

Californians fear having to sell land if Conservation Act is axed

By Loretta Kalb, Sacramento Bee

In some ways, Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed elimination of California's Land Conservation Act is just one more symbol of the state's great budget disaster.

For many agricultural advocates, the consequences of abandoning a long-held strategy to preserve farmland and open space go well beyond the state's projected \$25.4 billion deficit.

Supporters say eliminating the 46-year-old law – commonly known as the Williamson Act – will diminish an important source of environmental protection for 16.5 million acres and increase development pressure on farmers and ranchers.

The Williamson Act enables counties to contract with farmers, ranchers and other landowners, generally for 10-year terms, to keep the property taxes on their acreage lower. In exchange, the owners agree to keep the land out of development.

Historically, the state has provided funds to the counties to offset their property tax losses. If the program goes away, some landowners question their ability to continue operating their farms and ranches in the face of higher property taxes.

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