

Appendix B: Interview Summaries

Table of Contents

<i>Mendocino County Resource Conservation District</i>	1
<i>UCCE Fresno County</i>	5
<i>San Diego County Food System Alliance</i>	9
<i>Alameda County Resource Conservation District</i>	12
<i>Center for Land-Based Learning</i>	15
<i>North Coast Growers’ Association</i>	19
<i>UCCE Marin County</i>	22
<i>First Nations Development Institute</i>	31
<i>Flower Farm, Santa Barbara & Ventura Counties</i>	35

Mendocino County Resource Conservation District

Date: May 9, 2025

Location: Zoom

Interviewer & Summary Author: Lucy Diekmann

Organizational background

Mendocino County Resource Conservation District (MCRCD) “is a non-regulatory, public agency providing conservation leadership for voluntary stewardship of natural resources on public and private lands.”¹

MCRCD serves farmers through its Soil Health and Agriculture, Forest Health and Resilience, and Water

¹ Mendocino County Resource Conservation District, <https://mcrcd.org/>

Resources Programs. It also manages the Willits Bypass Mitigation Lands, which includes managing and monitoring leases with many ranchers. The RCD also helps farmers and ranchers secure grants to implement conservation practices.

Land access

In Mendocino County, the majority of agricultural production is in vineyards. Vineyards usually own their own lands, while small-scale fruit and vegetable producers typically lease.

Land access challenges

Cost of land is a barrier to purchasing land for fruit and vegetable producers. The lack of affordability is exacerbated when the amount of land for sale (e.g., 40 acres) is much larger than the area that the farmer will ultimately farm (e.g., 1-5 acres).

The history of agriculture shapes what land is available today. Parcels that are bigger than what a small-scale farmer is looking for were often parts of much larger ranches that were broken up over time.

Agricultural land ownership has been characterized by boom-and-bust cycles. These cycles contributed to the transition from ranching and dairying to fruit and nut orchards to vineyards. When “busts” occur, agricultural land is at risk of being converted to non-agricultural uses. The county is experiencing one of these moments now.

Successful models for accessing land

There's a ranch that includes a few acres of fruit and vegetable production. The landowners are dedicated to ranching but also wanted to spend more time with their family, so they leased the farmland, including all facilities (e.g., barn and cold storage) and existing agreements (e.g., with a local brewery), to an indigenous women-led farm. The relationship has been great, and the farmers have used the space as a gathering place for the coastal community.

When farmers or ranchers are interested in keeping their land in agriculture, it's helpful for there to be only a marginal price difference between selling to a developer and selling to a farmer. For example, one large dairy sold off 40 acres to a small farm at an affordable price; now the new owners are growing fruits, vegetables, and flowers. The sale was facilitated by the original owners' desire to keep the land in agriculture and the fact that there wasn't much difference in price between selling to a farmer and selling to someone who wanted to build a mansion.

Ideas for affordable, secure access to land

To ensure access to land for farmers, figure out a way to guarantee that agricultural land that is being sold either goes to another farmer and is kept in agriculture or goes to Tribes. Conservation easements are one way this could be done.

Feedback on Task Force's Draft Recommendations

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

Comment

- Whether farmers lease or own, any grant funding that helps them cover costs (e.g., purchasing compost) supports long-term land tenure.

Recommendations

- **Expand technical assistance (TA) programs and make funding for the state's climate-smart agriculture programs a consistent part of the state budget.** The lack of consistency in state grant programs has been hard for farmers and TA providers. When funding for popular programs (e.g., HSP and SWEEP) is cut from the state budget and then brought back through bonds, it creates challenges because the stipulations for the grant programs end up changing from round to round because of what's required by the bond funding (e.g., which costs are allowable, how agreements are structured, etc.).
- **Revising existing programs so that they align with equity goals should include making them work better for small-scale producers.** When revising existing programs to better align with equity goals, it's important to make them work better for small-scale, socially disadvantaged producers, who currently have a much harder time implementing state grant-funded projects than larger farms do and may be subject to a greater level of scrutiny because their projects are less cookie cutter.
 - Have had experience working with small-scale farms who had to completely restructure their projects or had them delayed for months. These experiences stand in contrast to vineyards that are implementing a standard project and have the benefit of dedicated staff who can manage the grant.
 - When one farm had to get an amendment to a grant project, CDFA decided to re-review the entire project, not just the proposed modification. Working through this issue with CDFA's technical team took so long that the grants administrator eventually told the farmer to repay their advance payment because they hadn't been able to complete the first phase of the project on time. The practice that the farmer wanted to do was one that other agencies had already approved on other parts of the property.
- **Develop and demonstrate trust with grantees.** Part of revising existing programs to be more equitable includes developing trust with landowners, farmers, and TA providers. Other state entities (e.g., Wildlife Conservation Board) already demonstrate that more trusting relationships with grantees are possible.

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

Comment

- The policies named in this section aren't especially relevant in Mendocino County.

Concerns about effective implementation.

- Increased coordination and review of state policies and regulations with equity in mind sounds great, but raises questions about implementation. A few years ago, a collaboration was announced between

CDFA, NRCS, RCDs, and UC ANR. Has that group made progress or been effective? Nevertheless, it would be great to make space for coordination to happen and to include more agencies.

- Like the idea of having CDFA committees review new policies and regulations when they can still be changed. However, how much input do these committees already provide for internal CDFA programs? How much change do they push for and what barriers exist to affecting changes internally?
- It's also important to be aware of how policies are implemented over time. Mendocino County is the last Water Board Region to have the Waste Discharge Requirements Program enforced, so it is the most heavily regulated of any region. The first Water Board Region to implement this program had the least monitoring, verification, and fees. But as each new region is added to the program, new elements are added, while things that aren't applicable are not removed. Compliance with this program will be very costly and there aren't enough ways to exempt or minimize participation by small-scale farmers. (Suggestions for improvement below.)

Recommendation: Reward good work

- As policies and regulations are rolled out, it's important that they recognize and reward farmers who are already doing good work that is continually verified. Compliance and early adoption should be rewarded.

Recommendation: Have exemptions and protections in regulations for small and mid-sized farms

- Having exemptions for small farms is good, but there also need to be protections for farms that are just over the limit for exempt acreages; otherwise, they face a disproportionate impact from compliance when compared to much larger growers.

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

Comment

- **Adoption of conservation easements limited by their restrictions on structures.** Housing for farmworkers is very important and is related to the loss of agricultural land. Many vineyard owners are interested in conservation easements, but they are deterred by limits on how much land can be used for any sort of structure. More landowners would utilize conservation easements if they didn't limit their ability to build, renovate, or expand structures that are needed for their agricultural operations, including farmworker housing.

Recommendation

- **Streamline permitting.** Decreasing permitting costs and streamlining permitting would also have a big impact. Enforcing fair leasing agreements for tenants should go hand-in-hand with permitting changes.

UCCE Fresno County

Date: May 14, 2025

Location: Fresno, CA

Interviewer & Summary Author: Lucy Diekmann

Lucy Diekmann visited University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) Small Farms Program staff in Fresno and toured three Hmong farms. At each farm site, we saw the operation, talked about land access challenges, and hopes for the future. Throughout the tour, Lucy learned from the UCCE Hmong Agricultural Specialist about his experience supporting small farmers over the last three decades.

Organizational background

In Fresno County, the UCCE Small Farms Team works with small, diversified specialty crop growers and offers linguistically accessible support for Hmong and Spanish-speaking farmers. The Small Farms team connects farmers to resources, helps them to apply to grant programs, and offers assistance complying with a variety of regulations (e.g., food safety and groundwater management.) Farmers also contact UCCE staff for advice on finding and accessing land. One of the tools they have developed is a simple lease form that farmers can take to the landowner.

Farm Background

- While Hmong farmers make up the majority of Asian farmers in the Fresno area, there are also Mien, Lao, Thai, and Cambodian farmers.
- In 2007-2008, there were ~1500 Asian growers in Fresno. Now that number has shrunk to 1000 to 1200 Asian farmers. Some of those who stopped farming left because they lost the land they were leasing and couldn't find more land to farm.
- Hmong growers typically sell to local packing houses and to farmers markets in the Bay Area and Los Angeles.
- Many Hmong farmers are highly diversified, so they consistently have crops for the farmers market. Around Fresno, Hmong farmers grow more than 200 varieties of crops, including ginger, lemongrass, and sugarcane.
- Americans don't realize why the Hmong are in California. After helping the US in the Vietnam War, they were forced to relocate because staying in Laos would have meant facing persecution or death.

Land Access

About 80% of Hmong farmers lease land; 20% own land. Most leases are year-to-year; a few may get a 5-year contract.

