



Program to preserve agricultural land threatened

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Published: Tuesday, Feb. 9, 2010 - 12:00 am | Page 1B

Last Modified: Tuesday, Feb. 9, 2010 - 12:22 am

Ranchers in [Yolo County](#) might have to tax themselves in a last-ditch attempt to keep alive a state program that protects agricultural land from development.

The land preservation program – called the Williamson Act – was cut by \$28 million this year because of the [state's budget crisis](#).

Rancher [Casey Stone](#), 43, a partner in the 7,500-acre [Yolo Land & Cattle Co.](#), said if no money is found, ranchers might have to pick up the slack.

The program is too important to let die, said Stone, who also serves as a state farm bureau director.

Otherwise, "the incentive will be to just develop the state," Stone said. "We will become a net importer of food" and lose status as the nation's No. 1 agricultural state.

Since 1965, the Williamson Act has allowed counties to contract with landowners to preserve agricultural land and open space in exchange for reduced [property taxes](#). The state, in turn, historically provided counties the difference. That ended this fiscal year.

So far, the self-taxation idea is only in the talking stages.

The preferred course, Stone said, is for the state to continue to reimburse counties for lost [property tax](#) dollars in exchange for protecting some 16.5 million acres from development statewide.

At the Yolo Land company, where 700 mother cows produce all natural grass-fed beef, the passion for preserving the land is real.

The land has been in Stone's family for 30 years, he said. In 2005, the company surrendered development rights for all but 500 acres through the [California Rangeland Trust](#).

If the Williamson Act is eliminated, the desire to keep lands in agricultural production also could evaporate.

"This year, the [Legislature](#) is starting to understand that the threat of losing this program is very real. The Williamson Act, which has served [California](#) so well for 45 years, could disappear as each county, one by one, decides" to let contracts lapse, said [John Gamper](#), director of taxation and land use for the [California Farm Bureau Federation](#).

For now, Yolo County is taking the lead on a possible fix, according to [John Young](#), the Yolo County agricultural commissioner.

Two concepts are being evaluated by county legal experts:

- A local assessment district imposed only on rural, unincorporated lands. That likely would involve a vote by landowners.
- A measure calling for a new [property tax](#) for agricultural land that could appear on a future countywide ballot.

In either case, the added [tax burden](#) on ranchers and growers still would be less than if the Williamson Act were eliminated and their agricultural land were taxed at full value.

Any approach is likely to find opposition, officials said.

Within the ranks of the agricultural industry, there is fear that any self-help approach would too easily allow the state to back away from its historic obligation.

Some said that won't matter.

"In essence, that's what has happened anyway," Young said. "It's the county that is making up the difference."

Yolo County, which last month announced plans to lay off 44 workers, is losing \$1.1 million in Williamson Act money this fiscal year.

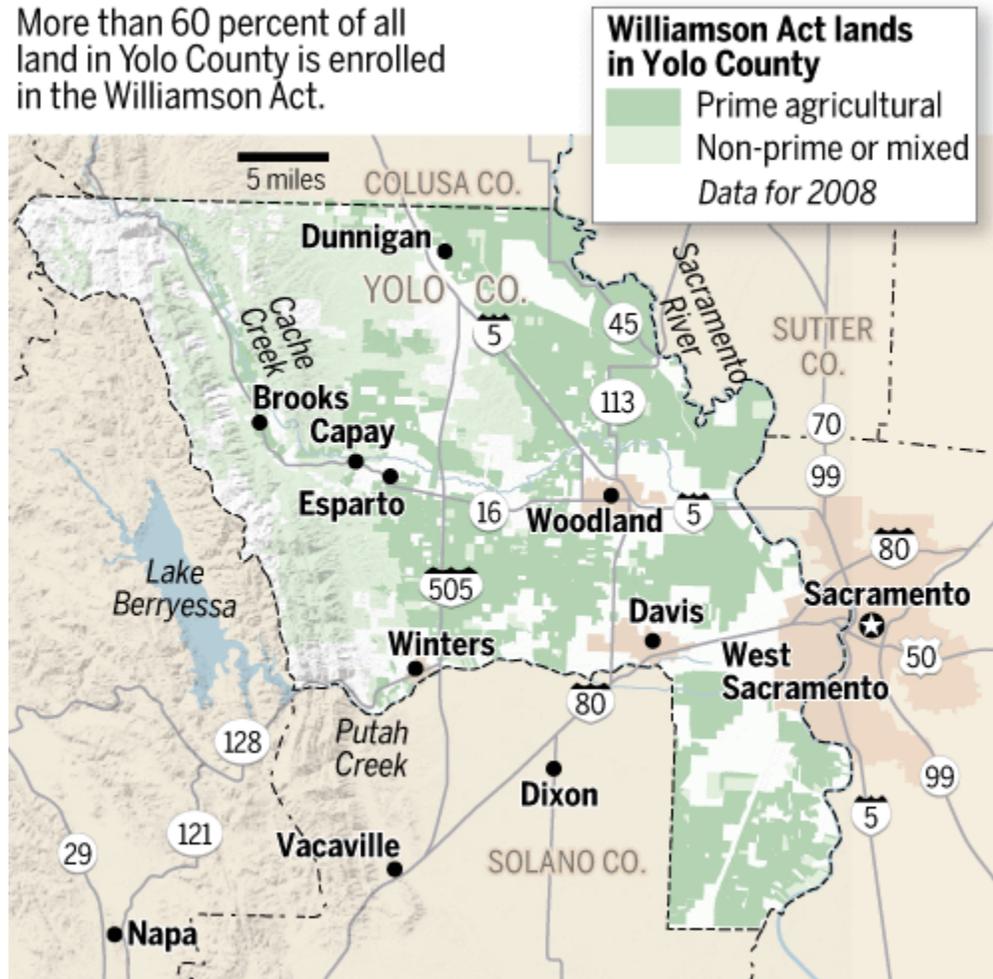
A new tax could prompt some agricultural landowners to sell their properties or take them out of protective status in favor of more lucrative development.

"It might be a reason for some landowners to walk away," said Gamper. "The program has been so successful in [California](#), I think it would be a real shame to lose it."

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YOLO COUNTY LANDS UNDER WILLIAMSON ACT

More than 60 percent of all land in Yolo County is enrolled in the Williamson Act.



Source: Yolo County

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Casey Stone says if the Williamson Act ceases to protect agricultural land from high assessments, "the incentive will be to just develop the state" and California's status as the No. 1 agricultural state will end.



Randy Pench / rpench@sacbee.com

RANDY PENCH rpench@sacbee.com Yolo County rancher Casey Stone transports a hay bale and his dog Sadie. Stone wants to preserve the Williamson Act, which protects agricultural land from development, but the program was cut by \$28 million this year amid the state's budget crisis.



RANDY PENCH rpench@sacbee.com Yolo County rancher Casey Stone transports a hay bale and his dog Sadie. Stone wants to preserve the Williamson Act, which protects agricultural land from development, but the program was cut by \$28 million this year amid the state's budget crisis.