

## Executive Summary

### *UC ANR Community Engagement for the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force*

To complement the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force's community engagement sessions, UC ANR facilitated 8 focus groups with small-scale farmers and Indigenous land stewards and conducted 9 interviews with organizations that provide support to these groups. Challenges and recommendations centered on insecure land tenure, land suitability, and political, economic, and social systems that placed farmers and land stewards at a systemic disadvantage. Feedback on the Task Force's draft recommendations highlighted the importance of implementation and ensuring equitable access to new programs.

#### **Insecure land tenure**

**Challenge:** Small-scale farmers and Indigenous land stewards cannot afford to purchase land, pushing many into insecure lease agreements that limit long-term investments. Competition from other land users limits the supply and affordability of farmland and contributes to farmland loss.

#### **Recommendations for secure land tenure**

- Protect land that is in transition through acquisition by land trusts and other values-aligned entities or return to Tribal Nations.
- Use state and local public land for agriculture with long-term access arrangements that affirm Indigenous cultural practices and farming.
- Support cooperative models of farming and farm incubators and recognize traditions of shared land stewardship within Indigenous communities.
- Make it easier to buy land through grants, no interest loans, incentives for first-time buyers, and lease-to-own programs.

#### **Land suitability for farming and stewardship**

**Challenge:** Without water access, infrastructure, labor, and proximity to affordable housing, land is not usable by farmers and land stewards. The size of land protected or made available also matters; small-scale farmers need access to appropriately sized farmland.

#### **Recommendations for land suitability**

- Provide farmers and land stewards with financial and technical help to build infrastructure and create processes to bring existing infrastructure into compliance.
- Enable farmers and land stewards to realize the value of the investments they make in infrastructure and ecological health on leased land.
- Ensure conservation easements do not restrict Indigenous cultural practices, Tribal sovereignty, or improvements needed to successfully manage land.
- Don't limit this initiative to prime farmland. Consider factors related to land suitability (e.g., access to water) when deciding what land to prioritize.
- Enable farmers and land stewards to live in close proximity to the land they steward.
- Address the centrality of water access and cost to farmers' and land stewards' use of land.

In addition to land characteristics (e.g., supply, cost, size, suitability), participants identified systemic policy, economic, and social barriers affecting their ability to steward and stay on land and recommended a holistic approach to developing equitable land access solutions.

## Overregulation

**Challenge:** Regulations not tailored for different farm sizes, models, and cultural traditions are a significant obstacle. Permitting and compliance processes that are unclear, overly complex, inconsistently applied, punitive, and/or lengthy interfere with effective land stewardship.

### Recommendations for reducing regulatory burden

- Design regulations and permitting requirements for small-scale agriculture and cultural practices to remove financial and administrative burdens and lessen delays.
- Assist farmers and land stewards with navigating regulatory agencies and regulatory compliance.
- Have regulations that are just for agriculture and have dedicated staff for working with Indigenous land stewards and farmers.
- Engage Indigenous land stewards and Tribal Nations as true partners in land use and policy decisions; engage farmers in meaningful dialogue with regulators.

## Economic and social barriers

**Challenge:** Operational costs and supply chain disruptions were an obstacle to staying on land. Programs that lower costs and invest in the regional supply chain support long-term land tenure.

Finding land depends on social networks and compatibility between landowner and tenant. Decision makers' and the public's lack of understanding of stewardship and farming are other barriers.

### Recommendations for economic challenges

- As part of holistic technical assistance, provide farmers with business support and help them address start-up and input costs.
- Provide Indigenous land stewards and farmers with legal assistance and state-backed insurance options.
- Support tool and equipment sharing and shared infrastructure.
- Invest in the supply chain to improve farm businesses' ability to stay on the land, improve access to robust regional markets, and increase resilience during disasters.

### Recommendations for social challenges

- Address lack of transparency for land stewards and TA providers by having a central directory of land that includes ownership, allowable uses, and readiness for farming.
- Provide wellness and emotional support for Indigenous land stewards and small-scale farmers. Help build social connections and social support.
- Educate decisionmakers about farming and Indigenous land stewardship.

## Implementation

When considering the Task Force's recommendations, participants raised concerns about implementation and requested processes and support to ensure small-scale farmers and Indigenous land stewards have equitable access to information, resources, and programs.

