

LANDOWNERS' VIEWS, VALUES AND MOTIVATIONS

3.0

Survey of landowners

We developed a survey instrument to sample landowners' reasons for enrolling, not enrolling, or leaving the Williamson Act, and to determine whether landowners regard the Coastal Act or Coastal Commission actions as influential in decisions regarding participation in Williamson Act contracts.¹⁴⁹ The target population for the survey included all landowners with land in active agriculture in the present or past in Santa Barbara County. From this population, we derived a sample through the use of County assessor's records. We tracked Williamson Act contract initiation and expirations from the mid 1970s through 2002 to compile a list of current and former Williamson Act landowners. In order to produce a list of eligible parcels, we assumed that any parcel of prime land over 10 acres or a non-prime parcel of at least 40 acres with an agricultural land use was eligible to enroll in the Williamson Act. From this list, we located landowner names and addresses in the telephone book, and called those whose numbers we recovered to ask if they would fill out a survey regarding their experience with the Williamson Act. We phoned landowners before mailing out a survey in order to ensure responses and increasing the response rate over a cold mailing. Based on the number of surveys sent out, the rate of return was high.

We found the task of tracking and contacting former Williamson Act landowners particularly difficult, but for all landowners we found the process time consuming and arduous. Eventually, we were able to obtain survey responses from only 13 landowners-- a sample neither sufficiently large nor statistically significant to be scientifically meaningful. Nonetheless, the results illustrate the range of landowner views, the challenges faced by those who want to continue farming, and the importance of the Williamson Act tax reductions to agricultural land retention.

Of the 13 respondents, five had land currently enrolled in the Williamson Act, two were no longer enrolled, and six were eligible but had not enrolled. Six held property within the coastal zone, 6 outside the coastal zone, and one is unknown. Respondents' land ranged from Carpinteria in the south county to Santa Maria in the north and from the coast inland to Santa Ynez. The uses identified by owners included crops,¹⁵⁰ pasture, woodlot, horticulture, avocado and lemon orchards. In response to the question about future land use plans, only two owners indicated intent to build and develop the land. Eight owners indicated their intention to continue farming; one of these also intended to build houses on the property, and one aimed to increase the value of the land (most likely through development). One owner was unsure about future uses, and one intended to have greenhouses; the latter wanted to see greenhouses allowed as agriculture under the Williamson Act. Both of these landowners engaged in horticulture at the time of the survey. One had not been enrolled in the Williamson Act and the other was no longer enrolled. Among reasons given for enrolling land in the Williamson Act, landowners stated that they had no development interest, wanted to farm, and believed tax incentives were more valuable than development opportunities at the time of enrollment. Two owners commented that the Williamson Act is the only way to make farming economically possible.

Two landowners noted their reasons for non-renewal of Williamson Act contracts, indicating their intention to develop the property or possible development potential in the future despite higher taxes in the present, or holding a parcel that no longer complies with Williamson Act rules. Among the eligible owners not enrolled, several wanted to keep their options open, and one indicated that the property already has low taxes without Williamson Act tax reductions.

[149] Kristin Hart developed the survey instrument with the advice of Onsted, Osherenko, and Professor Dan Montello. Ms. Hart tracked down survey participants and gathered the survey results.

[150] The survey form did not list orchards, but had a category for other. Some owners listed avocado or lemon orchards under other, while others known to grown avocados and lemons simply checked "crops." When asked to list the crops grown, the following appeared: avocados, cherimoyas, oranges, persimmons, wine grapes, flowers, strawberries, vegetables, and lavender.

When asked “What factors most influence your decisions about the future of your land?” respondents cited water issues (high water prices), labor shortages (attributed to lack of affordable housing for seasonal labor), energy prices, Coastal Commission regulation (particularly regulation limiting the number of greenhouses), crop developments (finding specialty crops with higher returns), market prices, “good stewardship of the land,” and interest level of the future generation. Landowner recommendations for change included increasing tax breaks available to horticultural operations (tax breaks decline proportionate to profitability) and the desire for the Williamson Act to include tax breaks for greenhouses. Two respondents with parcels ineligible for Williamson Act preserves recommended that the Act be amended to allow for enrollment of smaller parcels.

