



# Conservation Easements

## RANCHING SUSTAINABILITY ANALYSIS QUICK TIPS

### What is it?

A conservation easement is a voluntary, incentive-based legal agreement that limits the type and amount of development allowed on a parcel of land, either for a set period of time or in perpetuity. Effectively, the landowner forfeits some or all development rights in agreement with another party, such as a land trust or conservation organization—the easement holder—and both parties agree on how the land will be managed. Usually, an easement makes agriculture and natural resource management the “highest and best use” of the land to protect its conservation values. In partnership with the landowner, the easement holder monitors the land to ensure the conditions of the easement are being met. This can be an effective and flexible tool for land conservation as well as estate and succession planning.

### Why is it important?

More than 1.3 million acres of agricultural lands in California were converted to other uses between 1994 and 1998. Grazing lands decreased by 19,000 acres annually. Urbanization accounts for 80% of these losses, creating concern that we are losing important potential to produce food and fiber in the face of our growing population. In addition, the primary threat to wildlife and biodiversity is habitat loss, making the conservation of working landscapes that much more important.

Financially, estate tax burdens often put farm and ranch families in the difficult position of having to sell all or part of their land, which then becomes vulnerable to development and other conversions. However, because development rights usually make up the greatest portion of the land’s assessed value, removing them by means of an easement reduces your property tax basis and estate value, thereby making it easier to pass the land on to your successors.

### Conserving Farmland

“Peak Moment 1: Increasing local food production requires preserving agricultural land rather than developing it. Conservation easements on Bill and Anna Trabucco’s ranch preserves agricultural land now supporting a grass-fed cattle operation.”

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLPFdUkyJ\\_Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLPFdUkyJ_Y)

- Reducing your annual and succession costs improves your family’s ability to make a living off the land.
- Selling an easement can give you a significant one-time earnings boost.
- Donating an easement can give you a significant savings on income taxes for many years.
- An easement can protect your land and its natural resources and agricultural potential in perpetuity.

### What can I do?

- As part of your estate and succession planning process, consider a conservation easement as one tool to keep your land in the family.
- Consult fellow landowners who have been through the process.
- Contact land trusts/conservancies or conservation organizations in your area.
- Identify resources on your land that make it attractive to potential easement holders; e.g., well managed range, attractive scenery, healthy plant and animal populations, uncommon or special status species, proximity to other protected lands for habitat connectivity, potential for recreation, etc.

## Where can I get more information?

### Ag Land Trust

P.O. Box 1731, Salinas, CA 93902, 831-422-5868  
[www.aglandconservancy.org](http://www.aglandconservancy.org)

### American Land Conservancy

369 Pine Street, Suite 700, San Francisco,  
CA 94104, 415-912-3660  
[www.alcnet.org](http://www.alcnet.org)

### Conservation Easements, National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service (ATTRA)

[www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/coneasements.pdf](http://www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/coneasements.pdf)

*California Farmers and Conservation Easements:  
Motivations, Experiences, and Perceptions in Three Counties,*  
UC Agricultural Issues Center  
[aic.ucdavis.edu/research1/conease.pdf](http://aic.ucdavis.edu/research1/conease.pdf)

### California Farmland Conservancy Program

[www.conservation.ca.gov/dlrp/cfcfp](http://www.conservation.ca.gov/dlrp/cfcfp)

### California Council of Land Trusts

[www.calandtrusts.org](http://www.calandtrusts.org)

*Conserving Farmland...But for Whom? Using agricultural  
conservation easements to improve land ownership by next  
generation's farmers, M.S. Thesis by Kendra Johnson, UC Davis*  
[escholarship.org/uc/item/49z7905f?query=farm succession](http://escholarship.org/uc/item/49z7905f?query=farm%20succession)

## Did you know?

The nonprofit California Rangeland Trust has been helping to conserve ranches and rangeland since 1998. Their primary tool is the conservation easement and the regular monitoring that goes along with it to facilitate ownership continuity and ensure good stewardship of the land. Check their website for more information—[www.rangelandtrust.org](http://www.rangelandtrust.org).

CALIFORNIA  
RANGELAND  
Trust

### American Farmland Trust

[www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org)

### Agricultural Conservation Easements

[www.farmland.org/resources/publications](http://www.farmland.org/resources/publications)

### *Farming With The Wild Forever: Using Agricultural Easements to Support Biodiversity, Wild Farm Alliance*

[www.wildfarmalliance.org/resources/wfaagforeverbrief.pdf](http://www.wildfarmalliance.org/resources/wfaagforeverbrief.pdf)

### Land Trust Alliance

PO Box 8596, Missoula, MT 59807, 406-549-2750  
[www.landtrustalliance.org](http://www.landtrustalliance.org)

### What is a Land Trust?

[www.landtrustalliance.org/conservation/documents/what-is-land-trust.pdf](http://www.landtrustalliance.org/conservation/documents/what-is-land-trust.pdf)

### California Wildlife Conservation Board, Rangeland Program

[www.wcb.ca.gov/Rangeland/index.html](http://www.wcb.ca.gov/Rangeland/index.html)

### *RSA Info Sheet: Estate & Succession Planning—Keeping Your Ranch in the Family*

[ucanr.org/rsa](http://ucanr.org/rsa)

### *Update on Conservation Easement Guidelines: What Every Colorado Landowner Should Know,* Colorado State University Extension

[www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/natres/xcm234.pdf](http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/natres/xcm234.pdf)

## What is the RSA?

A voluntary program developed by California ranchers for use by the California ranching community, the Ranching Sustainability Analysis is a proactive self-assessment tool to foster successful practices and help ranchers achieve sustainability—**long-term economic, environmental, and social viability.**