- Participants repeatedly raised concerns that **the intent of recommendations would be subverted during implementation** and requested safeguards, greater specificity, and clear prioritization of intended beneficiaries.
- **There is often a gap between favorable policies being adopted and on-the-ground changes.** Involve local governments and other relevant parties in developing solutions and addressing procedural and financial barriers that prevent farmers and land stewards from utilizing new policies and programs.
- **Not all tools for equitable land access will work the same in every region.** Account for regional differences and support trusted, culturally competent organizations to help land stewards and small-scale farmers find and use statewide resources and programs.
- **Make new programs or policies fair and accessible** by providing assistance accessing them, translation support, multilingual education, and culturally competent staff. This type of support will help overcome existing linguistic, cultural, and digital barriers.

# Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

## Interviews and focus groups conducted by University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources

### Summary of Feedback

#### July 2025

To support the work of the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force, University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources (UC ANR) facilitated 8 focus groups and conducted 9 interviews with priority producers, Indigenous land stewards, and organizations that provide support to these groups. The goal of this community engagement effort—conducted from May 5 to July 2, 2025—was to learn about farmers' and Indigenous land stewards' challenges, ideas for improved land access, and feedback on the Task Force's draft recommendation

#### Background

Established by the State Legislature in 2022, the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force is charged with developing recommendations to address barriers to equitable land access for farmers and Indigenous land stewards. The Task Force has thirteen appointed members and is administered by Strategic Growth Council (SGC) staff. By January 2026, the Task Force will submit a final report with their recommendations to the Governor and Legislature.

#### Approach

To inform the development of its recommendations, the Task Force has engaged with farmers and Indigenous land stewards through a survey, community engagement sessions, and site visits. To complement these efforts, UC ANR sought to engage farmers and land stewards who might not be reached by the Task Force's activities. The geographic or thematic focus of the UC ANR-led focus groups and interviews were selected in coordination with SGC staff to avoid duplication of efforts. UC ANR's Small Farms Team, with bilingual staff and well-established networks, was instrumental in reaching farmers; UC ANR also collaborated with partner organizations to connect with other farmer communities.

#### Key Terms

**California Tribal Nations:** Federally recognized and non-federally recognized California Native American Tribes.

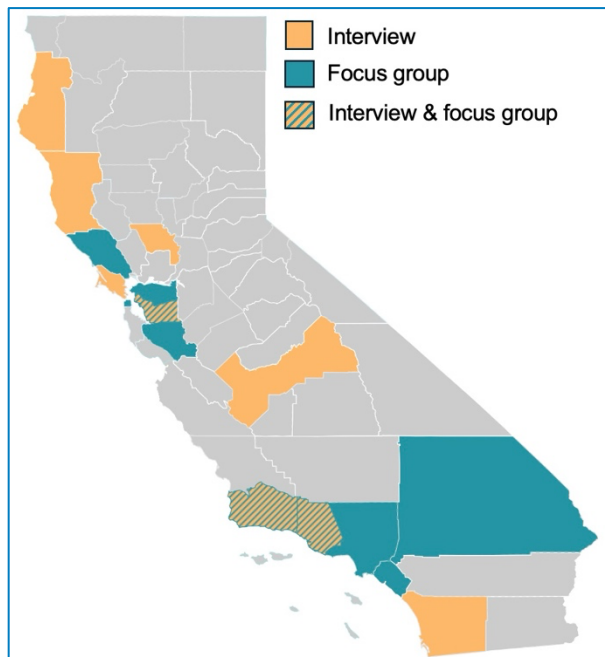
**Priority producers and land stewards** are those who have been historically and systematically excluded from land ownership and secure tenure for agricultural and traditional tribal uses.

In each focus group, farmers and land stewards were asked about how they access land, their top land access challenges, and their ideas about how to ensure long-term and affordable access to land. Then, the group selected several of the Task Force's draft recommendations to discuss in more detail and concluded with any final reflections on the process. As appropriate, focus groups were conducted in English, Chinese, Korean, and Spanish.

UC ANR also conducted interviews with organizations that serve and support Indigenous land stewards and priority producers, covering the same topics as the focus groups. In addition, interviews with support organizations included questions about any land access assistance they offered, land access projects they were involved in, promising models for land access, and gaps in the programs or resources available to support land access. All participants provided their consent to participate in this research project and were offered compensation for their time.

