

Short-term leases limit farmers' ability to implement practices that are environmentally beneficial. Owning land allows farmers to engage in practices that aren't focused on making a profit and may take years or decades to realize a benefit. As one farmer said, to care for the land, it's better if you own it.

A couple participants had accessed land with informal arrangements. They found that lack of a formal agreement made it hard to set up a business, enter some markets, or access grant programs.

While landowners prefer shorter contracts, farmers argue that it is inappropriate given the time and energy they have to invest in improving the farm. A longer-term contract (e.g., 10 years) would be preferable. Others observed that it takes 2-3 years to feel settled on a new piece of property.

Challenges related to installing, upgrading, and maintaining infrastructure

Installing and maintaining infrastructure was a challenge, even for farmers who owned land or had a financial cushion from a previous career in tech. For one farmer, the biggest challenge had been building infrastructure (e.g., barn, wash-pack station, containers) on leased land. Having to always seek permission from the landowner and finding funding to revamp the well and irrigation system on leased land were both challenges.

High cost of utilities

Multiple farmers named the cost of their PG&E bill (for operating their wells) as a significant challenge.

Cost of land

While some farmers in this focus group owned their own land, others mentioned how even though they worked off farm, that supplemental income was not enough to be able to purchase land.

Other challenges

Other challenges farmers encountered were not having enough labor, maintaining soil quality, and theft. Farmers in the group had had porta potties, tractors, and crops stolen from their farms.

Ideas to improve access and tenure

Land access

Participants shared many ideas for making land ownership or long-term land access more available to farmers. These included, subdividing parcels so that they could be farmed by multiple farmers each with 3-4 acres; instituting lease-to-buy programs; cooperative ownership of an ag commons, more community owned lands or ag reserves dedicated to agriculture; direct investments from agencies to producers (cutting out middlemen and gate keepers); and making more land available by putting all unused agricultural lands into food production.

Support landowners who want to lease to farmers

Others encouraged thinking about facilitating leases from landowners' perspectives. They suggested making it as easy to lease as possible by offering lease templates and legal protections. They also recommended more incentives for landowners who allow farmers to lease small acreages.

Holistic support for farmers, especially beginning farmers

Farmers also stressed that it takes more than land to have a farm. They recommended taking a holistic perspective on what will help farmers thrive. Areas where additional support is needed include working with Water Boards, covering input costs, finding labor, and regulatory compliance.

Ideas to support beginning farmers included encouraging farm mentorship and apprenticeship programs (perhaps through tax breaks or other incentives) and providing start-up capital to farmers when they begin farming a new piece of land.

Have fewer regulations

Farmers were enthusiastic about reducing the amount of regulation they face—one suggested using a magic wand to cut the number of regulations by half—and introducing better enforcement methods that are more friendly to small-scale growers. Participants also suggested making it easier to do some on-farm activities, like farm events and other forms of agritourism. To tailor regulations to farmers' needs, participants recommended greater and ongoing input from farmers when rules are being developed and periodic check-ins once they've been implemented.

Let farmers keep the value of their improvements

Create a dividends program that lets farmers “cash out” on land they improved

Improve information about available land

Provide better information to land seekers about available land, including how move-in ready it is. This would help to overcome the obstacle of not knowing where to look for land to buy or lease

Address exorbitant utility costs

To address the high cost of utilities, a few farmers suggested installing and maintaining solar power was subsidized for all farmers.

Increase understanding of farming

Participants also suggested educating the public about the environmental benefits of farming and requiring that anyone who works with or regulates farmers spends time on a farm to learn about what agriculture actually entails.

Feedback on the Task Force's recommendations

Recommendation 7. Increase fair access to public funding for farmers who want to purchase land

Comment: Have funding go directly to farmers, not through an intermediary.

Recommendations:

- Link loans to debt forgiveness, so that similar to loan forgiveness programs that exist for teachers, farmers who get a loan to purchase land would have it forgiven after a certain period of time.

Recommendation 8: Update policies and regulations to remove burdens on farmers

Comment: It is a challenge that the difficulty of getting a permit varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Make some rules more consistent from place to place.

