

AGRICULTURE LAND REFORM IN CALIFORNIA

a policy platform for a more just land transition

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CAFF
COMMUNITY ALLIANCE
with FAMILY FARMERS

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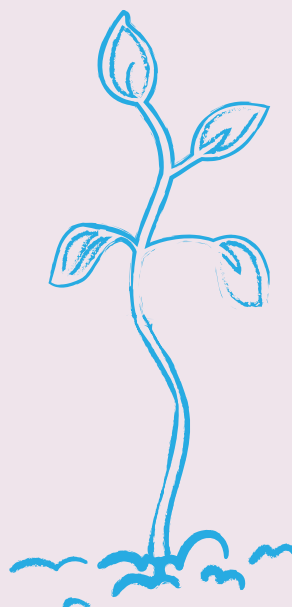
AGRICULTURE LAND REFORM IN CALIFORNIA

Agricultural land reform^{1,2} is an urgent and necessary step toward creating a just food system that centers rural economies and biological diversity, as well as addresses the historical land theft, exploitation, discriminatory policies, and systemic racism faced by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). Systemic racism continues to block farmers, food producers, and farmworkers of color from securing land ownership, this issue is exacerbated by an inherited wealth gap, a history of land removal policies, unjust lending due to United States Department of Agriculture discrimination, forced labor, and limited access to support services. (See Appendix A for historical references)

The history of centuries of systematic harm and the commodification of natural resources has led to a severely consolidated food system that causes environmental damage, exploits workers, and erodes local food economies. This trend does not appear to be changing, as California's agricultural land is experiencing rapid consolidation and transitioning to private investment firms, hedge funds, and billionaire investors. **Today, private investment firms, corporations, and non-agricultural operators already control a disproportionate share (over 40 percent³) of California's cropland. Current trends show their acquisitions accelerating rapidly, putting these institutional entities on pace to become the outright majority of landowners in the very near future.⁴ This trajectory is troubling, considering that previous research has found increased social and ecological harms when agricultural economies are dominated by large-scale, industrialized, and absentee-owned operations.⁵**

Today's policy framework is fundamentally not designed to solve the problem of inequitable land access. In recent decades no laws have been passed to combat land consolidation or make steps towards reform. Most legislation has only focused on protecting land from development and protection including the Williamson Act of 1965, California Farmland Conservancy Program Act of 1995, and the Sustainable Agricultural Land Conservation Program (SALC). Only in recent years has there been a shift toward prioritizing equity in solutions for socially disadvantaged farmers, as a result of the Farmer Equity Act of 2017.⁶ As well as steps towards tribal sovereignty after Governor Newsom's formal apology⁷ which has resulted in several new laws and programs, such as the Tribal Nature-Based Solutions grant program.

California's small-scale, beginning, and underserved farmers continue to assert the impossible challenges they face in an attempt to gain secure access to land. With the combination of unattainable land prices, decreasing water availability, the rapid rate of private investment firms buying up available land as investment properties, dangerous ambitions like the California Forever project, and warehouse development, **small, underserved, and beginning farmers have no other choice but to lease or stop farming altogether.**



Rubie Simonsen, First Mother Farms, PC. Rich Beckermeyer

*"The way we relate to this land today may seem fixed, but it is simply the result of choices made over time. **Our ancestors understood that land is not owned but cared for in relationships. There are other ways forward, guided by Indigenous knowledge and reciprocal stewardship. We must restore practices of shared responsibility by embracing collective land stewardship models and ensuring long-term, secure tenure arrangements that honor our deep connection to the land, allowing it to thrive for generations to come.**"*

—Rubie Simonsen + Farmer,
First Mother Farms

We must **develop transformational policies at the national and state levels to curb rapid consolidation and build a more just food system that uplifts rural economies and promotes biological diversity.** Furthermore, with the implementation of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, we know California's agricultural landscape will shift drastically, with hundreds of thousands of acres no longer able to operate as they have historically.⁸ **Equitable and secure farmland access is essential for food sovereignty, environmental stewardship, and community stability.** To ensure a just future for California's food system and address centuries of harm, we are required to create policies that transform our relationship with agricultural land away from its treatment primarily as a commodity and develop a path for small-scale, underserved, and beginning farmers, including farmworkers passionate about creating their own operations.

By 2035, 40 percent of farmland is expected to change hands through private transactions, between family members or on the open market.⁹ Open-market sales often go to the highest bidders, which are often found to be private equity firms, hedge funds, or investors.¹⁰ While these trends create challenging and inequitable conditions for underserved farmers, widespread transfer of farmland in the next 10-20 years presents a key opportunity to transform farmland access through strategic policy change.