### Focus Groups

Focal area	Date, location, and format	Participants
Urban agriculture, Bay Area, Los Angeles & Orange Counties	May 5, 2025; virtual	14
Asian farmers, Central Coast	May 20, 2025; in-person, San Martin, CA; conducted in Chinese	9
Korean farmers, San Bernardino County	June 2, 2025; in-person, Lucerne Valley, CA; conducted in Korean	25
Indigenous land stewards, statewide	June 2, 2025; virtual	7
Asian farmers & other priority producers, Central Coast	June 4, 2025; in-person, San Martin, CA; conducted in English	8
Indigenous land stewards, statewide	June 11, 2025; virtual	15
Spanish-speaking farmers, South Central Coast	June 14, 2025; in-person, Ventura, CA; conducted in English with Spanish interpretation	10
Spanish-speaking farmers, South Central Coast	June 29, 2025; in-person, Santa Maria, CA; all participants were bilingual, conducted in English	2
Total number of participants		90



Map of interview and focus group locations

### Organizations Interviewed

- Mendocino County Resource Conservation District
- University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) Fresno County
- San Diego County Food System Alliance
- Alameda County Resource Conservation District
- Center for Land-Based Learning
- North Coast Growers' Association
- UCCE Marin County
- First Nations Development Institute
- Flower farm, Ventura & Santa Barbara Counties\*

\*Unable to participate in focus group, so requested interview instead

## Themes

Several themes emerged from focus groups and interviews, reflecting common concerns, challenges, and ideas for more affordable and secure land tenure from priority producers and technical assistance (TA) providers. These are synthesized below. More detailed summaries of each focus group and interview, including those with Indigenous land stewards, can be found in the Appendix A and B.

The final section summarizes feedback on the Task Force's draft recommendations. Additional comments, concerns, and suggestions on the recommendations can be found in the appendices.

## CHALLENGES

1. **Farmers and Indigenous land stewards cannot afford land.** Without other sources of wealth or significant off-farm income, most small farm operations do not generate enough income to buy California real estate. Farmers and TA providers are quick to point out that this is not an individual failure, but a structural issue. Cost of land is also a top barrier to land access and stewardship for Tribal Nations and Indigenous land stewards.

Because it is difficult to make a living from farming, land appreciation may be a farmers' primary mechanism for generating wealth. Often farmers who lease or rent land struggle to make farming a financially sustainable career that could eventually fund their retirement. With financial gains tied up in land, farmers need to sell their land, most often to non-farmers, when they are ready to retire.

2. **Land has a higher value for housing or development than agriculture.** Competition with non-agricultural buyers puts farmland even further out of reach for farmers. For those who own farmland, the higher value of land for non-agricultural uses makes it harder to keep land in agriculture. Farmers who relocated to regions with less development pressure and lower land costs report significant trade-offs including poorer soil quality, limited access to utilities and markets, and increased vulnerability to environmental stressors such as extreme weather.
3. **Finding land is a social challenge.** Finding land often depends on a person's connections and relationships as well as the compatibility between tenant and landowner, who frequently come from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds and may have different hopes and expectations about using the land. Working with public landowners poses its own set of challenges: city and county government processes can be slow; in the absence of a champion, it is difficult to determine who to go to for help; and the differences between municipalities makes it hard to transfer knowledge and experience from one location to another.
4. **Water access and rights are essential ingredients of stewardship.** Land without water is not farmable. Farmers also struggle with obtaining water rights, with the high cost of water, the high cost of drilling wells, the electrical cost of operating pumps, and wells running dry. While participants stressed the necessity of water, water does not feature prominently in the Task Force's recommendations.
5. **Infrastructure, utilities, and start-up costs are also integral to land access and stewardship.** Whether taken on by a landowner or a tenant, it takes significant investment to make land suitable for farming and the costs of start-up (e.g., irrigation, fencing) can be prohibitive. Indigenous land stewards also identified lack of infrastructure (e.g., water, ADA) as a barrier to engaging in stewardship.