Two of the farmers we visited leased land. The third farmer owned their own property and leased a portion of it to other Hmong farmers.

Farm 1

- **Farm 1** leases about 20 acres, sells to farmers markets in the Bay Area, and is a recipient of the Health Soils Grant Program. They have been on their current property for about 12-15 years. The land they leased prior was converted to citrus.

Farm 2

- **Farm 2's** land access is the most precarious. She has been through three or four different farm sites already and doesn't know from year to year if she'll be able to continue farming the site she is on now. The landowner has said that as soon as the land becomes more valuable to use for something else, he will terminate the lease.
- The land that **Farm 2** leases is zoned industrial. If it were zoned agricultural, her lease might be more secure.
- **Farm 2** received money from SWEEP for a new pump and to extend the well 20 ft. She would struggle without the improvements SWEEP let her make. As it is, Farm 2 earns just enough to return to farming each year.
- **Farm 2** has had a problem with theft (e.g., of equipment and plastic row cover). In the last incident, she lost \$6000-\$8000 worth of supplies and a generator. There's no financial assistance for farmers affected by theft or fire.
- She sells to packing houses, growing larger quantities of fewer crops (e.g., eggplant, bitter melon, and opo squash).

Farm 3

- **Farmer 3** owns 36 acres; she farms some of the land and leases the remainder to 8 farmers, who each rent 3-4 acres from her.
- She also received SWEEP funding, which she used to install pumps and a valve for each farmer. It's hard to divide water up among multiple farmers without individual valves; before the new infrastructure, each farmer had to wait their turn to water.
- People ask **Farmer 3** all the time if she has spare land for them to grow.
- One of **Farm 3's** neighbors is an almond grower. The almond grower is asking her to sell them her land. They want her to let them know first when she's ready to sell. For now, she wants to keep growing vegetables, but when she's ready to retire, she'll sell the land. Unless some entity gives good money to keep it in vegetables, it will become almonds.

Land Access Challenges

Leasing

Year-to-year leases add stress and insecurity. If the landowner terminates a farmer's lease, they lose their land and possibly their farm because it's hard to find a different property to keep the farm going.

Many owners want lease payment in cash (e.g., ~\$40,000 in cash for 38 acres)

Landowners change. They can give farmers a hard time. It's better for farmers to have their own land so they don't have to worry.

Difficulty finding land

It's very hard to find land. Sometimes someone sees empty land and asks if they can rent it. The owner might not want to rent or no one knows who the owner is so there's no way to contact them.

Land availability

Conventional farmers (almonds and other commodities) have thousands of acres. There's hoarding of land, and small farmers don't have room to expand. Large farms have the money to purchase large acreages and small farms do not.

The land that is available is far away and it's too large. Some of the land that is available is in the foothills. It's not easy to access water there. It's also difficult for a small farmer to travel that far; it consumes a lot of time and gas money.

Large almond farms are everywhere. When agricultural land is available, it is used to grow almonds and citrus.

Land access has gotten harder over the last few decades. Land that used to be farmland outside of Fresno is now housing.

Land expense

Large farms are too expensive for a small farmer. For example, a property with an almond orchard may be for sale; it might cost \$2-\$3 million and then a farmer who wants to grow vegetables has to spend another \$80,000 to remove the almonds. That's not affordable. Cleaning up an existing agricultural site for a new grower costs so much. (For example, it would cost \$50K-\$60K to remove grapes from a property.)

It's hard to buy land right now because prices are so high.

Critical importance of water

Farms have to have access to water.

- A farmer contacted UCCE about 20 acres available for rent. That land doesn't have water and you're not allowed to drill a well there. Had to tell him, don't rent if you don't have water.
- We drove past a fallow lot that used to be a farm. There's an old well that's no longer working on that property. If a farmer were to lease that land, they'd end up spending \$40,000 - \$50,000 to put in a pump. If the landowner allows a long-term lease, the farmer would need 10 to 15 years to recoup that expense. If the landowner only allows a 1- to 2-year lease, then the farmer has spent all that money for nothing.

Large conventional farms also cause water to dry up. They have deep wells with 100 to 200-horsepower pumps. In a new almond or citrus orchard, they'll put in a well that's 400 to 500 feet deep. Hmong farmers typically have wells with 10 to 15-horsepower pumps. In a drought, small farmers with a 100 to 150-foot well are out of luck. Only those with wells 400-feet or deeper can get water. During a drought, farmers with a shallow well have to wait until their neighbors stop pumping, then the water rises up. They might not be able to turn on their pump until midnight.

Language access and regulatory barriers

Language is a challenge. Farmers speak Hmong; English is their second language.

Regulations are another challenge. Farmers can't farm like they did in Laos. In Fresno they must know and follow laws related to weeds, pests, pesticide application, etc. There are a very limited number of people who speak Hmong and can help farmers navigate regulatory agencies.

Economics of farming

From January to July, there's no money coming in. When the farm is done for the season, the money is gone, but farmers still need to purchase supplies for next year.

Ideas to improve land access

Available land should go to farmers who grow food, so they can continue to farm.

It's good for small farmers to have access to land. Let others farm, so they can provide for their families.

A program to help small farmers access land. If farmers can purchase land, then they can continue to farm. It would be best if the program could help to subsidize the land because farmers don't have enough money to buy land.

- Farmer 2 said, if she could purchase land, she might have a future in farming. Without land, there is no future.
- A program to help small farmers buy land could do a lease-to-own model. Farmers would pay their lease amount every year and eventually pay off the land.

It would be good to have land available, so farmers can keep growing food. A lot of small farms don't have land and they ask **Farmer 3** for land to grow food for their community and for their families, but she has already leased all of her property that she can.

Feedback on Task Force's draft recommendations

- Support removing the regulatory burden on farmers. When farmers are small, they struggle.
- Support using the Williamson Act to keep agricultural land in agriculture. If we don't preserve our agricultural land, we'll have to import food.

Message for the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

Farmers told us that their farms provide benefits to local communities and the region that extend far beyond their business.

- Farmers we visited were concerned for the future, especially self-sufficiency and health for future generations. When farmers are gone, there is no food for children, for the next generation.
- Hmong farmers produce an incredible diversity of crops.
- Farmers are looking for land, so they can grow food for their communities and support their families.
- When it's all almonds in the Central Valley and no vegetables, then maybe there will be no food.

Farmer 2 wishes the Governor would come tour the farm, so he would understand the situation of small, diversified farmers better.

San Diego County Food System Alliance

Date: May 16, 2025

Location: Zoom

Interviewer & Summary Author: Lucy Diekmann

Organizational background

The San Diego Food System Alliance (SDFSA) is a “diverse community of leaders in San Diego County—farmers, fishermen, food business owners, workers, organizers, policymakers, funders, and residents—committed to building a food system that works for everyone.”² Their work is guided by the San Diego County Food Vision 2030. Their Local Food Economies Lab’s Land Tenure and Stewardship Initiative has five core strategies:

- “developing and negotiating equitable land leases and transfers;
- supporting the creation of community agricultural land trusts and commons;
- providing holistic technical assistance for land-based projects and collective governance;
- expanding access to supportive and debt-free capital for land stewardship; and
- offering resources for ecological, cultural, and spiritual land stewardship.”³

Land access

The majority of the small-scale, underserved farmers that SDFSA works with lease land. Many of these producers are looking for more stable, secure tenure, either in the form of a longer-term lease or purchasing land.

Land access challenges

For those looking for land, the cost of land is a barrier. In San Diego, development pressure is very high, and land is so unaffordable, it’s out of reach.

For those who are leasing, it is a struggle to secure a lease that offers enough security or stability to be able to make larger or long-term investments in a property. On leased land, there is also no pathway for farmers to build equity.

In terms of being able to stay on land, the costs of doing business (e.g., water rates, operational expenses) are a perpetual challenge.

² The San Diego Food System Alliance, “About Us,” <https://sdfsa.org/about>

³ The San Diego Food System Alliance, “Land Tenure & Stewardship Initiative,” <https://lab.sdfsa.org/land-tenure-stewardship-initiative>

Current land access projects

The SDSFA has been working with a farmer cooperative to negotiate a farmer-friendly lease for land in a city-owned ag preserve. The project aims to improve leases for other agricultural tenants in the ag preserve (who have been signing month-to-month leases with the City); create a secure lease for the cooperative which would then start a farm incubator; and serve as model for how to work with other municipalities to create farmer-friendly leases or transfer public land.

Through this project, SDSFA has seen that working with the City takes a long time. To-date lease negotiations have taken two years. While the City is amenable to this project, it has been a slow process to figure out who are the right people within city government to talk to. Additionally, each city will be different, so every time, it will be a new process to figure out who to talk to and how to make the case.