Recommendations:

- There are a broader set of regulations and policies that interfere with farming than are listed here. Farmers recommended relaxing county codes for areas specifically designated for agriculture. This should include making it possible to have farm visits (e.g., for events, U-pick, farmstands) without a permit and allowing RVs and shipping containers on the farm without requiring the farmer to install a septic system.
- Small farmers would also benefit from having a tiered system of costs for electricity and water.
- Clarify how the Task Force's recommendations will provide protection for small producers.

Recommendation 9: Support changes in zoning and land use planning to ease development pressure on agricultural land and make it easier to develop housing for farmers and farmworkers

Comments:

- It is important for regulators and permitting and enforcement agencies to listen to farmers about their concerns and issues.
- Processes should be completed more expediently (i.e., without farmers having to wait multiple years for permits).
- Make sure that housing is developed in a way that preserves ag land.

Other suggestions & questions

- There is no crop insurance for specialty crops. One farmer has been flooded twice in the past three years, but he can't get crops insured. To address this issue, the state could create a fund for specialty crops for small, diversified farmers.
- Have CUSP always available rather than having the application period open in cycles.
- Will policymakers be motivated to adopt the task force's recommendations? A participant expressed concern that they will not be motivated because small farmers don't have the same resources as agribusiness.

Messages for the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

Give these strategies some teeth and funding – don't just make them a recommendation for counties. The strategies need to be comprehensive, robust, and connected to the ag bond. Funding for programs should

go directly to farmers and not agencies or land trusts. People in the middle are gate keepers. Relax the rules for farmers, it would help us continue. Have regulators spending more time in the field to learn about farmers' work. Don't keep charging farmers for each new rule – the costs add up.

Irrigated Lands Program has no scale to it. Need to have modified requirements for small-scale farms.

Have more focus group conversations.

Help new farmers get their operations started with a loan that will help them buy equipment and build infrastructure.

Lower other expensive costs, such as PG&E and water. Have a flat rate for energy since farmers irrigate during peak times and are being charged extra.

Spanish-speaking farmers, South Central Coast, Session 1

Date: June 14, 2024

Location: Ventura, CA

Facilitator & Summary Author: Lucy Diekmann

This focus group was hosted in partnership with Saticoy Food Hub and the Santa Barbara County Food Action Network. Ten growers from the region, who work with the Saticoy Food Hub, participated. The focus group included a mix of Spanish-speaking, English-speaking, and bilingual farmers. Lucy Diekmann facilitated the focus group in English, while a community member provided simultaneous interpretation. Claire Tuohey-Mote, a bilingual UC ANR staff member, took notes.

Farmer background

Participating farmers leased land in a variety of locations from Carpinteria to Fillmore. Leased land ranged in size from less than an acre to 5 acres. Farmers grew vegetables and orchard crops and raised chickens for eggs, which they sold through a range of regional markets, including food hubs, farmers markets, wholesale accounts, nonprofits focused on community food access, and school districts.

Land access challenges

Leasing difficulties

Farmers described difficulties negotiating lease terms and working with landowners. Several farmers mentioned the power imbalance inherent in tenant-farmer relationships. Farmers faced uncertainty about the conditions of the lease, not always knowing what to ask about during negotiations, and some

landowners' requirements that they lease a larger property than they wanted. Once a lease was signed, farmers still felt insecure because landowners often changed their minds. Ultimately, leasing limits farmers' autonomy as well as their ability to engage in long-term planning and make longer-term investments in their farms.

Language barriers

Language was an additional barrier for Spanish-speaking farmers trying to negotiate leases and work with English-speaking landowners.

Regulatory and zoning barriers

Multiple farmers struggled with the limitations that zoning and regulation placed on their operations. Those raising chickens were especially constrained; they were heavily regulated both in urban areas and areas with large-scale agriculture.

High cost of land exacerbated by size of available parcels

Farmers agreed that the high price of land put ownership out of reach. Individual farmers could not come with the up-front capital needed to purchase farmland. The cost issue is exacerbated by the size of the agricultural parcels available for sale. While larger properties are too expensive for an individual, it might be possible for a group of farmers to go in on purchasing land together. When sharing land, participants noted that farmers needed to have similar values.