6. **For farmers who lease, land suitability is a bigger barrier than cost.** One of the main reasons farmers choose not to lease a property is that it is either not well suited to farming or it is not equipped for farming (e.g., lacks road access). Elements of suitability include water access, infrastructure, and housing availability.
7. **When it comes to staying on the land, the costs of doing business (e.g., water rates, operational expenses) are a perpetual challenge.** Farmers may burn out emotionally, but it's typically a function of economics (e.g., working all the time, not compensating themselves adequately). Given this economic reality, anything that lowers costs for farmers supports long-term land tenure.
8. **Leasing increases uncertainty and risk for farmers.** Short-term leases make farm operations very precarious, while the power imbalance in farmer-landowner relationships adds to the challenges farmers face negotiating lease terms and working with landowners.
9. **Short-term leases make long-term investments in infrastructure or ecological practices impractical.** Additionally, insecure tenure and limitations on long-term site development and stewardship increase leasing farmers' vulnerability to extreme weather and other external disruptions.
10. **Permitting processes, enforcement pressures, and "one size fits all" regulations pose significant challenges for small-scale, specialty crop, and socially disadvantaged farmers.** There was consensus that existing regulations, which are not tailored for small-scale farmers, diverse farming traditions or Indigenous land stewardship, disproportionately burden small producers, specialty crop growers, and Indigenous land stewards. Farmers were also frustrated with local government regulations, permits, and enforcement actions. Strict codes (e.g. septic system requirements) and procedural delays make it hard to build needed infrastructure—especially housing—and in some cases farmers felt requirements (like installing an expensive septic system even on fallow land) were excessive. Farmers emphasized that local agencies do not provide sufficient guidance or flexibility for small-scale and immigrant growers.
11. **Language and digital literacy barriers add to farmers' challenges and make it harder to access support.** Farmers and TA providers agreed on the need for culturally and linguistically relevant programs and services. Language and digital literacy are additional impediments to accessing information about regulations, funding opportunities, TA, and communication with landowners or regulators. They are compounding factors to all the other challenges mentioned.

## IDEAS FOR IMPROVING ACCESS

1. **Protect existing agricultural land.** With so much agricultural land in transition and few priority producers able to purchase it, many participants stressed the importance of protecting existing ag land from conversion. A common suggestion was that land trusts, community land trusts, or other organizations with the values and resources to make farmer-friendly access arrangements purchase land now so it's available to farmers in the future. Other suggestions included guaranteeing farmland is sold to another farmer or returned to Tribal Nations or that farmers have the first option to buy.
2. **Use public land for agriculture.** Particularly in urban and peri-urban areas, there was support for committing local public land to agriculture. Because of the public benefits of agriculture, local governments could provide farmer-friendly land access arrangements that reduce some sources of risk for farmers.



3. **Make land more affordable and accessible, especially for purchase.** Farmers were eager to own their own land and suggested a variety of ideas to make this possible: no interest loans, no money down, grants for land acquisition, flexibility to account for the seasonality of farmers' income, programs to help farmers purchase land, incentives for first-time farm buyers, and lease-to-own models.
4. **Support cooperatives and other collectives models for stewarding land.** Unconventional models for structuring farms were seen as promising for overcoming land access challenges, but in need of additional support. Priority producers proposed funding and additional resources for cooperative farms, cooperative farmer networks, equipment sharing, and incubator farms. They also requested more robust models for holding land in common and support for setting up collective governance structures.
5. **Have a more robust, centralized repository of information about available land.** To overcome the lack of transparency around available agricultural land, farmers and TA providers suggested having a central directory of available land that includes information about ownership, allowable uses, and readiness for farming.
6. **Enable farmers, farmworkers, and land stewards to live where they work.** Farmers expressed a strong desire to be able to live where they farm. TA providers acknowledged the toll that the time and expense of travel take on farmers. One said that once a farmer has to travel more than 30 minutes to their farm, the likelihood of success goes down significantly. Easing housing restrictions would reduce stress and increase the functionality and value of farmland. Lack of housing in close proximity to the land they steward is a challenge for Tribal citizens. The time and cost of travel restricts Indigenous land stewards' access to land.
7. **Enable farmers to realize the value of improvements they make to the land.**
8. **Provide holistic support for farmers and land stewards.** Many noted that farmers' challenges are interrelated. Programs that support farm operations also help farmers stay on land. TA providers noted the importance of wellness and emotional support for Indigenous land stewards and farmers. Offering holistic support for farmers includes business development, help navigating regulatory agencies and requirements, addressing start-up and other input costs, and network weaving. Other popular ideas included opportunities for tool and equipment sharing and shared infrastructure.
9. **Reduce regulation and streamline bureaucratic processes.** There was consensus among farmers that they were burdened by overregulation, non-agricultural zoning, and permitting processes. Regulations and permitting requirements are not designed for small-scale agriculture and posed serious financial and administrative burdens and caused delays. Farmers were eager to have permitting processes expedited and regulations made simpler and less onerous to comply with. Similarly, Indigenous land stewards reported that cultural burns and other stewardship projects were delayed by complex permits and understaffing and they recommended simplifying permitting for cultural practices. Tribal Nations wanted to be engaged as true partners in land and policy decisions, while farmers also wanted more dialogue with regulators as regulations were developed and implemented.
10. **Provide assistance navigating regulatory and permitting systems.** Farmers and TA providers suggested that it would be helpful to have a local clearinghouse where farmers could come for help with regulatory issues (across agencies and levels of government) as well as other farm support functions (e.g., business development, website development, grant writing). Dedicated staff and clear

guidance for permitting agricultural projects could help farmers overcome the systematic disadvantages they currently experience dealing with bureaucratic systems.

