



American Farmland Trust, California Region

Policy Priorities 2021

More than forty years ago, American Farmland Trust created the country's conservation agriculture movement, which speaks for the land and the people who grow our food. As the movement's founders, and a national agricultural land trust, we have three priorities: protecting agricultural land, promoting environmentally sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land for generations to come.

Protecting California's Agricultural Lands

California's agricultural lands provide multiple environmental, economic, and public health benefits that are often overlooked. Along with providing valuable local food sources, working lands provide nature-based benefits such as recharging the state's groundwater, controlling floods, fires, and erosion, providing habitats for fish and wildlife, pollinating plants, sequestering carbon, removing pollutants from the air, creating space for outdoor recreation, and providing beautiful scenery.

AFT's recently released national research report *Farms Under Threat: The State of the States*, re-affirmed that although California has had success in protecting farmland and ranchland, there is much more to do.

- California scored among the nation's top states for policies and programs that protect agricultural

land from development, promote farm viability, and facilitate the transfer of agricultural land. "However, the threat to agricultural land was also among the nation's highest, with widespread conversion to both urban and low-density residential land use."

- According to AFT's [research](#), the state invested *only .11 per capita/year*. In contrast, Delaware earned top score among states for average funds spent per capita/year at \$6.03.

This relatively low investment in farmland protection occurs despite California's working landscapes providing more than \$333 billion in sales, 1.5 million jobs, and \$85 billion in earnings in 2018. Unfortunately, most development is happening on the state's highest-quality agricultural land: California's best land was 202 percent more likely to be converted to other uses than the rest of the state's agricultural land.



Plan for Agriculture, Not Just for Land Use

AFT is committed to advancing the development of state and local policies, which provide incentives for local governments to adjust their General Plans and Spheres of Influence, so they are consistent with high-density infill and related smart growth strategies that reduce and mitigate the urbanization of adjacent, productive farmland and protect groundwater recharge sites.

California must avoid developing the highest-quality agricultural land and instead direct new development towards land less suited for productive working landscapes. Once this precious resource is gone, it is gone forever.

Protecting California’s farm and ranch land also helps combat climate change. AFT’s *Greener Fields* research found average emissions from an urban acre are 58–70 times higher than an acre of farmland. At the same time, low-density development produces more greenhouse gases (GHG) per capita than efficient high-density development.

California has several land conservation programs, which can help turn the tide on the state’s farmland loss while also promoting smart growth principles. California has lost over one million acres of agricultural land over the past three decades at a rate of 50,000 acres lost annually. If current development trends continue, it is anticipated that 1.4 million acres will be lost by mid-century. Action is needed to protect this invaluable resource.



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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVANCE AGRICULTURAL LAND PROTECTION

Maintain Continuous Appropriation for Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) Program

The SALC program was created by AFT together with other partners to permanently protect agricultural land. SALC recognizes that long-term planning is crucial for California communities to mitigate and adapt to climate change, as well as meet state goals for long-term protection and agricultural land management.



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- Since 2015, the first five rounds of SALC grants have yielded 100 agricultural conservation easements in 36 counties, covering more than 112,000 acres of permanently protected agricultural land. It is anticipated that several more easement and planning projects will be approved as part of the sixth round of SALC applications in late 2020.
- With a 10% continuous appropriation of Greenhouse Gas Reduction Funds annually, this program has led to more than \$180 million awarded since 2015.
- SALC integrates planning grants into this innovative program to create meaningful engagement and actionable plans for agricultural land protection with local planning agencies and stakeholders.

Secure Stable Funding to Enhance California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP)

AFT sponsored the bill creating the California Farmland Conservancy Program in 1995, one of the first easement programs in the United States. CFCP is a statewide grant program that supports local efforts to establish agricultural conservation easements and planning projects for preserving important agricultural land resources.

As a key stakeholder in the creation of CFCP, AFT recognizes that CFCP has been heavily dependent on variable funding sources, primarily bonds, since its inception in 1995. AFT is committed to finding a long-term sustainable funding source for this critical program.

SALC and CFCP are critical components to securing federal match dollars to protect California’s agricultural land, namely USDA’s ACEP-ALE or Agriculture Conservation Easement Program.



Scaling Up Regenerative Agriculture in California

Regenerative agriculture practices build soil health and, in doing so, capture atmospheric carbon and put it back into the earth.

By focusing on the entire system, farmers can achieve multiple benefits: for example, healthy soils absorb more water during heavy rains, which reduces runoff, and offers better resilience during periods of drought because the land retains more water. [AFT research shows](#) implementing healthy soils practices can help farmers increase yields, increase yield stability, and improve economic bottom lines.

While a growing number of farmers and ranchers are rebuilding their soil and adopting soil health management systems, key barriers hinder more

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widespread adoption. AFT works with farmers, ranchers, and policymakers to overcome these barriers. Recently, AFT secured

tens of millions of dollars to work with local partners to provide farmers with technical assistance and funding to implement regenerative practices on 100,000 acres in the San Joaquin Valley as part of AFT's [San Joaquin Land and Water Strategy](#).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVANCE REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE OUTCOMES

Support Funding Commitments for California's Healthy Soils Program (\$50M)

- Since 2017, the Healthy Soils Program (HSP) has provided more than \$42 million to over 600 projects on farms and ranches, including almost 70 demonstration projects. Farmer demand for the program has increased six-fold in just three years.¹
- To meet the demand and scale up the HSP, it is estimated that annual funding levels for this program, at minimum, be \$50 million to incorporate demonstrations, incentivize payments, and provide valuable technical support to farmers on the ground. Regrettably, the state did not



appropriate funding for the program for the 2020–2021 budget year.