Ideas for affordable, secure land access

Create a community agricultural land trust.

SDSFA is already working on a community agricultural land trust that will operate on a receive-protect-sell model, built around land donated by—rather than purchased from—public and private landowners. With this model, they hope not to have to dedicate tons of time to raising large sums of money to buy back land at astronomical rates. Currently, the San Diego region has conservation land trusts and housing trusts, but no land trusts that are focused on agriculture.

What additional support is needed in the land access space?

More support for the organizations that are doing land access work. The depth of support that is needed for any of these areas of land access work is well beyond what any one organization has the capacity to do.

It would be helpful to have more models for holding land in common, in addition to community agricultural land trusts. It would be great to see creative thinking about how to bring several farms together and support them with collective governance, so they can steward land together.

Additional resources for Tribal Land Conservancies or for Tribes' land stewardship initiatives.

Figure out how to incentivize municipalities and counties to make public lands more affordable and accessible.

Also figure out how to incentivize local government and private landowners to donate land for agriculture. Coming up with creative ways to have land donated and raising money to protect land are both integral to land tenure work.

More work needs to be done so that farmers can make a reasonable living, such as a universal farm basic income. A basic income for those who don't have the resources to buy healthy food is also important because these are systemic issues. Land is one of many challenges; if we don't address several of them, then we won't create the desired transformation.

Feedback on the Task Force's Draft Recommendations

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

Support for land trusts focused on equity

- Support for land trusts focused on equity is important because in SDSFA's experience existing resources and funding seem focused on larger, more established land trusts (e.g., conservation land trusts and larger farmland trusts) as opposed to community land trusts and smaller-scale initiatives that are focused on equity.
- Networks for land trusts in California also seem to center conservation land trusts. It would be helpful to be part of a network that could offer umbrella support to smaller, more emerging, deeply rooted land trusts.
- Land trusts are an important strategy because with so much land in transition, having a way to acquire and hold land before it's lost is one of the most catalytic things we can do.

Need for regional coordination

- The mismatch between the pace of land trust development and the immediacy of farmers' needs means that we end up being less strategic and coordinated as a region. It's important to be able to approach conserving land for agriculture and supporting our communities in a strategic way.

Recommendation #4: Facilitate access to public land for agriculture

Recommendation: Building in accountability

- Recommend making more explicit *how* land will be made available to priority producers and Tribal land stewards. If land just goes to the highest bidder or the most established person, it doesn't solve the problem.
- Add qualifiers to the strategies for making public land accessible because available land is not inherently land that is available in farmer-friendly ways. For instance, the strategies don't stipulate anything about secure tenure, so access agreements created under this strategy could be month-to-month.
- Consider how to build in accountability measures or performance outcomes, so these strategies don't just become a box that local governments check.

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

Developing community funds

- Land trusts, nonprofits, and other intermediary support organizations also help farmers secure capital for down payments. Suggest naming the role these organizations play in land purchases and including money that could seed community funds, which would be available to the farmers these organizations are trying to support.
- Offer support for organizations that are providing technical assistance for integrated capital and creative financing solutions.

Integrated capital

- Earlier comments about support for integrated capital could be included here under increasing technical assistance for farmers seeking grants or loans.
- Clarify the type of technical assistance (TA) that is meant here. Would prefer that it is support for holistic TA, that includes capital support along with other types of assistance (e.g., business viability, marketing).

Recommendation #9: Support changes in zoning and land use planning*Make preserving agricultural land a core strategy for mitigation for developers*

- Consider how to incentivize developers to use mitigation policies to set aside land for community agriculture or indigenous land stewards. Currently, mitigation land goes into conservation, because it's more work for developers to put it into agriculture or a community land trust.
- Clarify what ag land mitigation banking means.

Alameda County Resource Conservation District

Date: May 19, 2025

Location: Virtual

Interviewer & Summary Author: Lucy Diekmann

Organizational background

The Alameda County Resource Conservation District (ACRCD) strives “to provide leadership in the County and region about natural resources conservation, wildlife, and agricultural enhancement through partnerships, education, outreach, resource services, technical assistance, and funding.”⁴ Since its founding in the 1940s, the ACRCD has worked primarily with ranchers because the majority of Alameda County’s agricultural land is rangeland. Over the last decade, ACRCD has also begun working with small, diversified row crop producers and urban farmers. As a non-regulatory agency, ACRCD provides technical assistance and helps farmers and ranchers find funding for voluntary conservation projects.

⁴ Alameda County Resource Conservation District, <https://acrcd.org/about-us/>

Land access

The majority of ranchers served by the ACRCDC operate on leased public land.

It is rare for small or urban farmers to own land; most are leasing. In contrast to ranchers who usually come from multigenerational ranching families, the majority of small and urban farmers are first generation farmers.

Land access challenges

Land Suitability. Recognizing that most agricultural producers in Alameda and surrounding counties lease, cost isn't the biggest barrier to land access. Instead, it's in part the lack of available land that's suitable for small or mid-scale row crop production.

The other barrier is the lack of transparency and information about agricultural land that is available (e.g., who owns it, what uses are allowable) to lease. It is incredibly difficult for someone trying to start a market farm to figure out where there are opportunities to lease land. There is no way for them to know about available land unless they happen to drive by and see it, then look up the parcel number to try to figure out who the owner is.

Successful models of land access

The Sunol Ag Park has been successful as a model for accessing and staying on land. It doesn't function as an incubator, which has farmers move off after a set period of time; instead, it provides more long-term land tenure. The Ag Park also addresses barriers related to land suitability, water access, cost, and transparency about what land is available.

In urban areas, partnerships with public agencies tend to be quite successful.

Ideas for affordable, secure land access

Put land into community land trusts, so it is out of the speculative real estate market and it is not held by large public agencies or municipalities. There are more possibilities with a community agricultural land trust, which is specifically designed to hold land for agricultural uses. Local governments still have to juggle competing priorities for the land they hold (e.g., affordable housing).

Create a more robust, centralized repository of information about available land. FarmLink is a great resource, but it's not widely utilized by urban or small-scale farmers in Alameda County. ACRCDC would love to be able to point farmers who inquire about land to a website that has a directory of land that's available; currently nothing like that exists. It would also be helpful to tailor more of FarmLink's resources to non-traditional-agriculture contexts and raise awareness about them with small and urban farmers.

Having an ag ombudsman to help farmers navigate small business development, permitting, and regulation. The ombudsman could help farmers identify and prepare everything that working with a public landowner will require. Having a more easily identifiable person to walk prospective farmers through that process would be very helpful.

Land access pilot project with municipal governments

With grant funding, ACRCDC is developing a pilot program to lease City-owned properties in Oakland and Hayward to farmers. Both cities have been very enthusiastic about the program. For one, leasing land to farmers would reduce the city's fuel reduction expenses. For the other, urban farming aligns with their climate and public health goals.

Having partners and champions within City government made the process for identifying a list of potential properties much quicker than anticipated. ACRCDC and partners are developing suitability criteria for land to be included in the pilot program. A main consideration is water access. The grant includes money for property set-up costs, such as installing water and fencing.

Project partners are also developing a request for applications and a selection process to choose farmers for the properties.

After the pilot project is completed, ACRCDC hopes to implement a permanent program that could be extended to include other jurisdictions.

Feedback on the Task Force's draft recommendations

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

Comment

- Land trusts play a key role in addressing the price of land and long-term tenure issues. If land is in a trust, it's intended for long-term use; when someone is leasing, the landowner may ultimately develop the land. There's an opportunity for land trusts that have a focus on housing (e.g., community land trusts) to expand to include agriculture, particularly urban ag.

Recommendation

- Would like more of a framework and support for increased partnership with Tribes and Tribal organizations. There's not much support for agencies that want to build partnerships with Tribes, but need guidance about how to navigate communication and outreach to Tribes and particularly how to navigate potential conflicts between Tribes. Having RCDs work with Tribes and Tribal land trusts seems like an effective way of approaching land stewardship and access, but there's not a clear pathway for how to do that locally.

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

Comments

- Farmers need a consistent and comprehensive place to learn how to navigate starting a farm (e.g., what policies apply, what's allowed, what regulations apply, what do they need to do to get started).
- Better policy alignment also applies to different levels of government. It's not always clear if different levels of government require something different for a particular issue (e.g., biosecurity for chickens). For farmers and technical assistance providers, it is hard to know which regulations and policies from which level of government apply to their work, making it hard to determine what is allowed and feasible.

- Sometimes it's shocking how different things are from county to county. That's a barrier – how different things are from city to city and county to county.

