

# California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force Meeting Summary: May 14-15, 2025

DRAFT until approved at subsequent meeting

**May 14, 2025**

## **Meeting Called to Order**

Chair Nelson Hawkins called the meeting to order at 9:02 a.m. Facilitator Meagan Wylie welcomed attendees, reviewed participation guidelines, and previewed the day's agenda.

## **Roll Call**

Roll call was conducted by the facilitator. Members present:

- Nelson Hawkins, Chair
- Emily Burgueno, Vice Chair
- Irene de Barraicua
- Nathaniel Brown
- Ruth Dahlquist-Willard
- Darlene Franco
- Lawrence Harlan
- James Nakahara
- Dorian Payán
- Thea Rittenhouse
- Liya Schwartzman
- Qi Zhou

Members absent:

- Doria Robinson

Quorum was established.

**Staff Attendance:**

Staff members present:

- Erin Curtis, California Strategic Growth Council
- Camille Frazier, California Strategic Growth Council
- Sean Kennedy, California Strategic Growth Council
- Tessa Salzman, California Strategic Growth Council
- Caleb Swanson, California Strategic Growth Council
- Meagan Wylie, California State University Sacramento

## **Action: Approval of Summary**

Approval of March 27, 2025, Meeting Summary.

### **Task Force Discussion:**

A member noted they did not attend or support the March meeting due to the limited tribal representation, with only one of three Tribal representatives present.

### **Public Comment:**

No public comment.

### **Action:**

Member Schwartzman moved to approve the meeting summary. Member Nakahara seconded.

Motion passes (10-0-3\*). (\*Two abstentions, one absent.)

## **Staff Report**

Staff provided an overview of the interagency (IA) review process for the draft Recommendations Report, highlighting efforts to engage a broad range of reviewers from relevant state agencies. They clarified that this IA review is informal and optional, conducted early in the process. Final decision-making authority on the recommendations included in the report to the Legislature rests with the Task Force.

Discussion highlights:

- Members recommended targeted outreach to additional state departments, Tribal advisors, and relevant sub-agencies. They emphasized the importance of involving Tribal and local governments and suggested leveraging associations and regional networks such as Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs) to expand engagement.

- Several members expressed concern about sharing the current version of the draft Recommendations Report (dated May 2025) and urged further revisions before beginning IA review. They underscored the importance of direct dialogue with reviewers.
- Staff noted limited capacity to process potentially extensive agency feedback and encouraged members to assist with outreach. Members discussed the option to form a small work group to help consolidate input. The group agreed to revisit this topic later in the meeting.

Staff next provided a budget update, current as of March 31, 2025. The discussion on local assistance funds will occur during day two of the meeting. Staff also reviewed subcommittee and working group meetings held in April.

Regarding Tribal Consultation, Staff clarified that the Task Force is advisory and not legally required to follow Assembly Bill (AB) 923 formal consultation policies. Furthermore, the California Strategic Growth Council (SGC) leadership cannot conduct formal consultation in this instance. However, both staff and members emphasized that legal thresholds should not limit meaningful engagement in the spirit of the law.

Members generally agreed that tribal engagement should be strengthened and expressed the desire to improve outreach within the Task Force's limited timeline. Concerns were raised about limited Tribal participation in recent engagement sessions. Members recommended clearer outreach, culturally appropriate framing in materials, compensation for tribal contributions, and use of existing relationships to increase participation. Suggestions included creating a Task Force letterhead, developing a Tribal engagement work plan, and allocating additional budget for outreach and engagement fees.

#### **Public Comment:**

None.

## **Discussion: Engagement Reports**

### **Community Engagement Sessions**

Staff shared [highlights from recent engagement sessions](#), including the Coachella Spanish-language Session, Susanville Tribal Engagement Session, EcoFarm Conference, and the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) Small Farmers' Conference. Common discussion themes across sessions included insecure land tenure, climate vulnerability, regulatory barriers, limited market access, water affordability, and infrastructure challenges. Additional insights from participants emphasized the importance of supporting home gardens, educational access to farmland, and culturally grounded agricultural practices, among others.