- 11. Invest in the supply chain.** To improve farmers' businesses, and thus their ability to stay on the land, TA providers recommended investing in the supply chain to increase access to regional markets and to increase resilience during disasters.
- 12. Educate decision makers about farming.** Related to challenges finding land and regulatory burden, farmers felt that people in positions to make decisions that affected their operations—landowners and rule makers—lacked sufficient knowledge of what farming entails. TA providers indicated that one of the top reasons land matches don't work out is that landowners have unrealistic ideas of what farming is. Farmers stated that those making rules didn't understand how their farms operate or how regulatory requirements affected them.

## FEEDBACK ON THE TASK FORCE'S DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Overarching Comments and Suggestions*

- **Don't limit this initiative to prime farmland.** A prime farmland designation is not a good indicator of whether farmland has value to a priority producer. Focusing only on prime farmland will exclude some parts of the state and overlooks the fact that many people already successfully farm land that is not prime farmland. Farmers actively improve land, and several suggested they could be compensated for the carbon sequestration and conservation values they provide. **Decisions about what kinds of land warrant protection should be considered carefully.** Proximity to markets, access to water, existing infrastructure, and housing are all factors as or more important than prime farmland.
- **Specifically address size.** Tailoring strategies, programs, and regulations to small-scale farmers was a cross-cutting recommendation. As one example, small acreages are not typically protected under the Williamson Act or by land trusts. Size is an element of equity for those interested in supporting small-scale farmers.
- **Acknowledge the centrality of water access.** Given their water challenges, participants would welcome policies to assist with water access. Even though no single solution can solve regional water scarcity, acknowledging and addressing water access as part of land access is important.
- **Provide more context for the strategies, including identifying the issues they are intended to address.** To some, the recommendations seem top-down rather than bottom-up. They would like the report to include a more grounded perspective.
- **A simplified version of the report and recommendations should be available,** so that farmers and Indigenous land stewards, as the intended beneficiaries, can easily understand how these recommendations would work for them.



- **Use unified, inclusive language that includes Indigenous experiences and Indigenous agriculture throughout the report.** For example, the term land steward encompasses all who steward and/or manage land, including farmers, ranchers, producers, growers, and farmworkers.

## Implementation

- **Farmers and TA providers repeatedly raised concerns that the intent of different strategies could be subverted during implementation.** To mitigate concerns about implementation and unintended outcomes, they advised adding safeguards, clearly prioritizing intended beneficiaries, and providing greater specificity about what is being proposed, how strategies will be achieved and how performance will be evaluated, among other things.
- **Regional differences mean some tools need to be applied differently depending on the setting.** For example, TA providers from the San Francisco North Bay indicated that agricultural easements increase the cost of farmland there because protected land is desirable to wealthy, urban buyers. In the Santa Maria Valley, farmers are forced to sublease land from distributors who lease it from landowners. They fear that increasing the length of leases, which in their regions would be held by distributors, would leave subleasing farmers in an even more vulnerable position.
- **Make new programs or policies fair and accessible** by providing translation support, multilingual education, and culturally competent staff. The speed with which government processes take place also needs to improve, since delays can be devastating for small farms.
- **Include local agencies in solutions.** Participants noted that county-level implementation is crucial – policies on paper mean little if county agencies cannot execute them. The Task Force should involve county agricultural commissioners and planning departments in developing solutions. By working closely with local entities to ensure new initiatives reach the community level, the Task Force can make its land equity goals a reality.
- **Small-scale farms are grounded in a set of core values that extend beyond profit motive and offer multiple benefits to the public.** Across focus groups, when asked what they would like to share with the Task Force, farmers reinforced the multiple benefits that their farms provide and a set of values related to community care, stewarding cultural traditions, environmental stewardship and biodiversity, regional food security, and concern for future generations.
- **Participants situate their challenges and solutions within broader systems.** Participants recognized that farmers and land stewards are affected by regulatory and economic systems that place them at a systematic disadvantage. Within this context, land signifies access to wealth, power, and autonomy. Consequently, they advocate for solutions to be implemented in a way that shifts control to farmers, Indigenous land stewards, and Tribal Nations.

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

**Support.** Tribal members and affiliates expressed support for this recommendation and felt that this should be reiterated as a land transfer process.