Recommendation

- Support more interagency collaboration and improving consistency across agencies and jurisdictions. **It would be helpful to have a central place where farmers can learn about all the policies and regulations that affect them.** Right now, for example, if a producer wants to start selling at a farmers market, we send them to County Ag to get a producer certificate. But County Ag won't necessarily be able to tell them what else they need to do, especially when those other requirements are overseen by another agency. When each agency doesn't know about the requirements of other agencies, it's harder to correctly inform farmers and they can be confused about who to go to for what.

Center for Land-Based Learning

Date: May 20, 2025

Location: Virtual

Interviewer & Summary Author: Lucy Diekmann

Organizational background

Center for Land-Based Learning (CLBL) “has built adaptive people and ecosystems by inspiring and training agricultural leaders focused on sustaining our natural resources.”⁵ Of particular relevance for this interview are CLBL's Beginning Farmer Training Program and Farm Business Incubator. In the Beginning Farmer Training Program, active and aspiring farmers learn production and business skills. After completing the training program, participants are eligible for low-cost leases at two incubator sites where they also access shared infrastructure, market opportunities, and ongoing mentorship. Through the incubator, farmers can lease 0.25 to 1-acre plots for up to four years. About 20-30% of program graduates go on to an incubator plot. CLBL also occasionally plays matchmaker if landowners approach them with land they'd like to lease for farming. They've also received grant funding to hire an alumni coordinator, in acknowledgement of the fact that evaluating land and making connections takes a long time.

Land access

Most people (80-90%) who participate in the beginning farmer training program do not enter with land. Instead, they look for land to lease or buy at the program's end. The handful of participants who already have land, usually own 0.5-10 acres.

⁵ Center for Land-Based Learning, “About Us,” <https://www.landbasedlearning.org/who-we-are/>

Land access challenges

Housing proximity to farmland

CLBL operates two incubator sites, one in Woodland, where more land is available, and another in Sacramento. The closer you live to the land you farm, the more likely you are to be successful. Once a farmer has to travel 30 or more minutes, their odds of success go down.

Farming urban land

The Sacramento incubator is more popular, but it is harder for CLBL to set up and maintain urban land as an incubator site. CLBL usually has short-term leases for urban land and it takes significant work and investment to turn urban sites into viable spaces for farming. One urban incubator site was lost to a housing development.

Other challenges at urban incubator sites include water, specifically getting connected and bringing the pressure down enough for farmers to use; soil quality (e.g., contamination with heavy metals or topsoil that has been scraped away); providing storage (e.g., shipping containers, sheds); and security.

Bureaucratic barriers

Urban farmers face bureaucratic barriers too. They can't sell produce on the land they're farming; they can't put up structures; there are setback requirements. The time it takes to pull permits and wait for exemptions are also hurdles that prevent people from getting started or progressing very far.

Even when supportive policies are adopted, barriers remain. In Sacramento, there is an urban ag stand ordinance, which allows farmers to sell a couple of nights a week, but only a few people are using it. Even though it's an allowed use, code inspection is still coming out and telling them they're not allowed to do it, because inspectors don't know that the ordinance exists.

Leasing limitations and barriers

Landowners also come to CLBL looking for help finding farmers to lease their land and CLBL will try to play matchmaker. Roughly 90% of the time, it doesn't work out. **The reasons are either land that isn't well equipped for farming (e.g., doesn't have water or road access) or landowners are not well informed about the realities of farming.**

When matchmaking between a landowner and a farmer works, they have to have similar values.

Leasing to a farmer is not as hands-off as renting; the landowner is invested.

Landowners, who are considering leasing, don't understand what a functioning farm entails or what it means to have a farm on their property. A lot of people have watched *Biggest Little Farm* or *Kiss the Ground* and they're inspired to make a difference, but they have an idealized perception of what a farm is.

Landowners don't want to invest in someone who's not already farming. Until they see that someone is actually farming, they don't want to take the risk. Incubators can help with this issue.

Securing a long enough lease term is a challenge. The four years at the incubator are designed so farmers have two years to learn and be able to make mistakes, then two more years to think about moving to another site.

For CLBL graduates, **leasing over the long-term has not been a successful strategy**. There is not enough money in farming at a small-scale for leasing to pencil out. Ultimately, property is the main asset. Farmers need to own the land, so they have something to sell later—owning is ultimately what allows farmers to continue farming and to have an exit strategy. To counteract this situation, they recommend thinking about making land available for farming as a community good rather than a source of profit.

Ideas for affordable and secure access to land

Commit local public land to agriculture

- In North Sacramento, the County has a large acreage that's not going to transition. That would make a wonderful place for farmers to try farming, potentially for longer periods of time. If local government saw it as a community good, they could afford to offer the land at a lower cost to facilitate access and stability.
- **When you work with private individuals to gain access to land, something is eventually bound to change**, either their situation changes (i.e., they need to get more money out of their asset) or they eventually pass away.

Feedback on the Task Force's Draft Recommendations

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

Clarifying question

- What is the 30 x 30 process?

Additional considerations

Protect and make available small parcels

- Most land trusts deal with larger portions of land. Access to smaller parcels through land trusts doesn't seem to be available at this time.

Additional resources for farmer success

- In addition to flexible access agreements and conservation easements, under-resourced farmers need other types of support, such as opportunities for tool sharing. **Having access to tools could be the difference between staying in farming or leaving.**
- **More early-stage financial training is needed.** There are organizations that do a fantastic job helping farmers with financial assistance, but they often work with people who already have a few years' experience. Beginning farmers need more business support to survive those first few years.

More knowledge of agriculture

- Support funding for RCDs and others to purchase farmland, but it is important that someone with farm experience is in charge of those programs, otherwise too many pieces won't be understood.

- Along with cultural competence, **more people need to understand what farming entails** (e.g., people expect small farms to be weed free). When neighbors and landowners understand better what farming is, you'll have more success.

Recommendation #4: Facilitate access to public land

Recommendations

- Processes for accessing land need to be accessible, easy, and expedient. People need assistance, not just a portal. If it takes 2-4 years to get started, people are deterred.
- Because urban farms provide more than just food, consider paying a farmer to produce the benefits urban farms provide. This is one way to gain access to land that could benefit farmers and institutions, while helping overcome some of the challenging economics of urban farming. When institutions and community organizations grow food, they can also provide employment and land access.

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

Support

- A farmer pension fund would help to overcome two significant challenges to starting or staying in farming: retirement and health insurance.

Recommendations

Increase culturally relevant farm outreach, education, and support

- There's good information for farmers out there, but not enough people know that it exists or who to ask for it. There are not enough farm support providers relative to the number of farmers looking for information. Additionally, it's important to have educators and support staff who reflect the demographics of newer farmers. Farming feels more possible when beginning farmers learn from someone they can relate to socially and culturally.
- Historically underserved and new farmers often have a strong distrust of government, which makes it hard to access resources. Need someone who is trusted to make that connection and assure them that it's safe.

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

Concern

- There's a lot of value to removing barriers to housing. Farmers need to be close to the land they farm in order to be successful. However, how to loosen restrictions without compromising safety and the treatment of farmworkers is a concern.

Message for the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

Economic hurdles are what keep people out. Beginning farmers need to be able to take risks in a way that is less risky.

Encourage identifying creative opportunities for land access: perhaps smaller plots are carved out of larger acreage, or opportunities are provided to learn on low-cost land, before farmers move onto larger spaces later.

Remember that urban farms are incredibly valuable. However, it's not usually because of their economic model, but because of the many community benefits they provide.

North Coast Growers' Association

Date: June 12, 2025

Location: Virtual

Interviewer & Author Summary: Lucy Diekmann

Organizational background

The North Coast Growers' Association (NCGA) "supports Humboldt County's farmers and artisan producers in building a robust and resilient local food system."⁶ NCGA offers a wide range of marketing and agricultural programs to support local farmers, including operating nine farmers markets, a produce box program, and a food hub, and offering farmer training, one-on-one business advising, and the North Coast Land Match program.

Land access

NCGA typically works with diversified row crop farmers. In a recent survey of 70 growers, 9% indicated that they own their own land. The remainder lease and of those about 50% don't have a formal lease agreement. Farmers typically lease land from heritage agricultural landowners. In terms of acreage, farmers fall into three categories: larger farms (up to 50 acres), mid-size farms (10 acres on average), and small-scale (less than an acre to a few acres). Those in the smallest category usually want to stay at that scale.

Land access challenges

Most farmers are not in a financial position to buy land. In the Humboldt County area, buying is only possible if people have a creative business entity, such as a cooperative; single family ownership is out of reach.

