

# Reflections from the Climate and Land Access Listening Sessions

August 2025





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# INTRODUCTION

## Throughout California, beginning and underserved farmers have faced systemic obstacles in accessing and securing agricultural lands.

Inadequate and inequitable access to land remains among the primary barriers socially disadvantaged (SDA) farmers, ranchers, and producers face in the agricultural industry.<sup>2</sup> The competition for land by private investment, legislation that favors land acquisition by foreign and domestic enterprises, and gaps in knowledge and finances prevent new, beginning, and SDA farmers from accessing prime agricultural land in CA.<sup>3</sup>

### Sustaining Food Land Legacies:

Similarly to the U.S context, California's vast and complex agricultural landscape is shaped by historical legacies of land dispossession, settler colonialism, genocide, and corporal capitalism – including chattel slavery, sharecropping, contract labor, and seasonal farm work.<sup>4</sup> More recently, the cascading effects of uneven power distributions in land ownership have caused even greater disparities in the land-food nexus. Despite significant investments in grassroots-led initiatives that move away from dominant land power grabs, private property regimes, and industrialized monocultures that favor the few, these challenges bear witness to the deeply-rooted injustices enforced by past measures. From the monopolization and forced removal of Tribal Nations from their lands, discriminatory lending practices, and exclusionary practices that bar access to knowledge and financial investment, this

legacy continues to inform current land programs and policies for SDA farmers.<sup>5</sup>

Despite facing numerous obstacles to accessing land, underserved farmers and growers remain diligent in caring for the soil, producing fresh food, and supporting the state's aging farmer population as the next generation of new hands to succeed prior operations. However, without strategic access to agricultural land, their efforts – and the future of CA agriculture – are at risk. Structural changes are needed to move toward agricultural production, wealth accumulation, and communal and cultural practices tied to the land that is fair, equitable, and resilient to SDA producers, growers, and the communities they serve.



### At-A-Glance: Beginning and SDA Farmers<sup>6</sup>

6%

of farmers are young producers (under age 35)

<10%

of agricultural land is owned by smallholder farmers

20%

or 1 in 5 farmers in CA are SDA\*

50%

of beginning farmers make less than \$25,000 in market sales

\*Socially-disadvantaged (SDA) farmer groups, also referred to as "farmers of color" in the CA Farmer Equity Act (2017), include but are not limited to Indigenous, African American, Latinx, Asian, and Native Pacific Islander farm communities. California also defines "high priority" farmers to also include women, new and beginning, and next generation farmers.



# SUMMARY OF THE REPORT



This report both highlights key takeaways, themes, and challenges that smallholder farmers are currently facing in the agricultural sector in accessing land. Although the discussions predominantly feature farmers from Southern California, we contend that these barriers persist throughout the state. In August 2025, we conducted two focus groups with operators, farm advisors, and farmer advocacy groups, during which we explored the following questions:

1. The greatest challenges farmers in the community experience in finding, securing tenure or ownership, and/or in managing farmland sustainably
2. The types of support, tools, or resources would make the greatest impact on farmers' and organization's ability to support farmers or land-connected communities
3. Reflections on the ALETF recommendations: What resonates and what's missing?

## **About ALETF:**

Since 2022, the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force (ALETF), established through the Strategic Growth Council within California's legislature, has been conducting public commenting sessions to evaluate the challenges and barriers to land access throughout the state.

By January 2026, the committee will present their findings, which will include a key summary report on the final policy recommendations to the Legislature and the governor. Their most recent draft report outlines several key recommendations, including:

1. Return public held lands to Native Tribes
2. Expand funding and policy mechanisms to support and preserve ecological stewardship practices
3. Incentivize local and regional governments, organizations, and communal entities to make long-term, secure land management possible for new, beginning, and priority agricultural producers

## **About CALE:**

Between May and August 2025, Climate Action Land Equity (CALE) conducted four virtual listening sessions to discuss the challenges, barriers, and recommendations for equitable and reparative land access. As an organization dedicated to stewarding climate justice and equitable land models for priority producers, these sessions engaged local and regional stakeholders and California Tribal Nations. This report highlights the final two sessions held in August, focusing on Southern California land stewards, farm support organizations, and community members that constitute the region's agri-food ecosystem.