“Farmworkers are not just the backbone of our agricultural economy; they are the future of farming. As future beginning and small farmers, they are key to sustaining and diversifying our food systems. Our survey of farmworkers in Ventura County found 99 percent would aspire to own their own farms if they had the opportunity. Yet farmland sold by aging small farmers is being consolidated by large corporations, while farmworkers are unable to secure land of their own. Systemic changes supporting farmworkers to access land and resources such as cooperatives are crucial for transforming agriculture to ensure that those who work tirelessly on the land can be part of a more just economy.”

—**Lucas Zucker**, Co-Executive Director, Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE)



From left to right, Antonio Palma (Tenant Farmer, former farmworker), Genevieve Flores-Haro (MICOP), Grace Cotangco (Prevention Institute), Francisco Romero (Prevention Institute), and Lucas Zucker (CAUSE). PC: Irene de Barraicua (Lideres Campesinas)

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a light-colored t-shirt and brown overalls, is sitting on a rustic wooden bench. She is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background features a grassy field, a fence, and rolling hills under a clear blue sky.

“Natural resources such as land belong to the common good. As we watch land grabs by billionaires and hedge funds unfold, what we are witnessing is the removal of land from food production that is gutting our local economies, and transferring those dollars into private portfolios for the few. In many ways this is more than a land grab, it’s a power grab, jeopardizing our food security and unraveling the rich fabric of our local communities.”

—Alexis Koefoed, Soul Food Farm, Solano County

DRIVERS OF LAND INEQUITY: COMMODIFICATION & CONSOLIDATION

We respect land ownership goals of family farmers who participate in the daily business operations on that land. For many families, land ownership is key to building intergenerational wealth. What we oppose and seek to end is land as a new investment frontier for hedge funds, private equity firms, and corporate interests. We oppose the extractive approach to mass land ownership and management. **To guide an equitable transition of land to the next generation of farmers, it is critical to understand and deconstruct the commodification and consolidation of California farmland.**



5%

**OF ALL
LANDOWNERS
OWN OVER HALF OF
CALIFORNIA'S
CROPLAND**

In California, farmland is severely consolidated with the largest five percent of properties making up 50 percent of cropland and the smallest 95 percent of properties accounting for the other half.¹¹



95%

**OF THE SMALLEST
PROPERTIES
ACCOUNT FOR 50%
OF CROPLAND**

Farmland **commodification** refers to how our property laws turn land into a private resource—or commodity—that can be exploited and sold for profit. Large-scale corporate farms, domestic and international investment firms, and private individuals then use farmland to extract private gains at the expense of community food production and sovereignty. This also results in absentee ownership¹², driving ecologically damaging practices and unattainable land prices.



43%

**OF SURVEYED FARMERS
INDICATED THEY
LEASE THE LAND THEY
CULTIVATE, WHICH
LIMITS THEIR ABILITY
TO INVEST IN THE LAND
THEY ARE ON AND
FEEL SECURE IN THEIR
BUSINESSES**

Farmland **consolidation** is the accumulation of more and more land by a smaller number of legal entities. This pattern gives undue control to the few, while pushing out local farms and further challenging beginning and underserved farmers from entering into ownership and/or stable access to land, who are far less likely to have access to generational land and wealth. Consolidation also drives up the price of land, accumulates natural resources like water, promotes large-scale, monoculture systems, and ultimately excludes new and underserved farmers from the benefits of land tenure.



PC Jason Elias Photography



Taylor Johnson, Jelly's Ferry Ranch, PC: Lan Ngo

POLICY ACTIONS FOR *Equitable Land Reform*

We need a bold, new policy framework in California that transforms our relationship with land and ensures accessibility and success for all. New policies and programs must prioritize land redistribution, long-term tenure and decision-making power for underserved communities. Secure land includes meaningful access to land with water, accessible markets, capital for startup costs, and secure housing.

The following **outlines our core policy goals to drive meaningful progress toward land reform in California.** These goals and subcategories present a suite of policy strategies and ideas that we aim to pursue in various forms. Many of the laws that have contributed to these critical issues are centuries old, and our policy goals are designed to begin addressing them with a commitment to sustained efforts for as long as needed. This approach ensures justice and equity, respects Indigenous sovereignty, and invests resources in those systematically denied for centuries.





GUARANTEE LAND SECURITY FOR BEGINNING AND UNDERSERVED FARMERS

These core goals will expand stable, affordable opportunities for the next generation of farmers while slowing the rate of farmland loss to development.