Members reflected on challenges faced by Tribal Nations, including discriminatory treatment by contractors, lack of access to suitable agricultural land despite available acreage, and barriers within the fee-to-trust process. Some members proposed solutions such as increasing state support for intermediary landholding roles, strengthening confidentiality protections, and more clearly representing the complexities of Indian Country in the final report.

### **Land Access Experiences Survey results**

Staff reviewed findings from the recent statewide land access survey. More than 200 responses were received. Key barriers identified were the high cost of land, limited infrastructure, and water access challenges. Staff shared that 80% of respondents found financial support to acquire or lease land to be “very” or “extremely” helpful. Additional survey findings were reviewed.

Members discussed the need to incorporate findings into the recommendations, with a focus on addressing the needs of beginning farmers, small-scale growers, and culturally specific food producers. They will continue to consider where and how to incorporate survey findings as the various report sections are built out.

### **Public Comment:**

None.

## **Working Session**

Members referenced the [May 2025 version](#) of the updated Draft Report and [Proposed Additions and Revisions to the May 2025 Draft Report](#). Staff provided an overview of the working session and its associated goals. The report development timeline was reviewed. The next several months provide a critical window for introducing any new ideas into the report, prior to the August Task Force meeting.

Staff presented a summary of proposed revisions to the draft report (May 2025 version), organized into three categories: edits likely ready for approval, next steps requiring staff action, and larger items needing full Task Force discussion. Members reviewed and commented on several revisions and thematic questions, including the use of clear terminology around land acquisition and the definition of "prime farmland."

Seven Advisory Committee (AC) members participated as panelists via Zoom in this portion of the working session. Members and AC participants engaged in deep discussion on numerous report sections and broader structural issues, including:

- **Definitions and inclusion of Tribal Nations:** Members discussed how the report should differentiate between federally recognized and non-federally recognized Tribal Nations while maintaining inclusivity and clarity.

- **Land return and governance:** Members explored recommendations to create a “Tribal-State Land Return Commission” and debated potential agency hosts. Some favored new structures, while others emphasized strengthening existing state agencies to avoid fragmentation and funding challenges.
- **Incorporating climate and Traditional Ecological Knowledge:** Participants emphasized integrating climate resilience and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) throughout the report. Members highlighted the importance of historical context, land dispossession, and the implications of land consolidation.
- **Public versus private land ownership:** Members and AC participants discussed respective roles of public and private land in advancing equity. Some acknowledged the value of long-term public leasing in some contexts and emphasized tailoring recommendations to different models of ownership and regional needs.
- **Accountability structures:** Members expressed interest in mechanisms to monitor and evaluate policy impacts over time. Ideas included a potential “land equity commission” or incorporating these functions within existing state agencies. Members agreed further exploration is needed on this concept and identified point people to continue development.

Task Force members were encouraged to flag areas of the draft report requiring additional modification or specificity. Members identified which sections of the draft report they are interested to work on or help advance. Several AC members volunteered to assist with research and content development on select topics. Work planning discussions will continue during day two of the meeting.

#### **Public Comment:**

None.

## **Discussion: Relevant State Policy**

Staff provided an overview of key legislative efforts of interest to the Task Force, including Proposition 4, AB 524 (Wilson), Senate Bill (SB) 462 (Cortese), and AB 1485 (Macedo).

Next, Shanna Atherton-Bauer, Department of Conservation (DOC), presented early-stage planning for the land access program envisioned under Proposition 4. Shanna shared that although Proposition 4 allocates \$30 million for land access, the Governor’s current budget does not include a mechanism for appropriation. DOC is exploring funding structures and seeking feedback to inform program design. Once a preliminary structure is developed, DOC will request input from the Task Force. She posed initial questions to the Task Force regarding definitions of program success and key considerations such as eligible expenses, match requirements, and outcome measurement.