Limitations of relying on social networks to find land

Knowing where to find land is another challenge. One farmer described a program that matched retiring and beginning farmers. However, because matches were brokered by a single organization, opportunities for finding land stayed within that social group and were not available to everyone, thus perpetuating existing inequities. It would be good to encourage large landowners who want their land to stay in agriculture to pass that land on to the full suite of small-scale farmers and not just farmers of the same background.

Ideas for securing long-term land access

Support on-farm housing

Most farmers were unable to live where they farmed and expressed broad support for programs or models that would allow them to live where they worked. Agrihoods were mentioned as one solution that links housing with agricultural land. The [Sustainable Iowa Land Trust](#) (SILT) was offered as an example of a land trust that provides affordable, on-site housing for farmers.

Make farmland affordable for farmers

Participating farmers want to have their own land. They were enthusiastic about proposals that would make land affordable, provide pathways to ownership, or offer very long-term leases.

Access to equipment and infrastructure.

Access to infrastructure is another barrier to farm success and longevity. Farmers were enthusiastic about arrangements that would provide affordable access to equipment and infrastructure, such as equipment cooperatives or having multiple farms on the same property to facilitate sharing equipment and infrastructure (e.g., tractor, coolers, a refrigerated truck).

Offer small farms holistic support

In addition to giving farmers affordable access to land, provide support systems to help them develop their businesses at the same time.

Give farmers the option to buy land in transition

Farmers described landowners selling agricultural land to corporations for non-agricultural uses. They would like farmers to have the option to buy those properties before they're sold to corporate landowners.

Reparations

The current system of land ownership is built on dispossession. When farmers or organizations buy land, they are paying people who have benefited from this system and history. Purchasing land within the existing system perpetuates historical inequities and power structures. Consequently, some farmers supported reparations for farmers from groups who have been removed from land.

Feedback on the Task Force's Draft Recommendations

Overall feedback on policy recommendations

- Recommendations seem top-down rather than bottom up. Participants would like to see a more grounded perspective.
- Provide more context for the recommendations.
- Recommendations should be simplified so that farmers and land stewards, as the intended beneficiaries, can easily see how these recommendations would work for them.

Recommendation 3: Make agriculture a priority for land trusts and state conservation efforts

Land trusts can protect land in transition

- When land is offered for sale at high prices, it is important for an entity with money to buy it to prevent its loss. Land trusts can purchase and preserve ag land so that later farmers will have the chance to farm a portion of it.

Build new models for land access that support liberation and true empowerment

- Land trusts and incubators need to be careful not to reproduce a sharecropper economic system and to consider whether they are structured in ways that support true empowerment and liberation. While

incubators often charge farmers for land and equipment so that they have skin in the game, they need to be mindful of not plunging beginning farmers into debt or micromanaging them. Land trusts should consider who is in control of protected land and whether it is building wealth and contributing to autonomy for farmers.

Reforming land access is a question of politics and values

- The people who do the work of farming—people who are now being taken from their workplaces by ICE—should have access to the land. It is important to address the issue that those who own land are not the same people who do the farming.

Recommendation 4: Facilitate access to public land for agriculture

Facilitating equitable access to public lands could increase the supply of available ag land

- This recommendation is important because public institutions are the largest landowners and their land is usually inaccessible for agriculture. Often they are holding land that could be used for agriculture but just sits empty. Other times, they offer the land for lease but the process for accessing it excludes small farmers. As an example, a school district opened an application process to lease some of its unused land, but people had to pay thousands of dollars just to apply. If they weren't selected, the deposit would be returned, but small farmers don't have access to those amounts of upfront capital.

Recommendation 7. Increase fair access to public funding for farmers who want to purchase land

Concerned about the unintended consequences of these strategies

- When the state starts intervening in the market, what are the downstream consequences? For instance, injecting more money for land into the market could drive prices up. It is important to consider the context, intention, and execution of these strategies and whether they will be helpful or harmful and to whom. It's possible that they may leave the intended beneficiaries worse off.
- Participants were concerned that farmers with more resources will be able to access new programs and resources before small-scale farmers can. To direct benefits to priority producers, it will be important to figure out how to set priorities within the agricultural industry.

