

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

5.0

Conclusions

The California Coastal Act as implemented by cities, counties, and the statewide Coastal Commission has not prevented the loss of agricultural land in the coastal zone, but it has lowered the rate of agricultural land converted to urban uses. Santa Barbara County's total prime farmland declined at a rate of .0039 yearly averaged over the pre-Coastal Act years 1954-67; at a rate of .0085 between 1967-1984, and at a lower rate of .0010 in the 18 years after implementation of the Coastal Act (1984-2002). The lower rate of agricultural land conversion in the years following implementation of the Coastal Act by local cities and counties as well as by the statewide Coastal Commission tends to confirm the effectiveness of the Coastal Act despite fluctuation in the rate of loss of agricultural land for economic reasons: in the building boom years of the 1980s, agricultural land was converted to urban uses at a higher rate than in the 1990s when the economy slumped.

Santa Barbara County's coastal zone prime farmland declined by 392 acres total, or an average of 30 acres/year over a 13 year period or at a rate of .0051 from 1954-1967. The table below shows how the rate of prime farmland loss within the coastal zone increased between 1967 and 1984 and then declined dramatically from 1984-2002.

	YEAR	# ACRES TOTAL LOST	AVE. LOST YEARLY	RATE OF LOSS
PRIME AG LAND Coastal	1954-1967	392	30	.0051
	1967-1984	1,530	90	.0164
	1984-2002	122	6.8	.0017
PRIME AG LAND Non-Coastal	1954-1967	3,830	295	.0038
	1967-1984	10,018	589	.0080
	1984-2002	1,159	64	.0010
IMPORTANT FARMLAND Non-Coastal	1954-1967	3,764	290	0.0021
	1967-1984	14,306	842	0.0063
	1984-2002	+8,205	(+456)	+.0038 GAIN

Table 6. Comparison of agricultural land lost before and after implementation of the Coastal Act

In Ventura County before adoption of the Coastal Act, urbanization consumed available land in the coastal zone at a rate slightly lower than in the non-coastal area. After the Act, it consumed land in the coastal zone at a rate 43% lower than the non-coastal area. The modeling exercise described in detail in Part 4 of this report suggests that both the Coastal Act and the Williamson Act are important for retention of prime agricultural land and less significant for grazing land (For Santa Barbara see Charts 1-9 and Table 3; for Ventura County see Charts 10 to 18 and Table 5).

For Santa Barbara County, with full protection of both Williamson Act and Coastal Act, retention of prime agricultural land is around 100%, while with no Williamson Act and no Coastal Act, the model predicts only 41% retention. For Ventura, with both Williamson Act and Coastal Act fully enforced, prime retention in 2060 is predicted to be 74%; with both removed, retention falls to 53%. While there are slight variations in retention of grazing land in Ventura under all scenarios, retention of grazing land remains high suggesting that the impact of both regulation and tax incentives is small.¹⁵⁵

For Santa Barbara County, with no parcels leaving the Williamson Act and levels of Coastal Act protection varying from 0 to 100% protection, prime retention under future scenarios is in the range of 97 - 100%. If parcels are dropped from Williamson Act protection (e.g. Williamson Act incentives are abolished), rates of retention drop for Prime Farmland significantly from 49% with 100% Coastal Act protection, to 45% with 50% Coastal Act protection, and to 41% with no Coastal Act protection. As for Ventura, it varies less wildly, with a range of 52 to 74% retention of prime farmland across all the scenarios.

Finally we can relate the narrative history of farming communities contained in Part 2 to the story depicted by the maps. For example, almost all of the Carpinteria Valley is in the coastal zone. Therefore, abolition of the Williamson Act but 100% protection of the coastal zone results in no development in this area. However, the opposite, 0% protection of the coastal zone and full enforcement of the Williamson Act, does result in development. When both are removed virtually all of the farmland is lost in the Carpinteria Valley. In contrast, most of the agricultural land in Santa Maria is not in the coastal zone; there, a great sensitivity to the Williamson Act is evident but, of course, virtually none to Coastal Act administration. And future scenarios for Santa Maria predict much more significant loss of agricultural land.

5.1

Policy implications and recommendations

This study shows that economic incentives (the Williamson Act) and regulation (the Coastal Act) working together are powerful tools for retaining agricultural land. The modeling exercise illustrates that were California to get rid of either act, the other would be less effective. While the 100% protection scenario of the model is only a pipedream, 50% resistance to development is more realistic. Municipalities may reject conversion of agricultural parcels many times, but eventually when the pressure for development is great enough, they may allow conversion.

The combination of the Williamson Act, the Coastal Act, the Coastal Conservancy and private land trusts using conservation easements provides a mix of tools to effectively retain valuable farm- and rangeland. As the narrative, maps and model show, economic incentive, regulatory and purchase approaches have all played a role in evolution of the Ventura and Santa Barbara County landscape. Each retention strategy has weaknesses: jurisdiction of the Coastal Act is geographically quite limited; the voluntary nature of tax incentives undermines permanent protection; the Williamson Act incentives don't differentiate between types of farmland (prime or non-prime); and

[155] Though grazing land does indeed get consumed by urban sprawl, it is not nearly as affected as Important (e.g., flat) Farmland. At the same time, Important Farmland obsolescence, abandonment, insolvency, or fallowness automatically switches that acreage over into the Grazing Land category. Therefore, a great deal of Important Farmland is predicted to become Grazing Land (even if there are no cows on the property). The rate of this process eclipses loss of Grazing land to urbanization or other occasional conversions to Other Land or even Important Farmland.

the expense and voluntary nature of easements dramatically limits their utility. Nonetheless, the three approaches interact to provide greater success in retaining agricultural land than could any one approach alone.