# IN COMMUNITY WE TRUST



## Session Highlights

**16** Participants

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**4** Counties Represented  
(San Diego, Riverside,  
Los Angeles, and  
Ventura)

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**11** Organizations

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**5** Operations

The listening sessions throughout this project were designed not only to collect insights, but to foster dialogue and surface community-rooted expertise of farmers' land-based experiences. Each participant shared a unique perspective that collectively informed a broader vision for advancing land access across Southern California. We are incredibly grateful for all who contributed their critical insights into how land access can be conceptualized and operationalized within the Southern California context.

There is still much to be heard, understood, and honored in the ever-evolving story of food and land justice for California agriculture. While the broader report lifts up critical themes such as land inaccessibility, tenure insecurity, and climate vulnerability, this work is ultimately about the people behind these experiences.

Thank you to everyone who participated in these conversations. Your generosity in sharing your time and wisdom speak to the continual call to action needed to inform and achieve equitable land futures for California farmers. May you find the synthesis of what we shared across both session enriching and worthwhile.



# 01

## Key Challenges Identified Among Farmers and Agricultural Communities

Participants highlighted overlapping challenges across regions:

### Top Three Challenges (Overall)

#### INSECURE AND COSTLY LAND TENURE

Short-term lease agreements, rising costs of agricultural land, and competition from other competing industries (eg. housing, nurseries, hemp) restrict farmers from accessing suitable land for their operations.

#### WATER SCARCITY AND CLIMATE IMPACTS

Water allocation challenges, high usage fees, and extreme fluctuations in precipitation and drought conditions hinder agricultural production for smallholder, short-lease, and urban farmers in Southern California.

#### EQUITY AND ACCESS BARRIERS

Systemic and language barriers continue to impact Indigenous and immigrant farmworker communities in their ability to access land, implement long-term regenerative management practices, and make liveable wages long-term.

### Top Three Challenges (By Session)

August 6 <sup>th</sup> Session	August 14 <sup>th</sup> Session
<p><b>Insecure land tenure &amp; high costs:</b> Most farmers lease land with short-term or uncertain contracts, limiting stability on the land. Rising land and housing values continuously threaten to push out smallholder farmers.</p>	<p><b>Gaps in Institutional and Public Land Engagement:</b> Opportunities for collaboration with public agencies and institutional landholders in supporting equitable land access offer a promising way to link current local efforts with public programming.</p>
<p><b>Competition for land use:</b> Urban development, nurseries, equestrian centers, and hemp cultivation are driving up land prices and displacing smaller farmers.</p>	<p><b>Lack of infrastructure &amp; support:</b> Farming communities face challenges in managing bureaucracy, securing financing, and planning for succession due to insufficient technical and legal assistance, pointing to need for greater involvement from city and state municipalities.</p>
<p><b>Water scarcity &amp; regulation:</b> Limited water allocations, high penalties for exceeding limits, and uncertainty about long-term access to water (especially in Coachella Valley and San Diego).</p>	<p><b>Equity &amp; representation:</b> Language barriers present systemic inequity in accessing information on land access and lease agreement programs.</p>



# 02

## Types of Support, Tools, and Resources Needed

The following priorities have been identified to enhance engagement, outreach, and acquisition efforts aimed at achieving equitable land access and tenure:



### Priorities Identified

### Recommendations

**Legal & Technical Assistance** for equitable leases, succession planning, cooperative structures, and navigating regulations.

Intermediaries that support community groups and individual growers in offering the legal framework and negotiating assistance to obtain fair and equitable loan and lease agreements.

**Affordable Capital & Financing** like matched savings accounts, cooperative lending, and low-interest loans for smallholder and underserved farmers.

Micro grants for urban and tenant growers to access marketing infrastructure (eg. portable sinks).