Ownership is key to breaking historical cycles of inequity

- Recommendation 7 is important because in a market-based system, black and brown farmers need access to land ownership to break the historical cycle that has denied them access to land and to opportunities to build intergenerational wealth. Without access to ownership for people who have been denied land ownership in the past, current patterns of inequity will continue and intergenerational problems will persist.

Charity vs. empowerment

- People feel comfortable making charitable donations of money or food as a way to help others. But if the recipients of those charitable donations start using them to empower themselves, donors don't want to give anymore. People are especially reluctant to give land because land ownership is a way to hold power over other people. Land is also the source of true liberation.

Recommendation 9: Support changes in zoning and land use planning to ease development pressure on agricultural land and make it easier to develop housing for farmers and farmworkers

Beware of unintended consequences of rezoning

- The Saticoy area was rezoned from residential to light industrial, a change that has had large, unintended consequences on this primarily residential neighborhood. In this case, the County drove a loss of agricultural land and the subsequent rezoning has had significant impacts on residents.

Create incentives for local government to undertaken zoning and land use reforms

- Zoning is very specific to individual cities and counties. The state will need to make sure there are incentives for localities to do this work.

Making local zoning changes to facilitate increased urban food production

- Urban agriculture is difficult and what people can produce (e.g., poultry) is limited without the right zoning. Loosen zoning to enable more urban farming.

Messages for the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

Throughout the focus group, farmers emphasized how land access and supporting farmers have implications for who holds power, who benefits from resources, and whose values are represented.

In closing, one farmer said that we live in a capitalist, industrial society that is driven by money and profit seeking. Within that system, we need opportunities for farmers that don't fit that mold—farmers with heart, farmers who want to include culture and honor ancestral traditions in their work. This farmer isn't looking to have a huge acreage or grow rich, but to care for the land and for her community.

Spanish-speaking farmers, South Central Coast, Session 2

Date: June 29, 2024

Location: Santa Maria, CA

Facilitator & Summary Author: Claire Tuohey-Mote

This focus group was hosted in partnership with the Santa Barbara County Food Action Network (SBC FAN). Two growers from the region, who work with SBC FAN, participated. The farmers that participated in the focus group are bilingual in English and Spanish. Claire Tuohey-Mote (UCCE) facilitated the focus group in English. Shakira Miracle, Executive Director of SBC FAN, took notes.

Farmer background

Participating farmers leased land in Santa Maria and Guadalupe. Leased land is in 12- and 32-acre parcels. The farmers grow strawberries. They sell their products to wholesale distributors and to the local food bank through the Farms Together program.

Land access challenges

Challenges faced by leasing farmers

Farmers described difficulties in accessing leases directly with landowners. Most leases in the area are only available through sub-leases from agri-distribution companies. This causes power imbalance between the growers, the distributors, and the landowners. Farmers faced uncertainty about the conditions of the lease – they are only provided short-term leases and once a lease was signed, farmers still felt insecure because distributors often changed their minds. Ultimately, leasing limits farmers' autonomy as well as their ability to engage in long-term planning and make longer-term investments in their farms. Furthermore, distributors that control the leased land offer contracts that are not in the growers' interest – all risk and responsibility for land and infrastructure maintenance is the responsibility of the grower, despite their short-term lease.

High cost of land exacerbated by USDA loan caps

Farmers agreed that the high price of land put ownership out of reach. Individual farmers could not come with the up-front capital needed to purchase farmland. Loan caps regulated by the USDA based on farm size make land ownership even more unreachable.

Direct lease scarcity

Due to the predominance of distributors controlling sub-leases, farmers with little capital (and therefore commercial power) find it challenging to negotiate leases directly from landowners. Further, if there are direct leases available, it is for land that is poor quality.

Ideas for securing long-term land access

Improving lease terms

Farmers want assistance negotiating leases – multi-year commitments directly from the landowner that contract farmers to improve the land with sustainable practices.