USDA definitions of the small family farm do not include people who are not blood-related, e.g., chosen family, LGBTQ farmers. Extra support is needed to navigate accessing USDA services for these small-scale farmers.

⁶ North Coast Growers' Association, "About," <https://www.northcoastgrowersassociation.org/land.html>

Successful models of land access

A cooperative farm formed and was able to purchase land. When the previous farm owner was retiring, her workers came together to purchase the land. They were able to take advantage of free local trainings on cooperative development in farms put on by the Small Business Development Center and Cooperation Humboldt and business development support from NCGA.

Needs

Some of the support for developing alternative business structures, which helped the cooperative farm form and access land, no longer exists because the funding ended. It would be a great benefit to continue to offer those trainings and resources in the future.

Government funding programs are critical, but are not enough on their own. We also need local people, who are rooted in a particular place, that can collate those resources and make them digestible for farmers in a way that's tailored to the region. Along with resources, farmers need the support system to make those resources discoverable and accessible.

There is a gap in serving the Spanish-speaking community in this region. **Culturally and linguistically specific programs are necessary.** To meet this need, provide funding to community-based organizations that are well positioned to do this work.

Ideas for affordable and secure access to land

Increase funding for small farm business education and support. To afford even a subsidized land price, farms need a strong business model. Business support and training helps farmers do the best they can with the resources that are available.

Increased availability of support for writing equitable leases. FarmLink has a great program; it would be helpful to have more regional support providers who were trained to help local farmers use FarmLink's resources.

More funding for incubator farms, where farmers can have support while they get established, build a marketing and customer base, and develop their niches.

The cost of buying land is a huge challenge. To make it possible, it would help to have no interest loans, no money down, flexibility to account for the seasonality of farm income streams, the removal of predatory lenders, and the elevation of non-predatory resources.

In our community, **farmers feel isolated and alone.** It's an intangible, but having farmers come together and build community increases their resilience and ability to have viable businesses and stay on their land.

Emotional and social support is important.

There's a great future in cooperative farms, cooperative grower networks, equipment sharing, and unconventional arrangements to meet the needs of small family farms. However, these types of entities are often left out of government funding. There needs to be scalable funding for small-scale farmers and special consideration given to the particular needs of small-scale farmers.

Assistance with stable land access

NCGA has a relatively new land matching program. Their role is to establish connections between those looking for land and those who are landowners. NCGA is also seeking to identify people who may be well suited to lease to farmers (e.g., retired, need help with land management, interested in leasing to farmers, see the benefit in getting to know farmers).

Part of the reason for the land matching program is thinking about the social, cultural, and economic differences between farmers and landowners. Farmers seeking land tend to be more diverse, young, female, and under-resourced than landowners. These are groups who are unlikely to meet each other socially, and people often have a bias toward working with those who are familiar to them. To address some of these differences, the land-matching program incorporates some blindness. At the outset, NCGA staff work with the landowner and farmer separately to determine if the land is farmable and the relationship could be a good fit.

The staff person who assesses land is also contracted through the NRCS, so at the same time that they're assessing the land for farming, they conduct a conservation assessment and connect landowners with NRCS financial and technical resources. Even if the site isn't ready for leasing, landowners still get something out of the visit.

Feedback on the Task Force's Draft Recommendations

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

Support

- All of the recommendations for funding land acquisition for priority producers and land stewards are spot on.

Question

- Can the task force specify what is meant by equity in the strategy to align existing programs with equity goals? In this region, equity means tailoring things for really small farms. In other parts of the state, equity may include something else.

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

Support

- It's a financial burden for farmers to have to lease a house and lease land to farm because they can't live where they work. Making it possible to have housing on leased farmland would be very beneficial. In NCGA's land matching work, the absence of housing can be a dealbreaker.
- In this region, there aren't large numbers of farmworkers. Half of farms are owner operated; the rest employ 1-10 seasonal employees. Locally, being able to have on-site housing for 1-3 people would improve land access.
- Of these strategies for housing, loosening regulations on non-traditional forms of housing seems like the most impactful.

Recommendation

- It could be beneficial for farmworkers to be better informed about their rights related to on-site housing and for landowners or farmers who have workers living on-site to have help interpreting labor laws and housing regulations for operations of their size.

Additional considerations: Greater resilience in the middle of the supply chain

- **The middle of the supply chain is also connected to land access and farm business success.** When packing or other intermediary facilities close suddenly, farmers lose ways to distribute their products as well as access to cold storage. (Those entities should be nonprofit or cooperatives.) Closures create instability and chaos that can cause farmers to go under if they can't access the money they need to farm again next year. Emergency resilience systems that function as holistically as possible should be put in place to support farmers. Grants have been helpful in this regard: retroactive emergency funding for natural disasters, food chain instability.

UCCE Marin County

Dates: May 29 – June 12, 2025

Location: Santa Cruz, CA & Zoom

Interviewer & Summary Author: Lucy Diekmann

Lucy Diekmann interviewed a University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) staff member who provides support to farmers in Marin County and a consultant on a project to increase land access opportunities for specialty crop growers in Marin County. This summary combines the two conversations.

Organizational background

In Marin County, UCCE helps connect agricultural producers to resources and assists farmers and ranchers with navigating rules, regulations, and permitting processes with state and county regulatory agencies. UCCE is part of a land access project with Kitchen Table Advisors that aims to increase land access opportunities on ranchland for specialty crop growers in Marin County.

Land access

In Marin County, most ranchers belong to families that have owned their ranches for multiple generations. The vast majority of farmers lease. Typically, their leases are short-term. Based on interviews with 24 farmers, farms fall into three size categories: <5 acres, 5-10 acres, and >15 acres.

It is important for those working on land access to know that people are reluctant to talk about the details of a lease. Tenants may feel vulnerable, while landowners may feel anxious that they'll be revealed as either too onerous or too generous.

Land access challenges

Finding land

The biggest obstacle to finding land is social. Finding and leasing land is a social thing. The most successful land leasing is matching through word of mouth, when the landowner and tenant meet and find they are compatible.

When farmers are considering a lease, water, infrastructure, and fencing are critical factors, but there are also social and cultural considerations: “Will the landowner support my lifestyle, traditions? Will they let me bring people in? Practice ceremony?”

These differences set up the potential for conflict around social experience and expectations. When landowners are not part of the agricultural industry, they tend to apply their perspective and expectations from non-farming industries to farming. There’s a mismatch of economic expectations; often landowners find it offensive that farmers are working so hard, using their resource (land), and aren’t earning more.

Suitability of land

The cost of leasing land is not the limiting factor in this region, even though leases are more expensive here than other parts of the state. **What’s hard to find is land that’s of an appropriate quality for farming.**

As an example, identifying land to farm that has water is a challenge. **The lack of water access is a bigger issue than land access.** There is plenty of ranch space that could be farmed if there were water.

Start-up infrastructure costs are another barrier. When land is available, start-up costs can be prohibitive. Needing to invest in irrigation infrastructure and deer fencing can be the deciding factor for farmers considering whether to lease a property. Start-up costs are also prohibitive for ranchers who are interested in leasing, but don’t want to invest the amount of money in infrastructure that would make it possible.

The economics of farming

Farmers cannot afford to purchase land.

Staying on land is an economic issue. It’s hard to make enough money farming to feel like it’s worthwhile. People burnout emotionally, but it’s a function of economics (e.g., working all the time, not compensating themselves well).

From personal experience as a farmer, even if you could remove land access, tenure, and affordability from the equation (e.g., you had a 100-year lease for \$0), **the economics of farming are still too challenging.** The big issue is not making enough money from farming to eventually be able to retire and think about succession planning. People don’t make enough money farming: food is too cheap and farmers don’t get a big enough cut. Land is not the biggest barrier in that sense.

Under these circumstances, **land ownership is especially important as a long-term investment.** Even if a farmer doesn’t make a lot of money farming, they hold an asset that appreciates over time and can be sold when the farmer is ready to retire.

When ag land comes up for sale, farmers can’t afford it, but people who work in tech and want a second home can. It’s a visible representation of the failure of farm economics in their current form. **“You have to not farm to be able to afford farmland.”**

If you make it possible for farmers to affordably purchase land, then they'll have the opportunity to build wealth through the land, but **still when they're ready to retire, they're back in the situation of selling it to someone who is not a farmer to make the most money possible.**

Need to reconsider the term viability. The vast majority of farmers—of all sizes and types of production system—rely on off-farm income. **The way we use viability puts unrealistic expectations on farmers, when we know that a farm income alone does not provide for an entire household.** The term viable puts all the responsibility on the farmer, when farmers are actually at the receiving end of a system that makes it hard to earn a living from farming.