**Centralized Land Access Tools and Community Models** such as land banks, land portals, trusts and mapping of available farmland.

Partner maps connecting farmers to regional stakeholder to assist operation at various levels. Land bank portal of foreclosed, subsidized land to secure for long-term stewardship.

**Language and Cultural Access** to ensure outreach, technical assistance, and communications meet the needs of Spanish-speaking and Indigenous-language farmers.

Visually engaging and accessible messaging on trusted platforms to enhance community involvement and facilitate access to land assistance programs.



*“We’ve had success only when messages were shared in Indigenous languages. That’s when trust is built, and people know these resources are truly meant for them.”*

Participant, Coachella Valley

# 03

## ALETF

### Recommendations

Session participants highlighted their top three recommendations from the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force Draft Report (July/August 2025):

#### Recommendation #3: Make agriculture a priority to land trusts and state conservation efforts



#### Key Reflections on Recommendations

- Community governance of land trusts and land banks that integrate food production and community ownership
- Pairing financing with technical assistance and mentorship through existing regional partners
- Tailoring strategies to regional needs (Riverside, Coachella, San Diego, etc)
- Making multilingual language and cultural access a baseline requirement for all state-level initiatives.

#### Recommendation #4: Facilitate access to public land for agriculture

##### What's missing?

- Broader public awareness and education around where food is coming from to support the market power of local growers
- Policies supporting infrastructure for incubator programs and publicly managed long-term leases (e.g., on city or preserve lands)
- Water-smart infrastructure subsidies for short-term leasing tenants

#### Recommendation #5 Help land stewards and farmers who want to purchase agricultural land

#### Final Reflections:

How are Southern Californian producers working to preserve, maintain, and reconstitute food and land legacies to ensure sustainable agri-food futures for generations to come? Cultivating land access is more than economical – its relational, cultural, and generational. The future of agricultural land access in CA for smallholder, SDA farmers hinges on legislators', organizations, and communities ability to come together to effect sound state policy as well as local and regional planning. Together, we can ensure current and next-generation farmers have access to the conditions most suitable for their operations and greater impact on California's agricultural system overall.

*“Most of our farmers are leasing land on short contracts. They invest in building the soil and infrastructure, but at any moment the landowner can decide to sell, and then their whole farm is gone.”*

Participant, San Diego



# Next Steps

While insecure tenure and high costs are sustaining issues happening across the state, the form they take differs by region. Tailored solutions throughout Southern California must consider land competition dynamics (nurseries vs. hemp vs. housing), water governance differences, scale of operations (micro-plots vs. large inherited farms), and cultural/linguistic needs of beginning, next generation, and current farmers. Only with region-specific strategies can statewide policies and tools be meaningful and equitable. We remain committed to elevating the voices and platforms of who are preserving and transforming land-based traditions with care and vision, all while carving out space for new, just legacies to take root.

## NEEDS ASSESSMENT

CALE continues to showcase a updated needs assessment that identifies key barriers facing land insecure farmers and producers throughout Southern California region and solutions to these issue.

## AG LAND EQUITY TASK FORCE

Recommendations to California legislature are currently being drafted and finalized. Reflections shared from these session will be shared with Task Force.

## Contact

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# End Notes

1 ALETF: Agricultural Land Equity Task Force

2 Wilt, C., Marsh, R. (2024). Building an Equitable Future with Generational Renewal in California Agriculture.

3 Calo, M. S., Adam. (2025, September 1). Who controls California farmland? The hard-to-find answer is disturbing. San Francisco Chronicle. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/farms-agriculture-corporations-21015386.php>

5 Smith, S. L. (Ed.). (2013). *Freedom's frontier: California and the struggle over unfree labor, emancipation, and reconstruction*. The University of North Carolina Press.

6 California's Strategic Growth Council. (2025). Draft for Review: Report and Recommendations of the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force: Compiled by the California Strategic Growth Council 7-28-2025

7 CALE: Climate Action Land Equity

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