

LAKE COUNTY WILLIAMSON ACT GUIDELINES

RULES AND REGULATIONS FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF AGRICULTURAL PRESERVES UNDER THE CALIFORNIA LAND CONSERVATION ACT OF 1965 (WILLIAMSON ACT)

COUNTY OF LAKE

BACKGROUND

The California Land Conservation Act of 1965, commonly known as the Williamson Act, was enacted in response to the rapid conversion of agricultural land to urban and non-agricultural uses throughout California. As development pressures increased, agricultural land values rose based on potential future development rather than agricultural productivity, creating financial pressure for farmers and ranchers to sell or convert working lands.

The Williamson Act establishes a voluntary partnership between local governments and private landowners to preserve agricultural and open space lands. In exchange for restricting land to agricultural, open space, and compatible uses, landowners receive property tax assessments based on the land's productive agricultural value rather than its potential market value. These contracts are generally structured as rolling ten-year agreements that automatically renew annually unless notice of non-renewal is filed.

Today, more than sixteen million acres of agricultural and grazing land in California are protected under Williamson Act contracts. The program supports California's position as the nation's leading agricultural producer while also preserving open space, wildlife habitat, watersheds, and rural community character. It has also played an important role in reducing the fragmentation of agricultural lands and limiting leapfrog development patterns.

Agriculture remains a foundational component of Lake County's economy, identity, and rural character. The County's agricultural landscape includes vineyards, pear orchards, walnut orchards, olive production, livestock operations, hay production, and specialty crops that contribute to both local economic stability and regional food systems.

The County of Lake recognizes that agricultural operations vary widely in scale, production cycles, and economic conditions, and may be affected by drought, market fluctuations, replanting cycles, natural disasters, and labor availability. These

Guidelines are intended to provide a locally appropriate framework that preserves working agricultural lands while reflecting the realities of Lake County agriculture.

These Rules and Regulations are adopted to implement the Williamson Act in a manner that protects long-term agricultural viability and ensures continued stewardship of Lake County’s agricultural resources.

SECTION I. PURPOSE

The purpose of these Rules and Regulations is to preserve and protect Lake County’s agricultural lands, open space resources, and agricultural economy through implementation of the California Land Conservation Act of 1965.

These provisions are intended to:

1. Preserve agricultural lands for the production of food, fiber, livestock, and agricultural commodities, with an emphasis on food production.
2. Discourage premature conversion of agricultural lands to non-agricultural uses.
3. Maintain the economic viability of commercial agriculture in Lake County.
4. Protect Lake County’s agricultural heritage and rural character, with an emphasis on legacy agricultural operations.
5. Promote long-term stewardship of agricultural and natural resources, with an emphasis on protecting primefarmland and farmland of statewide and local importance.
6. Support continued investment in agricultural operations and infrastructure.
7. Recognize and support multi-generational farming and ranching operations as a public benefit to the County.

SECTION II. DEFINITIONS

AGRICULTURAL PRESERVE An area established pursuant to the Williamson Act and restricted to agricultural, open space, recreational, and compatible uses.

AGRICULTURAL USE The use of land for the production of plant or animal products for commercial purposes.

COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE Agricultural production intended for sale, exchange, or other commercial benefit.

COMPATIBLE USE Any use determined by the County to be compatible with agricultural, open space, or resource conservation purposes.

LEGACY AGRICULTURAL OPERATION A farming or ranching operation that has historically supported commercial agricultural production and retains the capability and intent to continue agricultural use, even if production or income temporarily fluctuates due to drought, market conditions, replanting cycles, natural disasters, or other agricultural factors.

OPEN SPACE USE Land use that preserves natural resources, scenic values, watershed function, or wildlife habitat.

RECREATIONAL USE Use of land for outdoor recreation consistent with the Williamson Act.

SECTION III. CONTRACT TYPES

The County of Lake shall administer Williamson Act contracts in the following categories:

A. TYPE A – PRIME AGRICULTURAL CONTRACT

Applies to the most productive agricultural lands (except cannabis).

Eligibility:

- 1. Minimum of 10 acres of Prime Agricultural Land, or 40 acres of Non-Prime Agricultural Land.
- 2. Actively devoted to commercial agricultural production.
- 3. Zoned Agricultural or Agriculture-Exclusive or equivalent designation.

B. TYPE B – COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURAL CONTRACT

Applies to diversified and mid-scale agricultural operations.

Eligibility:

- 1. Minimum parcel size of 10 acres.
- 2. At least 50% of the parcel in agricultural production.
- 3. Demonstrated commercial agricultural activity through production, infrastructure, or management plan.

C. TYPE C – GRAZING AND RANGELAND CONTRACT

Applies to livestock and grazing lands.

Eligibility:

1. Minimum of 40 acres.
2. Primarily used for grazing or livestock production.
3. Includes cattle, sheep, goats, and similar operations.

SECTION IV. AGRICULTURAL QUALIFICATION STANDARDS

Applicants may qualify through one or more of the following:

A. Agricultural Income Standard

- Parcels under 20 acres: minimum \$3,000 annual agricultural income (average over 2 of 5 years).
- Parcels 20 acres or more: minimum \$5,000 annual agricultural income (average over 2 of 5 years).

B. Agricultural Production Plan

Applicants may submit a production plan including:

- Existing agricultural use
- Planned agricultural activities
- Conservation practices
- Water resources
- Timeline to commercial production

C. Agricultural Investment

Evidence of agricultural investment including:

- Irrigation systems
- Fencing
- Livestock infrastructure
- Orchards or vineyards

- Agricultural buildings

SECTION V. LEGACY AGRICULTURAL OPERATIONS

A property may qualify for a Williamson Act contract even if it does not fully meet current production or income thresholds if the Agricultural Commissioner determines that:

1. The property has historically supported commercial agricultural production;
2. Agricultural infrastructure remains in place and capable of supporting continued agricultural use;
3. The property is being maintained for continued or future agricultural production;
4. The owner demonstrates intent to continue agricultural use; and
5. Enrollment supports the County's goal of preserving long-term agricultural resources.

Evidence may include historical production records, Agricultural Commissioner records, and existing agricultural infrastructure such as orchards, vineyards, grazing systems, fencing, irrigation systems, barns, or corrals.

The Board of Supervisors may consider the historical significance of agricultural operations and their contribution to Lake County's agricultural heritage when evaluating eligibility.

SECTION VI. COMPATIBLE USES

Compatible uses may include:

- Agricultural support structures
- Equipment storage
- Irrigation facilities
- Farm labor housing (where permitted)
- Agricultural processing facilities
- Farm stands
- Agritourism activities

- Educational agricultural programs
- Habitat restoration and conservation projects

All compatible uses shall remain subordinate to agricultural use.

SECTION VII. APPLICATION PROCEDURES

1. Applications filed with Lake County Community Development Department.
2. Applications shall include required forms, fees, and supporting documentation.
3. Referral to Agricultural Commissioner, Assessor, and other relevant agencies.

SECTION VIII. CONTRACT TERM

1. Initial term: 10 years.
2. Automatically renews annually unless non-renewal is filed.
3. Subject to Williamson Act provisions of California Government Code.

SECTION IX. REQUIRED FINDINGS

The Board of Supervisors shall find:

1. Property meets eligibility requirements.
2. Property is suitable for commercial agriculture.
3. Contract supports preservation of agricultural land.
4. Use is consistent with General Plan and zoning.
5. Contract supports long-term agricultural sustainability.
6. Contract protects Lake County's agricultural heritage and rural economy.