**Implementation Concerns.** Many participants indicated that frameworks and processes leading to the return of ancestral and agricultural land would need to be better defined, especially regarding the support

mechanisms provided to Tribal Nations. They emphasized that this would not be a land acquisition process. The levels of financial, technical, and legal assistance for Tribal Nations may vary widely depending on their capacity, resources, interest, expectations, and funding streams.

#### Participant recommendations

- **Remove the perceived layers of bureaucracy from the report language.** For example, a shift from “oversee” to “moderate” or “mediate” will restructure this process toward a more equitable balance of power. Including operational definitions would help to strengthen this recommendation.
- **Clarify the incentive structure.** Tribal land trusts and conservancies are already being incentivized, so this strategy should be more clearly defined (e.g., tax breaks).

### *Recommendation 2. Recognize and remove barriers to sovereignty for California Tribal Nations.*

**Support.** Participants indicated full support for this recommendation.

**Comment.** Land donations (including land back and returning ancestral and agricultural land), acquisition, and conditions surrounding stewardship should acknowledge Tribal sovereignty and not place limitations on Tribal traditional, ecological, and cultural practices.

#### Participant recommendations

- **Create a state recognition process for Tribal Nations to access programs, resources, and protections.** Non-federally recognized Tribes are systemically denied many state and federal supports, which hinder their access to programs, to land for stewardship, and to funding opportunities.
- **Include clear policy language affirming Indigenous practices, food ways, ceremonial access, and land stewardship.**
- **Provide protective mechanisms for Indigenous practices through engagement with law enforcement, landowners, and the public.** Native people are harassed, interrupted, questioned, and displaced while practicing traditions and ceremony on public land.
- **Provide legal and environmental expertise to Tribal Nations and Native communities to safely access land without undue risks.** The costs of liability for Tribal practices (ceremony, tending, cultural burns, basketry, fishing, etc.) raise concerns about legal liabilities for land use, hazard mitigation, and land protection.
- **Simplify permitting for traditional and cultural practices.** Public domain allottees face restrictions from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and are further delayed by complex permits, understaffing, and limited capacity. These regulations do not align with Indigenous governance.

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

**Support.** Participants expressed support for the role of land trusts, especially those focused on equity, to protect agricultural land before it is lost.

**Implementation Concerns.** Many participants described shortcomings of conservation easements. Farmers are concerned about easements because of the limitations they place on improvements needed to maintain, upgrade, or expand a farm. Easements also do not always make land more affordable for small-scale farmers if there are wealthy non-farm buyers or well-capitalized sectors of the ag economy (e.g., wine grapes) that drive prices up. Indigenous land stewards described conservation easements that limit traditional practices and do not acknowledge Tribal sovereignty.

#### Participant recommendations

- **Protect and make available small parcels.** There is a mismatch between the size of land that land trusts typically protect and the size of land small-scale farmers want.
- **Provide guidance for agencies who want to build partnerships with Tribal Nations,** but are not sure how best to do outreach or navigate relationships with multiple Tribal Nations with overlapping territories.
- **Address concerns about unintended consequences of easements on land price and farm operations.**
- **Remove all limited waivers of sovereign immunity.**
- **Provide resources and support to agriculture-, community-, and equity-focused land trusts,** not only larger, more established, conservation-focused land trusts.

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

**Support.** Farmers and TA providers were broadly supportive of returning lands to Tribes and using public lands for agriculture.

**Implementation Concerns.** There was concern that corporations would take advantage of more accessible public lands, leaving out the intended beneficiaries of these strategies.

Urban growers thought it was important to be able to sell food that is grown on public land, otherwise the types of farms that could access those lands would be quite limited. At the same time, others felt that if public land is going to be used for urban agriculture, there should be some clear benefit for or reciprocity with the community.

#### Participant recommendations

- **Be more explicit about *how* public land will be made available.** If land goes to the highest bidder or the most established farm, equity goals won't be met.
- **Add qualifiers to strategies for making public land accessible to ensure it's made available in ways that are farmer friendly** (e.g., long-term leases). As currently written, there is nothing to ensure that leases on public land won't be month-to-month, for instance.
- **The process for accessing public lands needs to be accessible, easy, and expedient.** Having to wait multiple years to access public land is a major barrier. For equitable access, farmers will need assistance, not just a portal.
- **Build in accountability measures or performance indicators,** so these strategies have teeth and are not just guidelines or boxes to check.

- **Include safeguards to prevent big corporations from taking advantage of low-cost public lands** at the expense of priority producers and Indigenous land stewards.