Reflecting on the lessons of this study, we offer a few recommendations for strengthening the existing tools to enhance agricultural land retention. First, weighting benefits based upon a sliding scale of proximity to urban areas may help to maintain an urban boundary; however, it may also foster leapfrog development on farmland farther from the urban boundary. Also, lowering minimum acreage requirements would increase enrollment in Williamson Act. With the high property values in coastal counties such as Santa Barbara and Ventura, and especially in areas close to urban development, agricultural parcels are often smaller than 10 acres. This is evident in the Goleta Valley. Reduction in the minimum acreage requirements of prime farmland coupled with greater incentives for prime soil (and possibly proximity to urban areas) would increase the appeal of Williamson Act contracts for urban fringe farmers. Lowering minimum acreage requirements, however, risks offering tax reductions for residential development in the guise of farming. Note that making such adjustments to the Williamson Act would require increased funding to accommodate growing enrollment, greater incentives, and increased regulation to ensure landowners are not entering under false pretenses.

Another possibility is to capitalize on the already existing synergies of the various policies. For instance, by allowing greater tax breaks for Williamson Act parcels in the coastal zone the Coastal Act would better meet its goals of coastal farmland retention. This could also be achieved by reducing acreage requirements along the coast, where parcels tend to be smaller than in more inland areas. Additionally, increasing tax breaks for all agricultural parcels within the coastal zone could enhance the resistance to development. Incentives provided by the Williamson Act could be differentiated by the size and the type of land in order to provide stronger protection for bigger parcels and for prime and important farmland.

While conservation easements provide the most permanent protection for agricultural land, constraints on funding have prevented extensive use of this tool. Statewide, less than 1 percent of agricultural land is covered by a state-owned conservation easement (roughly 80,000 acres), but increased recognition of the importance of conservation easements could strengthen this trend, especially with the development of new non-profit farmland trusts. We recommend increased state and private funding for purchase of conservation easements for agricultural land. Lawyers could play an instrumental role in helping to preserve agricultural land by educating ranchers and farmers of the potential benefits of creating conservation easements through estate planning.

Finally, agricultural easements are the most effective tool for permanently preserving agricultural land; however, the expense and voluntary elements of this strategy make it unrealistic as a widespread solution to agricultural land conversion. The use of easements to preserve endangered farmland could be enhanced with greater state involvement in planning and increased funding. Funds could be better directed by state level planning and distribution of funds to those local area organizations where the most prime agricultural land is at the highest risk. As with the Williamson Act, increased tax incentives should be offered landowners with prime land near urban boundaries.

The vitality of the California Coastal Act is highly dependent on implementation by cities and counties. Relatively few cases of agricultural land conversion reach decision makers at the statewide Coastal Commission. Further, the Coastal Commission has not had the funds or staff to regularly review and update LCPs. On the one hand, this has left implementation and evaluation largely in the hands of municipalities; on the other hand, the reluctance of cities and counties to bring major revision of LCPs before the Commission may have enhanced retention of agricultural lands.

The Coastal Act's jurisdiction is too geographically limited to protect agriculture on a large scale, but the Coastal Act provides a model for state-level agriculture policy. This study demonstrates that the combination of mandatory regulations and voluntary economic incentives provide a significantly more robust strategy for retaining agricultural land than either tool can provide alone. If retention of farm- and rangeland are important throughout the state, the legislature should adopt goals and policies such as those in the California Coastal Act. While municipalities are likely to re-

sist intrusions by the state into land use decisions, a statewide policy on agricultural land retention and a program for oversight of local land use plans would be a far more effective way to prevent urban sprawl and loss of agricultural land than reliance on economic incentives alone.

5.2

Recommendations for future research

This study demonstrates the ability and utility of an interdisciplinary team of researchers to collaborate in the use of quantitative and qualitative methods to provide both systematic and robust evaluation of policy tools. We were able to go beyond literature review and anecdotal evidence to map changes in land use over a half century and correlate these with policy and regulatory changes at the state and local level.

Modeling greatly enhanced this study as it aligned quantitative and qualitative elements of the study. The modeling scenarios strongly correlated with most of the other analyses included with the report, especially noting the complementary nature of the Coastal and Williamson Acts in the Carpinteria Valley as well as the projected growth of the Santa Maria urban area. We caution, however, that the modeling exercise is most useful as an indicator of broad changes in land use, rather than in precise delineation of land use change. The model, for example, did not identify the Gaviota Coast as an area likely to experience residential development, though we know from the ongoing controversy at Naples, that the Gaviota Coast is likely to experience development and loss of agricultural land. Concomitantly, with removal of all Williamson Act protections, the model projected significant urban growth for the isolated area of Cuyama, an area currently without the infrastructure and services to support major urbanization. The model placed weight on proximity to major roads (in this case to Highway 166) and the presence of much flat, easily developable surrounding land. The model could be strengthened by taking in to consideration other variables such as water availability, another factor that may make Cuyama less likely to be developed than the model predicts.

We found the maps depicting historical change as well as those showing future scenarios triggered lively discussions among planners and others concerned with land use planning and agricultural land retention. We hope in making these widely available on the internet that others will use them to engage experts and the general public in debate and discussion. We hope other researchers will extend the analysis and use the maps to further their own research. The shapefiles used to create the maps are available from Davidson Library at the University of California, Santa Barbara.