No pathway for building equity when leasing

When you're leasing and making infrastructure improvements, you don't get the value from the investments that you've made.

Ideas for secure and affordable land access

See it as two questions: 1) magic wand for access to affordable, long-term land tenure and 2) magic wand to be able to continue a business on that secured land

For part one of the question, would make it so that everyone can appreciate value from the land they're farming and get the benefit of the ecological and infrastructure improvements they've made.

Put land in the hands of people or organizations who are fundamentally invested in food systems, agriculture, and the success of farmers. These entities would be freed from financial worries and have the values to make supportive lease terms.

Ensure farm success and resilience

For part two of the question, **put more energy and focus into the supply chain.** Would like to have more operations, like Feed Sonoma, that could reach wholesale markets, while giving some amount of ownership and value to the farmer. Sees direct marketing as an outcome of a broken supply chain rather than the solution for large-scale reform to the supply chain.

To ensure long-term success for the farmers themselves, would network those lands with other lands, those farms with other farms, so that people aren't so alone. Isolation is a health risk factor. Tie people together and make sure that the landowner is invested in their success – this can only be accomplished through organizations or individuals with the right mindset.

Connect conservation funding to downpayment assistance and loan forgiveness. In this region, where conservation easements don't function to increase access to farmland, try to find a way that conservation funding can increase access. You could have an entity that assists with access through downpayment assistance or by providing land. Then, instead of demonstrating that a farmer paid back their loan for five years, so it is forgiven, farmers could show that they've met benchmarks in a regenerative farm plan. Then a farmer's loan is forgiven because they've regenerated or remediated land.

Would make it possible for all these lands to have housing on them. The rate of burnout is a function of how hard it is to farm 3-30 miles from the site where you live. With that comes the additional cost of maintaining both a residential and commercial existence.

Land Access Project

The goal of the project is to improve land access in Marin County for specialty crop growers by unlocking new acreage to lease. The idea is that there is land that could be farmed if ranchers knew what their land could support and had resources to help them with leasing.

We are exploring the opportunity to lease land that's held in multi-generational ranches. While there are many opportunities to lease land for grazing, it doesn't pay well; specialty crops pay more per acre. The land access project is focused on landowners, developing a tool to help them assess their land's potential for leasing to a specialty crop farmer.

While there's an economic opportunity, the challenge is partly social because the leasing possibility involves two different farming systems. People who are 5th or 6th generation ranchers and farmers who are 1st or 2nd generation; people who are focused on animals and people who are oriented to crops.

Next, we want to figure out how to find farmers for land that is unlocked. Can we establish a pathway to bring underserved farmers to the land? This work is focused on social networks. Can we make a path that is lined with networks and people who would facilitate the movement of underserved growers onto those lands?

Gaps

FarmLink is a good resource, but it needs additional support to be utilized by small-scale farmers.

Feedback on the Task Force's Draft Recommendations

General comments

- More interested in ways to facilitate successful tenancy for farmers and land ownership preserved in the hands of stable and amenable entities than strategies to facilitate purchase of land by a producer. Not convinced that trying to develop a set of policies that will allow every farmer to buy a piece of land is the solution. Capital is not easy to come by, especially for small farmers. Even lands that have been stripped of development rights can still be beyond the reach of many. The exception is where land can be placed in Tribal ownership; that's a win-win.

Don't limit this initiative to prime farmland

- **“Prime farmland” is not a good indicator of whether land has value to a producer for this initiative.** Conservation easements use terms like prime farmland and minimum acreage to decide what to protect and what types of protection to provide. Most of Marin County isn't prime farmland, but we have a long-standing ag industry.
- **Don't limit the focus to prime farmland.** Many specialty crop farmers see land as improvable. However, it's an endeavor that takes time, so they need a lease that gives enough time to build soil. Incorporate farmland where there is the most potential for carbon sequestration and carbon credits.

Consider creative uses of conservation funding, beyond buying easements

- **Create a program that's similar to the Superfund Program, but for farmland that is degraded.** This program could identify the potential for conservation and carbon sequestration and create a mechanism for adding it to the value of the land. Instead of a conservation easement, farmers are

being paid for remediating land and meeting conservation goals. It recognizes the public good that farmers provide when they remediate degraded soil.

- **Doing conservation projects could be an alternative source of income for farmers who lease land.** Those who have the equipment and expertise to do riparian plantings or compost applications, for example, could get off-farm income by doing conservation work on the larger property that their leased land is part of. Or the funding could go to equipment purchases for farmers to do the work.

Utilize the Williamson Act

- **The Williamson Act is a good place for incentives for long-term leases.** Counties could be given boilerplate language related to leasing and leasing at good terms to include in their Williamson Act contracts. In the North Bay, landowners are very motivated to keep their Williamson Act protections. Could make it so that one way to do that is through **leasing some or all of their property with terms that are friendly to farmers.**

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

Easements have limitations that will need to be addressed

- In some places, when ag land is placed under traditional conservation easements, some of the activities associated with commercial agriculture are taken off the table, and the ability to diversify is severely hampered.
- Know farmers in the North Bay who regret getting conservation easements. They say if they could go back in time they would have figured out a way to borrow the money because of the complications to ownership and reselling.
- “Fair price” is tricky. It used to be that vineyards were the prime competitor for acres and driver of high prices for ag land in Marin/Sonoma. But wine grapes are agriculture, so land trusts trying to preserve agriculture couldn’t easily strip that from an easement, thereby failing to reduce the price significantly.
- Need to ensure that you are creating land that is more affordable to farmers and not just lowering the bar for wealthy landowners. Plenty of well-heeled individuals want large tracts of land for a rural escape. They are looking for pleasant vistas, peace and quiet. As such, the loss of development rights does not trouble them, and they are happy to bid up the price of protected lands that lie in proximity to urban areas (i.e., good markets for farmers) thereby maintaining the unaffordability of lands for capital-challenged growers.
- If a farmer owns the land, a conservation easement could assist with affordability. But by the time a property is resold, a conservation easement ends up increasing the value of a property and reducing access for farmers.

Strategy: Add a target for conserving agricultural land to existing California conservation priorities (e.g., 30x30 process)

Concerns

- Conservation covenants/easements would have to be worded carefully so as not to eliminate the option for housing. **Ag land without housing in a state where rent is so expensive is fundamentally flawed.**

Recommendation

- **Decisions about what kinds of land warrant protection should be considered carefully.** The temptation is to focus on large parcels and Prime Farmland, but other factors are equally if not more important: proximity to markets, access to water, existing infrastructure, housing, etc.

Strategy: Fund land trusts to develop agricultural conservation easements that ensure flexibility for farmers, pay for infrastructure and permitting, and improve their cultural competence.

Clarify

- What is meant by “Pay for infrastructure”? Does that mean land trusts are developing infrastructure or are they paying landowners to develop ag-friendly infrastructure? **Setting up block grant programs that would allow land trusts to match funds for other critical improvements like septic renewal and potable water development would be huge.**

Strategy: Encourage land trusts to provide flexibility for farmers, allow for building infrastructure, and allow for cultural land management.

Recommendations

- **Include housing.**
- **Could the state establish housing incentive funds that include deed restrictions for affordable or ag-centric housing?** If the land trust owns it, they won't worry about it, and it increases the value of the easement (payment to seller). Maybe land trusts could get in the business of setting up ground leases on parts of protected lands where they own and administer housing while paying the landowner an annual lease?

Recommendation #4: Facilitate access to public lands for agriculture

Strategy: Direct the Department of Conservation to create access agreements to allow cultivation of public land

Clarify

- What's the “conservation” angle? Would this agency really get onboard for tillage and potential disruption of habitat?

Strategy: Incentivize local governments to make public land accessible through low- or no-cost partnerships with community-based organizations.

Comment

- \$1 lease to farming non-profits makes sense. Might get tricky to provide public lands for for-profit activities

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

Strategy: Establish a state tax credit for landowners that rent or sell to farmers, with additional incentives for lower prices or long-term, flexible leases.

Support

- Love it. Sounds like the next phase of Williamson Act contracts – would have to be negotiated County by County?

Strategy: Create a producer pension fund to allow farmers to retire without selling their land to the highest bidder.

Support

- Love it. Some of the plans for land trusts would also play this part. Many farms here use the easement payment as a retirement plan and/or way to pay inheritance taxes at time of transition.
- Support removing farmers' retirement accounts from the land by creating a government pension program for qualified farmers. It's a problem that farmers have to rely on selling their land in order to retire because land is their primary mechanism for building wealth. Farm businesses don't generate enough money to build up any significant savings, so we need to find another retirement account other than land.

