

Executive Summary

UC ANR Community Engagement for the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

To complement the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force's community engagement sessions, UC ANR facilitated 8 focus groups with small-scale farmers and Indigenous land stewards and conducted 9 interviews with organizations that provide support to these groups. Challenges and recommendations centered on insecure land tenure, land suitability, and political, economic, and social systems that placed farmers and land stewards at a systemic disadvantage. Feedback on the Task Force's draft recommendations highlighted the importance of implementation and ensuring equitable access to new programs.

Insecure land tenure

Challenge: Small-scale farmers and Indigenous land stewards cannot afford to purchase land, pushing many into insecure lease agreements that limit long-term investments. Competition from other land users limits the supply and affordability of farmland and contributes to farmland loss.

Recommendations for secure land tenure

- Protect land that is in transition through acquisition by land trusts and other values-aligned entities or return to Tribal Nations.
- Use state and local public land for agriculture with long-term access arrangements that affirm Indigenous cultural practices and farming.
- Support cooperative models of farming and farm incubators and recognize traditions of shared land stewardship within Indigenous communities.
- Make it easier to buy land through grants, no interest loans, incentives for first-time buyers, and lease-to-own programs.

Land suitability for farming and stewardship

Challenge: Without water access, infrastructure, labor, and proximity to affordable housing, land is not usable by farmers and land stewards. The size of land protected or made available also matters; small-scale farmers need access to appropriately sized farmland.

Recommendations for land suitability

- Provide farmers and land stewards with financial and technical help to build infrastructure and create processes to bring existing infrastructure into compliance.
- Enable farmers and land stewards to realize the value of the investments they make in infrastructure and ecological health on leased land.
- Ensure conservation easements do not restrict Indigenous cultural practices, Tribal sovereignty, or improvements needed to successfully manage land.
- Don't limit this initiative to prime farmland. Consider factors related to land suitability (e.g., access to water) when deciding what land to prioritize.
- Enable farmers and land stewards to live in close proximity to the land they steward.
- Address the centrality of water access and cost to farmers' and land stewards' use of land.

In addition to land characteristics (e.g., supply, cost, size, suitability), participants identified systemic policy, economic, and social barriers affecting their ability to steward and stay on land and recommended a holistic approach to developing equitable land access solutions.

Overregulation

Challenge: Regulations not tailored for different farm sizes, models, and cultural traditions are a significant obstacle. Permitting and compliance processes that are unclear, overly complex, inconsistently applied, punitive, and/or lengthy interfere with effective land stewardship.

Recommendations for reducing regulatory burden

- Design regulations and permitting requirements for small-scale agriculture and cultural practices to remove financial and administrative burdens and lessen delays.
- Assist farmers and land stewards with navigating regulatory agencies and regulatory compliance.
- Have regulations that are just for agriculture and have dedicated staff for working with Indigenous land stewards and farmers.
- Engage Indigenous land stewards and Tribal Nations as true partners in land use and policy decisions; engage farmers in meaningful dialogue with regulators.

Economic and social barriers

Challenge: Operational costs and supply chain disruptions were an obstacle to staying on land. Programs that lower costs and invest in the regional supply chain support long-term land tenure.

Finding land depends on social networks and compatibility between landowner and tenant. Decision makers' and the public's lack of understanding of stewardship and farming are other barriers.

Recommendations for economic challenges

- As part of holistic technical assistance, provide farmers with business support and help them address start-up and input costs.
- Provide Indigenous land stewards and farmers with legal assistance and state-backed insurance options.
- Support tool and equipment sharing and shared infrastructure.
- Invest in the supply chain to improve farm businesses' ability to stay on the land, improve access to robust regional markets, and increase resilience during disasters.

Recommendations for social challenges

- Address lack of transparency for land stewards and TA providers by having a central directory of land that includes ownership, allowable uses, and readiness for farming.
- Provide wellness and emotional support for Indigenous land stewards and small-scale farmers. Help build social connections and social support.
- Educate decisionmakers about farming and Indigenous land stewardship.

Implementation

When considering the Task Force's recommendations, participants raised concerns about implementation and requested processes and support to ensure small-scale farmers and Indigenous land stewards have equitable access to information, resources, and programs.

- Participants repeatedly raised concerns that **the intent of recommendations would be subverted during implementation** and requested safeguards, greater specificity, and clear prioritization of intended beneficiaries.
- **There is often a gap between favorable policies being adopted and on-the ground changes.** Involve local governments and other relevant parties in developing solutions and addressing procedural and financial barriers that prevent farmers and land stewards from utilizing new policies and programs.
- **Not all tools for equitable land access will work the same in every region.** Account for regional differences and support trusted, culturally competent organizations to help land stewards and small-scale farmers find and use statewide resources and programs.
- **Make new programs or policies fair and accessible** by providing assistance accessing them, translation support, multilingual education, and culturally competent staff. This type of support will help overcome existing linguistic, cultural, and digital barriers.