Task Force members raised several considerations:

- **Tribal inclusion:** Members emphasized the importance of early and meaningful engagement with Tribal Nations. DOC acknowledged that outreach has not yet begun but plans to engage its newly hired Tribal Liaison in the process.
- **Program design:** Members expressed broad support for directing funding toward land acquisition rather than transactional costs. Several advocated for a downpayment assistance program or a revolving loan fund that could include forgivable terms linked to conservation or tenure goals. Concerns were raised about matching fund requirements potentially excluding underserved applicants.
- **Equity and impact:** There was general agreement on the need to balance accountability and accessibility of program funds. Some members supported small match requirements to promote buy-in, while others cautioned that any financial hurdle could limit equitable access. Participants recommended business planning support and alignment with market access programs to ensure long-term success for land recipients.
- **Implementation pathways:** Members highlighted the opportunity to connect the Task Force's recommendations directly to the development of DOC's future program. The group emphasized the importance of timely funding deployment, culturally appropriate technical assistance structures, and transparent metrics for success.

Staff will continue to coordinate with DOC and will facilitate follow-up discussions as the agency refines the land access program design.

#### **Public Comment:**

Lena Ortega, Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe, underscored the need for DOC to engage Tribal communities directly and suggested the inclusion of a Tribal set-aside in future programming.

## **ACTION: Position Letter AB 524**

At the March meeting, the Task Force discussed whether to formally support AB 524. A subcommittee of Task Force members was formed. The Subcommittee met in April and drafted a high-level position letter outlining alignment between the bill's intent and the Task Force's goals around equitable land access. The submitted letter was signed only by Subcommittee members and not by the full Task Force.

Staff asked, on behalf of the Subcommittee, whether the full Task Force would like to endorse the letter, modify it, or take no action.

Members discussed the intent and content of the bill, which aims to establish the *Farmland Access and Conservation for Thriving Communities Program*. Questions were raised regarding the bill's implications for Tribal Nations, program design details including match requirements, and potential equity considerations. Several members expressed a desire to revise acreage

limits, address distinctions between ranching and farming operations, and explore differentiated eligibility thresholds for Tribal Nations.

A motion was introduced by Member Brown to repurpose the Subcommittee's draft letter as a full Task Force position letter. The motion was seconded by Member Harlan.

**Public Comment:**

None.

**Action:**

Motion fails (6-1-6\*). (\*Five abstentions, one absent.)

Members expressed interest to revisit the discussion with more time for review of the bill and letter, and to consider potential revisions to a full Task Force position letter.

The Task Force remains engaged in monitoring AB 524 and other state legislation related to land equity. Staff and members will continue to explore opportunities to inform policy conversations through future meetings and written comments.

## **General Public Comment**

None.

## **Meeting Adjourned**

Chair Hawkins provided closing comments and adjourned day one of the meeting at 5:03 p.m.

## **May 15, 2025**

### **Meeting Called to Order**

Chair Nelson Hawkins called the meeting to order at 8:21 a.m. Facilitator Meagan Wylie welcomed attendees, reviewed participation guidelines, and previewed the day's agenda.

### **Roll Call**

Roll call was conducted by the facilitator. Members present:

- Nelson Hawkins, Chair
- Emily Burgueno, Vice Chair (\*arrived 8:33 a.m.)
- Irene de Barraicua
- Nathaniel Brown
- Ruth Dahlquist-Willard
- Darlene Franco
- Lawrence Harlan (\*stepped out from 12 – 12:45 p.m.)
- James Nakahara
- Dorian Payán
- Thea Rittenhouse
- Doria Robinson
- Liya Schwartzman
- Qi Zhou

Quorum was established.