Clarify

- How might inheritance taxes on transmission of (small – sub 1000acre) parcels be waived in accordance with the attachment of affirmative ag easements?

Recommendation

- A few years ago, voters passed a law (Proposition 19, 2020) that was intended to curtail Proposition 13 benefits unless someone was residing in the home. It was very well intentioned, but it had unintended consequences for farmers. Some of the protections that benefited landowners when they passed land on to their children went away. Recommend revisiting that.

Recommendation #6: Improve lease terms for farmers who lease land

Strategy: Ensure fair lease terms through developing and enforcing a Tenant Producers' Bill of Rights

Recommendation

- Like it. Commercial leases are notoriously precarious, compared with residential tenant protections. **In particular, mandating the minimum amount of time tenant farms have to extricate themselves from a property following eviction would be helpful.** Current law allows for "hold-over" provisions, but these really only serve tenant farmers who previously had a lease with the landowner. To my knowledge, those who have farmed under hand-shake agreements enjoy no such protection, even though there may be a de-facto lease in place as a result of years of exchanges between landowner and tenant.

Strategy: Create incentives for long-term ag leases that benefit landowners and tenants.

Recommendation

- Attach to Williamson Act contracts.
- Provide matching funds or tax benefits like exempting revenues from lease income so long as the lease conforms to acceptable standards (low cost, flexible terms, etc.)

Strategy: Increase access to legal support or neutral mediators to help with contract and relationship development.

Recommendation

- Expand CalAMP. Two people to cover the entire state are not enough.

Strategy: Develop mechanisms that allow tenant producers to retain the monetary value of improvements they make to leased land.

Recommendation

- Fund development of models to place a value on improvements to soil health or carbon sequestration so that these can be credited to tenant farmers/ranchers – either in the form of discounted lease payments or “ecosystem services” type payments from the state or even claimed for repayment by the landowner upon eviction or surrender of the property.

Comment. There’s only so much benefit that will come from making leases better. Someone is either going to be a good or bad landlord and no amount of technical assistance or mediation is going to change that. So the solution is removing the landlord-tenant dynamic, which can be done through purchasing, making land more affordable, and identifying ways for land trusts to provide long-term leases that give farmers some return on their investments in infrastructure.

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

Strategy: Establish a state grant fund to support land purchases

Recommendation

- Matching dollars for downpayments
- Farmer-owned revolving loan for land acquisition

Strategy: Create a loan program for priority producers and land stewards

Recommendation

- 0% loans

Additional recommendations

- Establish 0% loans to fund the cost of start-up and operation as a way to help cash-strapped new producers. Ramp up interest payments over time as (hopefully) the business stabilizes
- Establish housing funds to make it less expensive to build housing on ag parcels – especially for the purpose of housing employees.

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

Food Safety Modernization Act – address issues for small producers

Concern

- This is a federal law. Don’t see how California can have any influence over this regulation.

Other recommendations

- **Water regulations are one of the biggest barriers in Marin County.** It would be helpful to amend purpose of use for surface water rights. Many ranches have water use rights for livestock, domestic uses, and recreation. They don't have a water right use for irrigated agriculture (even though they can irrigate pasture) and the process to change that is almost impossible unless they're willing to give up another water right use. The system doesn't make sense – you're not asking to change the amount of water that is diverted, only what it will be used for—and it stops people from leasing existing agricultural land.
- **Make it easier for farmers in coastal zones to do new construction on agricultural land.** As an example, trenching in pipe is very difficult for coastal producers. Increasing exemptions for agricultural building purposes and/or decreasing the need for CEQA in coastal areas could reduce barriers for farmers.

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

Zoning and Land Use Planning

Strategy: Direct, incentivize, and support local governments to support conservation and agricultural activities, such as:

- *develop multi-use zoning that allows for housing, retail, and agriculture activities to occur in areas currently zoned exclusively for agriculture,*
- Support: Yes. We need more flexibility in the kinds of activities that farms can partake in as part of their overall strategy for viability.

Housing

Minimize regulations that limit or prohibit non-traditional forms of housing (mobile homes, RVs, etc.) on ag land.

- Yes. But attach some kind of obligations to ensure that these flexible structures aren't being misused.

Suggested addition

- **Septic systems** – the cost to upgrade old ones, the cost to install new ones – is one of the biggest obstacles to innovating, diversifying and making the kinds of moves many farms *need* to make in order to stay viable. **We often see that virtually any permit for any kind of new activity on the farm triggers intense scrutiny on the farm's septic and drinking water systems, leading to expensive and – to many – utterly unnecessary changes.** Additionally, outdated septic standards stipulate overly large (and therefore expensive) systems when water-conserving appliances allow for more people to get by with smaller systems. Many local programs also have failed to keep up with new waste-management technologies and don't offer farmers a multitude of choices that would make more sense on rural lands (composting toilets, incinerating toilets, vault toilets, gray water systems, etc.)

First Nations Development Institute

Date: June 26, 2025

Location: Virtual

Interviewer & Summary Author: Chandra Richards

Organizational background

First Nations Development Institute (FNDI) is a non-profit organization that assists Native American tribes, communities, and Native nonprofits toward economic development initiatives. The California Tribal Fund is a new program that is the only California native-led fund that works exclusively with federally and non-federally recognized California Tribes and California Native-controlled non-profit organizations. California Tribal Fund invests in the viability and visibility of Tribal Nations and communities and is working with approximately 90 grantees across 36 counties within the state of California.

Land Access

The land stewarded by California Tribal Fund grantees includes ancestral lands and waters. The cohort of California-Native-controlled nonprofit organizations and California Tribal people steward land through reclamation, donations, and re-acquisitions (i.e. land purchase), often through Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with federal and state agencies and private party landowners.

Land stewardship is also achieved through lease agreements with private landowners and other parties since many Tribal people do not own the land they are stewarding for traditional medicines, basketweaving, gathering, small-scale agriculture, and Tribal farms and nurseries.

MOUs are common between non-federally recognized Tribes and non-profit agency organizations. Land tenure is an issue, for example if the MOU shifts focus or falls apart due to changes in land ownership, boundary lines, or right of way enforcement on private routes.

Land Access Challenges

The cost of land is the main barrier because stewardship (which includes co-stewardship, co-management, and land ownership) is directly tied to the cost of land acquisition. Legally binding ownership of a property often ensures an easier pathway to stewardship and planning, unlike co-stewardship and co-management which can involve added challenges.

Housing is the second financial challenge since many Tribal people struggle with proximity and travel time, affordability to the land they steward, therefore limiting daily access for Tribal people to many traditional homelands, traditionally stewarded lands, and small-acre parcels, especially in urban areas (e.g., Southern California region).

Successful models for accessing land

California Tribal people have stewarded land since time immemorial so technical assistance providers for these conversations related to land stewardship should be a priority. Technical assistance for Tribal people and initiatives has shown positive impacts for several programs. Much needed is also an element of

wellness and emotional health within technical assistance support, in line with traditional ecological knowledge and cultural practices.

Land equity looks different within tribal communities because of the model of shared land stewardship over land ownership so recognizing the different languages and pathways for land stewardship and land use will help to shift our relationship with land.

The use of philanthropic spaces toward the meaningful implementation of recommendations is another important pathway and model toward equitable land access.

Ideas for affordable and secure access to land

Ensure access to land for Tribes. They suggest giving Tribes and Tribal people the first right of refusal for land sales and land back within the state of California. This includes any public lands by the California Department of Transportation, Department of Interior, etc. for free and completely reduced premiums.

Remove the limited waiver of sovereign immunity throughout all funding opportunities and change the mechanism relating to tribal allocations for state and federal grant funding streams, so that they best serve Tribes and tribal people.

Use state, federal, and private philanthropic funding streams to create endowments for Tribes and change the mechanism by which they can be transformed specifically into endowments.

Feedback on the Task Force's Draft Recommendations

We discussed each of the recommendations in detail to ensure equal attention to each from the perspective of the Tribal member. Below are general reflections as well as feedback on each of the recommendations, except for recommendation 2 (remove barriers to sovereignty for Tribes) which had a detailed, thorough, and clear description requiring no additional feedback.

General reflections

- Recommendation 9 (changes in zoning and land use planning and housing for stewards) is prevalent in many conversations because the conversations around land access and housing are much larger than the conversation about agriculture. This recommendation should be a top priority.
- All recommendations reference agriculture but missing is a more intentional and inclusive definition of tribal agriculture. Traditional agriculture is one of the five elements that displaced California Tribal people and so it is necessary to include tribal perspectives and opportunities and emphasis for Tribal Nations throughout all recommendations to capture needs, state recognition, and engagement efforts more inclusively. One example is to shift from “farmer” to “land steward” throughout.
- Generally, there are many barriers to sovereignty for California Tribal Nations, whose focus is improving stewardship and infrastructure. By maintaining stewardship and access to land, there is no issue with land tenure.
- There was concern regarding the order of the recommendations. It was also unclear if/why this order prevails and how that might translate toward a ranking and subsequent implementation.