Land easements

Advocate for the state to set up more land easements that are managed by nonprofits that mandate no conflicts of interest are present.

Offer small farms holistic support

In addition to giving farmers affordable access to land, provide support systems to help them develop their businesses and navigate regulatory requirements at the same time.

Give farmers the option to buy land in transition

Farmers described landowners selling agricultural land to corporations for non-agricultural uses. They would like farmers to have the option to buy those properties before they're sold to corporate landowners.

Equitable access

Farmers advocate land access be prioritized for historically underserved farmers.

Feedback on the Task Force's Draft Recommendations

Overall feedback on policy recommendations

- Appreciate the thought and innovation of the recommendations.
- Especially appreciative of the BIPOC advisory committee, tenants' bill of rights and publicity of land sales.

Recommendation 5: Help farmers who want to purchase or already own agricultural land

Suggested addition to the recommendation

- When landowner passes control of land to the next generation, set up mediation services for sub-leasing farmers on that land to be able to negotiate land purchase OR a direct lease from landowner (when a 3rd party holds the direct lease).

Recommendation 6: Improve lease terms for farmers who lease land

Concerned about increasing lease length from 50 to 100 years

- Long term lease holders in the Santa Maria area are distribution companies who do not grow on the land but just act as landlords. This trend would be exacerbated by lengthening leases.
- Rent collection in this model is exploitative of small-scale, historically underserved farmers. Distributors' contracts mandate that growers sell to them exclusively, so farmers don't have any say in what price they get for their products, and often also require that growers use the distributor's cooler, which growers have to pay for and which prevents them from seeking out other coolers that charge less for their services.
- Long term leases make it difficult for beginning farmers to start businesses.
- Forces existing and beginning farmers to take on higher rent for leases because of lack of options.

Suggested addition to the recommendation

- Add a mandate for rent caps on leased land that is assessed for each region of California and is not affected by change in land controller or owner.

Recommendation 7. Increase fair access to public funding for farmers who want to purchase land

Concerned about revision of existing funding programs

- Loan programs need revision in their eligibility requirements. Loans stipulate that “small” producers have a certain gross annual revenue that does not consider the actual capital/cash flow that farms have. Definitions affect that maximum loan that a “small” farm can access which therefore makes land ownership out of reach.

Recommendation 8: Update policies and regulations to remove burdens on farmers

Suggested addition to the recommendation

- Include Pesticide application regulations in policies evaluated by BIPOC Advisory Committee and encourage collaboration of regulatory agencies and municipality development policies so that farmers are not overburdened by balancing pesticide buffer zone regulations and encroachment of urban areas on agricultural land.

Recommendation 9: Support changes in zoning and land use planning to ease development pressure on agricultural land and make it easier to develop housing for farmers and farmworkers

Suggested addition to the recommendation

- Collaborate with municipalities to create more affordable housing for farmers and farm workers that does not encroach on agricultural land.

Message to the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

Throughout the focus group, farmers emphasized how land access is critical to farmers being able to invest in the health of the land and the products they grow.

Farmers want to feed their community with healthy, culturally appropriate, and sustainably grown food. Without secure access to land, they will not be able to do this.

TRIBAL FOCUS GROUP: KEY TAKEAWAYS

JUNE 2ND 2025

CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURAL LAND EQUITY TASK FORCE (ALETF)

Participants included seven Tribal members from diverse regions and affiliations.

All respondents stated they represented groups geographically located in lands Indigenous to the lands and/or territories of current day California



Generally speaking, participants characterized the current state of land access in California, as it pertains to Indigenous and Native American community members' ability to access land, implement cultural practices and ceremonies, as:

2/4 insufficient land access and their community faces major barriers

1/4 insufficient land access and their community faces some barriers

1/4 neutral

0 participants stated that there is sufficient land access and their community faces some or major barriers

Key Barriers Identified

Land donations often come with conditions (e.g., conservation easements) that limit traditional practices and do not acknowledge Tribal sovereignty.

Participant Recommendations

Return land to Tribes and Native American communities without restrictions; enable full cultural and sovereign use

Related ALETF Recommendations

Return ancestral lands to California Tribal Nations

Non-federally recognized Tribes are systematically denied many state and federal supports, this impacts access to programs, land, and funding.