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

**Support.** Farmers and TA providers were extremely supportive of the proposal to create a pension fund.

**Implementation Concern.** Farmers wonder if these strategies will appeal enough to landowners to be effective. They referenced multiple other policies that have not worked as intended.

#### **Participant recommendation**

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

### ***Recommendation 6. Improve lease terms for farmers who lease***

#### **Participant recommendations**

- **Use the Williamson Act** as a vehicle for encouraging landowners to lease land with farmer-friendly terms.
- **Add a mandate for rent caps on leased land** that is assessed for each region of California and is not affected by change in land controller or owner.
- **Expand CalAMP.** Two people to cover the entire state are not enough.

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

**Support.** Farmers were supportive of the strategies to make land acquisition more attainable for priority producers and land stewards.

**Implementation concerns.** There was concern that more well-resourced farmers would be able to access new programs and resources before small-scale farmers could. To direct benefits to priority producers, it will be important to set priorities within the agricultural industry.

Immigrant or older farmers currently have difficulty accessing traditional loans due to language barriers and lack of extensive financial records (e.g., tax returns, credit history). There was concern that without tailored assistance, the same farmers who have trouble accessing loans now could be left out of new public funding opportunities.

More broadly speaking, there was concern about the potential downstream impacts of new programs and injecting new funds into the land market. For instance, would they inadvertently drive up the price of land? Farmers counseled that it is important to consider strategies' context, intention, and execution and who they would help and who they might harm. There was concern that without careful consideration strategies might harm intended beneficiaries.

### Participant recommendations

- **Aligning existing programs with equity goals should include tailoring them for small-scale producers.**
- **Expand TA programs and make funding for the state’s climate-smart agriculture programs a consistent part of the state budget.** The current lack of consistency poses challenges for farmers and TA providers.
- **Fund trusted Tribal TA providers and ensure that Native communities can access legal and environmental expertise** to safely steward land without undue legal or financial risk.
- **Specify what type of technical assistance would be expanded.** There is a preference for holistic TA that includes legal, business, marketing, and social support.
- **Link loan program to debt forgiveness.** Participants were wary of adding to farmers’ debt burden and suggested connecting new loans to a debt forgiveness program.
- **Establish a support program for those with limited credit history**, such as a union or foundation that could co-sign or back loans.
- **Create a first-time farm buyer program**, similar to first-time home buyer programs, including tax credits and interest buydowns.
- **Develop state-backed insurance options** for Indigenous land stewards and priority producers who face high insurance and liability costs or are unable to purchase insurance (e.g., for specialty crops).

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

**Support.** Regulations were a frequently noted challenge and reducing regulatory burdens was a popular recommendation. Farmers and TA providers also supported greater interagency collaboration

### Implementation Concerns

- Support idea of increased coordination, but wonder how it will be implemented, particularly in light of other recent statewide coordination efforts (e.g., between CDFA, RCD, NRCS, and UC ANR), where it is unclear what has been accomplished.
- Support idea of BIPOC Advisory CDFA committee reviewing new rules, but wonder how much impact that committee has been able to have on internal CDFA decisions and, by extension, question how much power they would have to affect change at other agencies.

### Comments

- Based on current experience, when policies are rolled out in stages, implementation becomes increasingly burdensome for those regions where implementation happens later.
- Better alignment is not just across agencies, but also across different levels of government.

### Participant recommendations

- **Provide a clear definition or benchmark for what “increased collaboration” and “increased Tribal consultation” mean.**

- **There are a broader set of regulations and policies that interfere with farming than what is currently listed.** Revise this section to include more of the regulations that burden farmers.
- **Include pesticide application** regulations in the policies to be evaluated by the BIPOC Advisory Committee.
- **Include protections or flexibility for small-scale farmers.** When there is an exemption for small acreages, consider additional protection or a graduated approach for farmers that are just over exempt acreage thresholds. Allowing flexibility for different cultural cropping systems is also encouraged.
- **Encourage regulatory agencies to collaborate with municipalities,** so that farmers are not overburdened trying to balance pesticide buffer zone regulations and encroachment of urban areas onto agricultural land.
- **Encourage greater consistency in farmer-friendly policies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.** It's a challenge to have large differences between cities, between counties, or between a city and the county.
- **Offer comprehensive assistance to help small-scale farms navigate regulations and remain in compliance,** including providing accessible information and policy guidance in farmers' native languages. Better communication in multiple languages between regulators and farmers can improve compliance and trust.
- **Offer grant programs or cost-share assistance to help farmers meet standards** (e.g., upgrading equipment or facilities to comply with water and food safety rules).
- **Improve consistency and training of inspectors,** so that inspectors are knowledgeable about farming, including different cultural cropping systems, and farmers receive the same guidance regardless of the person they interact with.
- **Regulatory processes should not be solely complaint driven.** Some farmers suggested a system of scheduled inspections or consultations to reduce conflict and uncertainty.