Reinstate Funding to State Water Efficiency & Enhancement Program and Alternative Manure Management Program

- California's State Water Efficiency & Enhancement Program (SWEET) and the Alternative Manure Management Program (AMMP) are critical to combatting climate change. They support the state's climate-smart agriculture programs and help California farmers and ranchers create more drought tolerant and resilient farms.

Help Farmers Comply with the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act

AFT understands the vital importance of funding technical assistance to help farmers comply with the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). Farmers statewide are struggling with developing on-farm conservation plans and reaching SGMA's water reduction goals. The San Joaquin Valley is ground zero for impacts to agriculture due to SGMA; there it is projected conservatively that as many as 365,000 acres may need to be fallowed, while other projections show a more aggressive range between 500,000–1 million acres.

- AFT has developed a SGMA Ombudsman Bill and will work with the legislature to bring technical assistance and funding to San Joaquin Valley farmers to assist in reaching water use reduction goals established for SGMA and prevent unnecessary agricultural land fallowing.

¹ The California Healthy Soils Program: A Progress Report, December 2020. California Climate and Agriculture Network. calclimateag.org.



Use Nature-based Solutions to Meet California's Climate Goals

AFT engages in developing policies that are actionable and support proven methods on agricultural lands to meet California's ambitious greenhouse gas reductions and climate goals. The Governor's October Executive Order on Biodiversity and Nature-based Solutions (N-82-20) serves as an important point in time for California to make advancements, and to create strong policies that prioritize investments in agricultural land conservation and climate-smart agricultural programs which are proven to advance climate goals.

As part of the State's upcoming Climate Scoping Plan, AFT will continue to pursue the inclusion of an avoided conversion measure of 50–75% reduction by 2030 in the annual rate of conversion on agricultural lands, and the integration of climate-smart agricultural programs.



According to the 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture, California had at least 47,907 female producers, representing ~37% of all producers.

of affordable housing, and the additional challenges that face farmers of color.

These farmers often have difficulty accessing government programs. They also often lack culturally relevant technical assistance for cost-effective regenerative agricultural practices, which would allow them to adapt to significant climatic changes, reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, and conserve precious resources. AFT's **Farms for a New Generation** program provides training, resources, and support

to new farmers and historically underserved farmers but there is much more that needs to be done.

To succeed, a new generation of farmers needs greater access to quality agricultural land, culturally relevant technical assistance, and current or new government programs.

Fostering Diversity in California's Agricultural Communities

The future of California agriculture, and the communities and livelihoods that depend on it, will require a new generation of farmers and ranchers. The average age of a California farmer is 59 years old,

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include rising land prices, appropriateness of potential lands, distance of available land to key markets, lack

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT A NEW GENERATION OF FARMERS

- Support efforts to increase access and funding to new and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers to assist in securing agricultural lands for the preservation of farming through a state-funded land linking program.
- Align state resources to purchase land, allowing beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers to access these lands when resold at affordable prices.
- Introduce an equity framework for land transfer and agricultural policies and programs. California's 2017 Farmer Equity Act² provides a model for institutionalizing equity checks for agricultural policy, such as mechanisms for ensuring delivery

2 AB 1348, Aguiar-Curry. Farmer Equity Act of 2017. [leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=20170180AB1348](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=20170180AB1348)



of resources and reach of programs to socially disadvantaged farmers.³

- Support traditional criteria for state-funded easement projects that have a qualifying succession plan in place, in order to invest in socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers when they are a party to the project.
- Build capacity of land trusts to enhance technical and legal support for the development of “Buy-Protect-Sell” programs that protect the most critical farms and ranches with easements and sell to working farmers and ranchers.

Women in Agriculture

AFT understands the significant role women play in California agriculture, and recognizes the value of improving women’s access to resources they need to be successful contributors and equal beneficiaries of California’s agricultural system. AFT’s [Women for the Land](#) program combines three complementary strategies: 1) research into the barriers women in agriculture face, 2) learning circles to engage women in agriculture in conservation, and 3) technical assistance and policy reforms to better serve women in agriculture.

According to the 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture, California had at least 47,907 female producers, representing ~37% of all producers. Many indicators including statistics on the outsized presence of women among beginning farmers and ranchers, highlight that women are increasingly entering and taking on more leadership in agriculture.

Many women have a strong conservation ethic and are deeply committed to healthy farmland, farm families, and farm communities. But women face gender-related barriers to managing their land for long-term sustainability. Existing data and anecdotal evidence from technical assistance providers indicate women remain under-represented in USDA and state-based conservation programs. These programs are critical to farm viability and conservation practice success, and women need targeted support to ensure parity in access.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE

- Increase knowledge, appreciation, and acknowledgment of the diverse and critical roles women play on California farms.
- Encourage consistent demographics data collection in tracking state conservation program utilization.
- Model and recommend best-practices for conducting effective outreach to women in agriculture, thus supporting state and federal programs in achieving gender parity in their reach and impact.



³ California Young Farmers Report 2019. Copyright National Young Farmers Coalition, April 2019. youngfarmers.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/California-Report-10.21.19-LoRes.pdf.