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Let's Embrace the Williamson Act

A Vision for the next 40 years

By U.S. Representatives Doris O. Matsui and Mike Thompson

Forty years ago, the California Legislature made a bold move to protect our state's farmland and economic future. They realized that having some of the world's most fertile land would be wasted if it isn't protected from over-development. To keep that from happening, they passed the landmark Williamson Act, which offers farmers a lower property tax rate in exchange for the promise to continue farming their land. It was "big thinking" when it was first conceived, and it still is today.

The Williamson Act has been ahead of the curve in many ways. Since its enactment, it has helped preserve 17 million of our state's 29 million acres of farmland. It has provided the counterbalancing force to development pressure for much of California's agricultural areas.

Because of forward-thinking policies like the Williamson Act, today our state contributes an amazing 13% of the nation's agricultural sales. California's produce and livestock products are shipped all over the country and world, and California's residents reap the benefits of 1 million agricultural jobs and \$34 billion in gross product.

Unfortunately, the Williamson Act alone can't protect all of California's farmlands. In fact, our state is losing 50,000 acres of land a year, much of which is our most productive land. A study by the American Farmland Trust found that 72% of all farmland lost in Yolo County from 1990 to 2000 was considered high quality, meaning it had the highest yields or produced the state's most important crops. This trend is similar for most of the Central Valley.

We should be doing more, not less, to keep our farmers farming. However, Governor Schwarzenegger wants to eliminate the state's funding for the landmark Williamson Act farmland preservation program. In the governor's May Revision of his proposed Budget he recommended cutting the entire Williamson Act Program funding, -- \$39 million -- for FY 2007-08. A program that costs less than 1% of our state's agricultural sales is a bargain in anyone's book. There is no reason to get rid of a program that has served our state so well for nearly a half century.

Agriculture in the Northern Sacramento Valley not only provides a safe food supply and stable economy, but also flood protection and some of the last remaining habitat for migratory birds along the Pacific Flyway. With the new estimates that California's population will double by 2060, now, more than ever, we should provide the resources to strengthen, not weaken, the chief tool we have for preventing the loss of critical agriculture lands so California's farmland won't turn into an urban desert.

We urge Governor Schwarzenegger to reconsider his position and stand up for California's farmers. However, as Northern California's federal representatives, we must walk the walk when it comes to farmland preservation and not just talk the talk in telling the State of California how to spend its money. That is why farmland preservation is among our highest priorities in Washington.

In 2006, we championed the law that now allows farmers to deduct from their taxes 100% of the fair market value of their farmland for 15 years, as long as they don't convert that agricultural land to other purposes. This is a huge incentive for farmers across the country to continue farming, and has been utilized on crops ranging from almond orchards to vineyards.

The Sacramento River Watershed has some of the most precious farm land and beautiful landscapes in the country. Within our watershed, we have large urban areas, small and rural communities, emerging suburban plains and productive agricultural land. Our communities have different needs, but common goals -- to protect, preserve and enhance our way of life. We believe that preserving farmland is an important priority for our entire region.

The next several years, as California's population continues to grow, more demands will be placed on our watershed and agricultural lands. Supporting the principles of the Williamson Act

will help us maintain that important balance between urban expansion and preservation of agricultural land. It's a balance that can be easily lost if we don't do something about it today. We urge the Governor to reconsider his stance on the Williamson Act.