- Create a **grant program**, or modify existing programs, to **fund land acquisition by community-based organizations that center justice and equity and are dedicated to ecological stewardship**.
 - Grant recipients must make these lands available to beginning and underserved farmers through purchase or long-term leases.
 - Ecological/agricultural land uses must be preserved in perpetuity through a buy-protect-sell agreement, agricultural conservation easement, community land trust, or otherwise.
- Create a **forgivable loan program** to support underserved farmers in buying land at market rate.
- Identify public lands fit for food production and Tribal foodways and ensure access and **secure, long-term tenure to this land for underserved farmers**. Consider urban and public lands under city, county, state, and federal jurisdiction.
- Transition a portion of private agricultural land to publicly available, secure long-term tenure or ownership for beginning and underserved farmers.
- Develop local community-based infrastructure, including both local and state representatives to facilitate these transactions and processes to ensure they are just, fair, and center community needs



REDUCE COMMODIFICATION & CONSOLIDATION

These policies will help curb land accumulation by the few, and inaccessible land prices, while ensuring access and benefits for many communities who currently lack such access.

- Establish a **first right-of-refusal program at local and state levels for Indigenous and underserved food producers** to ensure agricultural land stays in the hands of local communities and out of hedge funds and private equity firms. Develop **local community-based infrastructure** including both local and state representatives to facilitate these transactions and processes to ensure they are just, fair, and center community needs.
- Incentivize the sale of land in small parcels to increase affordability and reduce consolidation.
- Require community benefits agreements for the sale of large plots of agricultural land, which intentionally grow economic and decision-making opportunities for local underserved communities.
- Adopt a corporate farm law that limits corporations and private investment funds from purchasing or leasing farmland.
- Institute a **corporate land ownership fee** (by acre or percentage of annual revenue) used to fund farmland acquisition for underserved farmers.
- Create tax incentives for landowners who donate or sell to programs outlined above, to land banks, or directly to underserved farmers.



EXPAND FARM COOPERATIVES

These priorities will promote the co-management of resources and food production and incentivize more sustainable practices and local food economies.

- **Direct funding towards producer and farmer-governed organizations** that collectively manage the land and shared resources through examples such as agrarian commons, community land trusts, and community-based subsistence areas.
- Establish a program to **pilot a variety of collective and cooperative stewardship models** on publicly owned farmland.



REFORM EXISTING PROGRAMS

The current policy framework in California fails to systematically create more equitable ownership and access patterns for underserved farmers. Relevant legislation includes the Farmer Equity Act of 2017, California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP), and Sustainable Agricultural Land Conservation Program (SALC). These strategies can be used to improve existing programs:

- Track and implement recommendations by the Strategic Growth Council's Agricultural Land Equity Task Force.
 - **Build a CA land observatory** under the Strategic Growth Council, that delivers monitoring of agricultural land ownership to the public
- Improve CFCP and SALC to more **effectively address structural land access barriers**:
 - Adapt existing project selection criteria to **prioritize majority funding for underserved farmers and communities**, including projects that promote land access for California Tribes,
 - Facilitate relationship building between underserved farmers and common recipients of farmland conservation grants, who often don't serve these farmers without intentional design and programming,
 - **Collect demographic data** on grant recipients, assess grant scoring criteria and utilization by underserved communities, and update accordingly.

WORKS CITED

1. For the purposes of this platform we consider land reform to include but is not limited to “...deconcentration and democratization of land access, use, and the benefits of land’s use (Borras and Franco, 2012), accompanied by provisioning of capital and infrastructure to support new and expanded agroecological production and localized markets. (Roman-Alcalá, 2024) <https://online.ucpress.edu/elementa/article/12/1/00087/200463/Land-reform-in-the-United-States-Lost-cause-or>
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PC: Rubie Simonsen

APPENDIX A

The below include a few of the many historical laws and policies that caused the theft of land, harmful discrimination and labor practices.

Native American Land Removal and Treaties/Laws in California

- Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848)
- California Land Act (1851)
- Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA): The BIA’s oversight often led to forced removal of Native Californians from their ancestral lands. In 1851, 18 unratified treaties were signed by California tribes but later nullified, leaving tribes without federal land or recognition.
- Mission System: Although earlier (1769-1833), California missions forced Native Californians into labor and converted them, undermining tribal sovereignty and displacing many from their lands.

Harmful labor policies impacting Filipinos, Mexicans, and Other Groups

- Bracero Program (1942-1964)
- Philippine Independence Act (1934)
- Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)
- Coolie Trade (1847-1874)

African American Forced Labor and Discrimination

- Discrimination and Jim Crow Laws
- Alien Land Laws (1913, 1920)

Japanese Internment and Loss of Farmland

- Executive Order 9066 (1942)
- 1942 Wartime Civil Control Administration
- California Alien Land Law (1913)



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