***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 farm workers.***

**Support.** There was widespread support for making it easier to have housing and for multi-use zoning.

**Implementation Concerns**

- How to loosen housing restrictions without compromising farmworker safety was a concern.
- While generally supportive of changes that permit more housing and preserve agricultural land, farmers were concerned that these strategies could be implemented in ways that would not serve the intended beneficiaries or would result in the loss of agricultural land. For instance, one farmer was concerned that ag land mitigation banking would end up setting aside poor land. Another concern was that adding housing would increase property values in such a way that farmworkers and farmers would ultimately lose out.
- Even when building farmworker housing is permitted in theory, the difficulty and cost of installing it makes adding housing very difficult to do in practice. Farmers cautioned that the existence of zoning



allowances for on-farm dwellings does not automatically translate into attainable housing. Permitting processes and cost remain a major barrier.

- Because of the importance of implementation, involve county governments in crafting model ordinances and encourage local planning departments to treat farm housing proposals with urgency and understanding, rather than skepticism. Providing clear statewide guidance on zoning changes could help local officials embrace them and help more farmers actually build housing.

#### Participant recommendations.

- **Incentivize developers to use mitigation policies to set aside lands for community agriculture or Indigenous land stewards.**
- The strategies listed seem like they are written from a rural perspective. **Consider the zoning needs of urban agriculture**, such as rezoning urban land to permit agricultural use.
- **Create incentives for local governments to undertake zoning changes**, since many of the strategies in this section rely on the willingness of local governments to do this work.

#### Housing

- **Include safeguards to ensure that agricultural land used for housing stays agricultural.**
- To turn well-meaning zoning policies into on-the-ground projects, farmers suggested **greater technical and financial assistance for farm housing projects**. Ideas include grants or low-interest loans specifically to build farmworker housing and creating a pathway for pre-approved designs or certified structures that farmers are allowed to use.
- **Relax certain restrictions on temporary housing on farms, such as RVs or trailers, without imposing arbitrary time limits or onerous moving requirements.**
- **Include protective clauses and insurance for land steward housing that is damaged by climate-related events, such as wildfire and flooding.**

#### Infrastructure

- **Support on-farm infrastructure and legalize what farmers have built.** Help farmers construct needed facilities and develop ways to bring existing informal structures into compliance, such as creating a program to legalize structures without penalizing farmers. This could include funding or technical help to retrofit structures to meet safety standards.
- **Adopt agricultural-specific building standards.** Farmers recommended creating separate, appropriate building codes for agricultural structures. They felt that facilities like greenhouses should not be held to full commercial construction standards. Requirements to use expensive fire-proof materials or commercial-grade foundations on simple farm greenhouses add unnecessary cost. Having an “agricultural track” in building codes – with lower-cost standards suited for farm use – would make it feasible to construct needed infrastructure.
- Requirements related to **septic systems** and the cost to upgrade existing systems or install new ones are one of the biggest barriers to making farm improvements. Reconsider these requirements, including when changes to or installation of a septic system are necessary and revisiting septic standards to see if older rules take into account water-conserving technologies or alternative systems (e.g., composting toilets).

- **Decrease permitting costs, and streamline and expedite permitting processes for housing and infrastructure.**

#### Compliance & Enforcement

- **Ensure consistent and fair enforcement.** Farmers feel that inspections and code enforcement should be consistent, transparent, and not driven by neighbors' complaints. They want an oversight system where minor infractions don't lead to harsh penalties and farmers have a chance to correct issues. They recommend encouraging mechanisms that protect growers from being unfairly targeted and that foster cooperation between farmers and regulators. This could include, for example, having a dedicated agricultural permitting and inspection unit that understands farming – "a separate group of county workers" focused on agricultural projects – and using inspectors who are more understanding of farm conditions.
- **Lower the cost of compliance.** High fees and required infrastructure upgrades (e.g. costly septic systems or utility hookups) often put projects out of reach. Farmers proposed that counties could either relax certain standards for farms or offer subsidies/grants to offset these costs. For example, if an agricultural building needs to meet some safety standards, grant programs could help growers pay for permits or engineered plans. Better communication and flexibility on some requirements could save farmers significant expense.

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## Project Partners

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