Create a state recognition process for California Tribes to access programs, resources and protections.

Recognize and remove barriers to sovereignty for California Tribal Nations





Key Barriers Identified

Native people are harassed by law enforcement when practicing traditions on public land, sometime interrupted or questioned by the general public, disrupting ceremony. Elders, urban folks and displaced Native people struggle with travel distances to sacred or ancestral lands.

Participant Recommendations

Include clear policy language that affirms Indigenous practices, foodways, ceremonial access, and land stewardship. Prioritize Native access to public lands and ensure protection of these practices by law enforcement, landowners, and the public. Tribes must be engaged as true partners in land and policy decisions.

Related ALETF Recommendations

Recognize and remove barriers to sovereignty for California Tribal Nations

Costs of liability (related to land access for ceremony, tending etc.) raise concerns about who is legally liable for land use and/or related hazard mitigation- this hinders the feasibility of access and ownership (due to high risk or high mitigation costs).

Fund trusted Tribal TA providers and ensure Native communities can access legal and environmental expertise to safely access land without undue legal or financial risk.

Recognize and remove barriers to sovereignty for California Tribal Nations

Increase fair access to public funding for farmers / land stewards who want to purchase land.



Next Steps



These notes were shared with participants who provided comments and edits



UC ANR researchers will share notes from five sets of focus groups with the ALETF



ALETF is working with partners to integrate these insights into recommendations for equitable land policy, ensuring Tribal voices shape state frameworks for land access.

TRIBAL FOCUS GROUP: KEY TAKEAWAYS

JUNE 11TH 2025

CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURAL LAND EQUITY TASK FORCE (ALETF)



- Participants included fifteen Tribal members from diverse regions and affiliations.
- All respondents stated they represented groups geographically located in lands Indigenous to the lands and/or territories of current day California



Generally speaking, participants characterized the current state of land access in California, as it pertains to Indigenous and Native American community members' ability to access land, implement cultural practices and ceremonies, as:

- 62% insufficient land access and their community faces major barriers
- 23% insufficient land access and their community faces some barriers
- 8% neutral
- 8% sufficient land access with some barriers
- No participants stated that there is sufficient land access and their community faces some or major barriers

Key Barriers Identified

Participant Recommendations

Related ALETF Recommendations

Non-federally recognized Tribes are excluded from programs, funding, and land rights. Blood quantum and recognition processes perpetuate colonial structures.

Create a CA-based recognition process, respect diverse Indigenous identities, provide pathways for access to land and rights for all Indigenous communities.

Return ancestral lands to CA Tribal Nations; recognize and remove barriers to sovereignty.





Key Barriers Identified

Participant Recommendations

Related ALETF Recommendations

Public domain allottees face heavy restrictions from Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA); cultural burns and stewardship projects delayed by complex permits and understaffing. Regulations do not align with Indigenous governance.

Fix BIA staffing, reform land titling, expand eligibility for land transition programs, simplify permitting for cultural practices.

Recognize and remove barriers to sovereignty; increase fair access to public funding.

High insurance and liability costs, unclear land-sharing agreements, limited capacity to navigate legal risks, costs deter stewardship.

Develop state-backed insurance options, offer tax breaks to landowners who lease land to Tribes, standardize land-sharing templates, support technical assistance.

Increase fair access to public funding and technical assistance; support co-management and safe access without financial burden.

Long travel distances, lack of facilities (water, ADA), harassment during ceremony, environmental threats, displacement, and loss of tribal ecological knowledge.

Guarantee year-round access, develop infrastructure (restrooms, water, ADA), expand public land sharing, protect Indigenous practices through law and partnerships.

Engage Tribes as true partners in land policy; prioritize Native access to public lands.

Next Steps

- These notes were shared with participants who provided comments and edits
- UC ANR researchers will share notes from five sets of focus groups with the ALETF
- ALETF is working with partners to integrate these insights into recommendations for equitable land policy, ensuring Tribal voices shape state frameworks for land access.