Recommendation #1: Return ancestral lands to California Tribal Nations.

- **Include frameworks or processes leading to the return of land to Tribal Nations.** This component would simplify the land transfer and re-acquisition process and include operational definitions.
- **Change “oversee” to “moderate” or “mediate”.** The word “oversee” can be often translated as highly problematic, especially regarding the return of Tribal lands because it adds another layer of bureaucracy, refinement, and power shift toward who gets to decide.
- Financial, technical, and legal assistance are potential elements that well-resourced Tribal Nations may have compared to under-resourced ones, so this may look different for various Tribal Nations.
- The existing structure is that Tribal land trusts and conservancies are already being incentivized toward this goal through fundraising efforts so this should be more clearly defined (i.e. as tax breaks or other shifts).

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

- **Ensure unified inclusive terminology where possible.** Confirm that conservancies and land trusts can be used interchangeably and can harness state funding without many restrictions to encourage development and expansion of Native-led land trusts. Tribally controlled land trusts are also necessary, for example if Tribes are spearheading these efforts in partnership with outside agencies.
- **Remove all limited waivers of sovereign immunity.** It is a major barrier to the participation of Tribal Nations and many grantees do not have the capacity to manage this issue of asking an agency for permission to proceed due to added layers of ownership and oversight.
- **Provide financial, legal, and mediation assistance for tenants who enter into poor lease agreements.** If a tenant enters into a poor lease agreement due to any limitations of the land, stewardship, resources, and/or mediation of said agreement, then they will need pathways to uncouple from that agreement.
- **Shift operational definitions to improve clarity and equity.** For example, land back is land donation but not land purchase; land acquisition is land purchase or potentially land leasing. These recommendations and land use policies should be reviewed for racially insensitive language that remains equitable and inclusive of tribal agricultural land use, traditional ecological, and cultural practices and competences.

Recommendation #4: Facilitate access to public land for agriculture.

- Move stewardship payments to the top of the description list and ensure consistency throughout for land stewards (instead of producer).
- Unclear how this recommendation would support Tribal owned land in urban areas.
- **Provide clarity on the description to ensure effectiveness.** For example, it is necessary to highlight what the California Surplus Land Act resembles now, so it is clear how it can be expanded towards increased production. Another example is to showcase funded pathways to include urban and small-scale agriculture in access agreements.

Recommendation #5: Increase fair access to public funding for farmers who want to purchase land.

- Develop a state-level succession strategy for public and private lands.
- Shift local ordinance/jurisdictions to state ordinances for the location, communication, and dissemination of public information. This would ensure Tribal Nations' first right of refusal.
- **Transform technical assistance into legal assistance.** Technical assistance might help improve transparency, facilitation, and capacity building so a switch to legal support would ensure providers can ensure purchase agreements are fair and equitable and demonstrate a consistent presence regardless of program or funding availability.
- **Expand the logistics of the producer pension fund as a consistent element of the state budget.** Some philanthropic funds are harmful and do not transform into opportunities ensuring cultivation, stewardship, and protection.

Recommendation #6: Update policies and regulations to remove burdens on farmers.

- The lease-to-own model needs to be included, such as a shift in tax rate for lease agreements extending past a period of five years. Transformation of lease agreement into ownership is another crucial pathway depending on succession plans, specifically for sole ownership without successors/heirs.

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

- Uplift Tribal Nations and organizations as subcontractors who have already demonstrated the ability to perform technical assistance through contracts. This has been demonstrated using the framework of Tiered capacity grants and is a positive pathway to navigate by paying it forward. Grantees that have the certifications and have proven success measures should be elevated alongside newer stewards toward a collective action model.

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

- Improve the operational or quantifiable definition of increasing collaboration and tribal consultation. This will help to redefine policies and burdens to land stewards.
- **Adopt a specific definition of equity and fairness for problematic programs that often raise these concerns.** This recommendation should include a re-evaluation procedure that includes related topics (ex. Food Safety Modernization should include an emphasis on water quality and sustenance use within small-scale stewardship pathways to grow solely for community sustenance). A redefinition of this recommendation should focus on how this shapes tribal practices, cultivation, and stewardship that omit financial gain for products and distribution.

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.

- Establish a formulaic framework to ensure adequate stewardship can be achieved and directly incentivize that support for stewardship. The recommendation must include clearer and simplified multi-land-use zoning and model ordinances, and multi-year leases.
- **Decrease permitting costs for housing construction for stewards on agricultural lands.** This should include streamlined funding pathways for permitting and infrastructure upgrades.
- **Include protective clauses and insurances for climatic events that damage housing for stewards.** California stewarded spaces continue to be impacted by climatic events, including wildfire and flooding, so mandated and state-supported insurance and funds for the displacement of stewards due to these events would support their temporary relocation during rebuilding. This immediate aid relief fund should directly translate to what is lost.

Flower Farm, Santa Barbara & Ventura Counties

Date: July 2, 2025

Interviewer & Summary Author: Claire Tuohey-Mote

Organizational background

Farmer has 15 years of experience growing mixed vegetables on the East Coast. Has farmed in California for seven years, with one year in Mendocino County and the remaining years in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. She grows cut flowers that are sold at farmers markets, to wholesale accounts and special orders from florists and events. A very small percentage of sales (5%) are value added products (e.g., teas) made from medicinal herbs that she grows.

Land Access

Farmer leases 0.75 acres in two different locations. Leases are directly from the landowners. One plot is in Santa Barbara County, and one is in Ventura County.

Land Access Challenges

Cost of land is a barrier for small-scale farmers. Land in both counties is incredibly expensive and first and even second generation farmers lack the capital required to access agricultural land.

Competition for land is exacerbated by wealthy non-agricultural professionals buying “hobby” farms that do not bring goods to market or feed the community or local economy.

Leases for agricultural land are year-to-year which makes long term infrastructure or soil investments risky for farmers. Furthermore, short leases do not incentivize conservation practices which combat climate change and therefore farmers will continue to be challenged by more extreme weather. Land leases of very small plots are available, but **farmers have to gauge a landlord's attitude and understanding of farming before signing leases.** Landlords may change their minds about leasing to working farmers once they realize the mess that farming can cause. Leases may also be compromised by the long-term plans that landowners have for their land.

Ideas for affordable and secure access to land

To ensure access to land for farmers, **protect existing agricultural land from development.** Facilitate the formation of land trusts for landowning families that no longer want to farm and pay them fairly for the land.

Prioritize land access for farmers that are non-English speaking, practice conservation techniques in their operation, and are fully committed and/or experienced in growing foods that are marketed to the local community.

Feedback on the Task Force's Draft Recommendations

Recommendation #4: Facilitate access to public lands for agriculture.

- Fully agree that lands be returned to California Tribes. This would be beneficial to the local agricultural sector and community.
- Caution that there be equity in *where* public lands are opened to farmers. Land that is far from profitable markets is not necessarily viable for small-scale farmers. If those lands are to be utilized, there needs to be energy simultaneously put into building supply chains that are committed to supporting locally grown products and who are flexible on current barriers to access, such as costly GAP certification requirements.

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

- Agree that changing tax law to encourage the gift or sale of land would be helpful given that many second generation folks do not want to continue farming.
- Appreciation of the creation of a producer pension fund so that farmers that want to grow products for the local community can have access to lands after owners retire.

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

- **Fund land acquisition for priority producers and land stewards** – the 5 sub-recommendations here are very practical and would help farmers stay in the region where they already farm and maintain the markets they have already established. These programs need to prioritize farmers that are committed to growing and contributing to the local economy and community.

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

- Decrease permitting costs and remove barriers to housing construction for farmers and farmworkers on agricultural land. This strategy is essential and offers some respect for the professionalism of small-scale farmers and farmworkers.

Message to the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

- **Much appreciation for the recommendations** – the implementation of any of them could make a significant difference in land access challenges.
- Encouragement to the ALETF to **continue to prioritize non-English speaking, 1st generation, working class farmers**. Make grants and funding available to these folks and structured to include their cultural farming practices.
- **Examine land trust structure in California** – compared to experience on the East Coast, it seems that California's land trusts are not as activated and often only protect legacy farms and wildlands. Ensure that trusts are established with the goal of contributing to the farmer-food economy.