A number of landowners surveyed (especially those with eligible land or whose land was already under contract when they purchased it) indicated little knowledge of the Williamson Act. This lack of awareness about eligibility and the potential benefits of the Williamson Act may account for the sizable acreage qualified for enrollment but not enrolled.

Although the Coastal Act has strong protections for all agriculture, when adopted, the Act did not anticipate the rapid growth in greenhouses along the coast. The Coastal Commission has regulated and limited the number of greenhouses in some parts of the County. To many people, greenhouses are a type of industrial development: they pave over land, limit open space, use high volumes of water, and raise serious waste disposal and water pollution concerns. The values and interests of greenhouse growers are not well-aligned with Coastal Act provisions, and this has led to ongoing controversy.

Overall, the survey findings illustrate that the Williamson Act has been helpful to landowners who plan to continue farming by providing tax reductions. Those landowners not enrolled in the Act were either interested in future development or lacked awareness of Williamson Act benefits. The fact that enrollment in contracts is voluntary limits the Act’s overall effectiveness in providing long-term retention of agricultural land, but at the same time, the Act has definitely helped to maintain agricultural activity in areas with high land values.

3.1

Values toward the land

The survey, though just a sampling of agricultural landowners, illustrates the range of values and goals of different property owners. Survey responses indicated that goals differ from generation to generation. Both of the local attorneys we interviewed (one a land use lawyer, the other a specialist in trusts and estates) commented on how changes in generations lead to changes in agricultural patterns and attitudes toward the land. Estate and probate lawyer, Jim Davidson explained that what agricultural landowners want to do with the land depends on which generation they are in:

If I am dealing with the individuals who developed the business, they are often intent on maintaining the business. At the next generational level, they often want to preserve what Mom and Dad had. By the third generation, goals are all over the board. Many just want their one-ninth (or whatever) interest out.¹⁵¹

Susan Petrovich who works with many farm and ranchland owners noted:

[A]gricultural parcels tend to be smaller along the coastal area for two reasons. First, it is the way of the world that parents divide up their land to apportion to their children, so a 40 acre parcel becomes two 20 acre pieces. Second, smaller farming operations tend to be more economically feasible; greenhouses are more economically viable than large grazing operations.¹⁵²

[151] Davidson phone interview by Osherenko, May 5, 2005.

[152] Petrovich interview by Onsted and Osherenko, in office of Hatch and Parent, April 19, 2005.

Gaviota coast ranchers Eric and Elizabeth Hvolboll chose to protect their land for continued long-term use as a “working landscape” by giving up development rights and placing the land in an agricultural conservation easement with the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County. Mrs. Hvolboll wrote an editorial in the Santa Barbara News Press regarding the issue.¹⁵³

My family has owned and farmed land in Santa Barbara County since 1840 and on the Gaviota coast since 1866. ...When my husband and I had our children, they spent most of their growing-up years on our ranch, working with cows, raising orphan calves, riding horses, fixing fences. They learned about the natural world and about how they fit into the whole system, raising animals and food. As farmers and ranchers, they understand much about the cycle of life because they are part of it. ... There are three newer generations of my family now, and I think about when the youngest will be my age 70 years from now. I feel good knowing they will be able to stand here in Venadito canyon and see it much as it has been for hundreds of years.

A recent study of how to preserve agricultural land in Monterey County, California, conducted by graduate students of the Bren School of Environmental Science and Management confirmed the difficulties younger generations have in retaining active agricultural operations.¹⁵⁴

[153] “Coast conservation from view of farm family,” Santa Barbara News Press, Feb. 4, 2004: A11.

[154] Crous, Evelyn, Larkin, Muller and Perry, *Conserving Monterey County’s Ranchland: Trends and Strategies* (2007), available at http://fiesta.bren.ucsb.edu/~bigsur2/documents/BIGSUR_1_MAINREPORT.pdf (viewed 12.14.2007).