#### **Staff Attendance:**

Staff members present:

- Camille Frazier, California Strategic Growth Council
- Sean Kennedy, California Strategic Growth Council
- Tessa Salzman, California Strategic Growth Council
- Caleb Swanson, California Strategic Growth Council
- Meagan Wylie, California State University Sacramento

### **Working Session**

#### **Work Planning**

Staff provided framing remarks on the Task Force's progress to date and the need to pivot toward a more structured and time-sensitive work plan for completing the Task Force's final report. Staff reminded members that the Task Force was established by the 2022 state budget, not an executive order, emphasizing the unique opportunity the diverse membership presents to address the complexity of land equity in California.

Given the depth and breadth of ideas generated throughout the first day's discussions, staff outlined two proposed pathways to significantly advance report development: (1) reduce the scope of content included in the main report and shift more detailed or less-developed concepts to an appendix, or (2) delegate development of specific report sections to small teams of Task Force members, with staff and AC support.

Members expressed strong support for delegation as a strategy to move the work forward efficiently while retaining fidelity to the Task Force's goals. The group affirmed the importance of transparency, consistency, and balanced representation across report sections. Members also discussed potential updates to subcommittee structures, favoring a shift away from most subcommittees toward topic-specific working groups assigned by report section or priority area. The revised approach aims to streamline collaboration and strengthen report quality.

To facilitate the work, members determined the following timeline:

- **By June 1:** All members submit general comments on the current (May 2025) draft report to staff using track changes.
- **By June 15:** Staff synthesize and organize all feedback and assign content areas to member-led working groups.
- **By July 15:** Working groups complete revisions to their assigned sections with support from staff and the AC.
- **By July 30:** Staff compile a revised draft report and distribute to the full Task Force for review ahead of the August meeting.

Task Force members volunteered to lead working groups on specific topics. Staff will confirm the proposed working group composition is compliant with Bagley-Keene requirements and help groups schedule meetings between June 16 and July 14, per the above timeline. Staff also noted that flagged content areas not yet reflected in the draft report would be incorporated through this working group process.

Members discussed the role of the AC in supporting, but not directing, report content development. Members highlighted the importance of grounding recommendations in relevant research, lived experience, and sound policy analysis while ensuring all contributions align with the Task Force's mandate and values.

Finally, members agreed to delay interagency review of the draft report until after working groups have met to allow time for further refinement. However, members may identify

relevant state agencies for targeted early input on specific sections as they are being developed.

The following upcoming subcommittee meetings are cancelled:

- Land Access Acquisition and Ancestral Land Return: June 4, 2:30 – 4 p.m.
- Land Tenure: June 18, 10 – 12 p.m.
- Sustaining Natural and Cultural Resources: June 23, 1 – 3 p.m.
- Land Use Governance and Sovereignty: June 24, 1 - 2:30 p.m.

The following subcommittee meetings are retained:

- Community Outreach: May 29, 3 – 5 p.m.
- AB 524: June 25, 11 – 12:30 p.m.
- Grants and Resources: June 27, 1 – 3 p.m.

Member Franco joined the Grants and Resources subcommittee.

### **Tribal Engagement and Letter to Tribal Nations**

Members explored next steps to strengthen engagement with Tribal Nations. Staff proposed drafting an introductory letter that outlines the Task Force’s purpose and invites further conversation. The letter will include a link to the most current version of the draft report and will offer multiple feedback pathways, such as one-on-one conversations and participation in listening sessions.

Members emphasized the need to ensure culturally respectful outreach. They supported distributing letters both electronically and via standard post mail and making direct calls to Tribal leadership. Staff will draft the letter, invite Task Force review with a one-week review timeline, and finalize and begin distribution of the letter by the first week of June. Staff will also coordinate any requested follow-up conversations with Tribal leaders. Members were asked to participate in these discussions with Tribal leaders.

The Task Force also agreed to host an additional Tribal Listening Session in Arcata prior to the August Task Force meeting. Staff will promptly begin organizing for this session.

### **AB 524 Letter of Support**

Members revisited the discussion on whether to endorse a letter of support for AB 524. A subcommittee had drafted the letter to align with the Task Force’s values. The group did not reach consensus on adopting it as a formal Task Force position during day one of the meeting. One member raised concerns about the draft’s language and the development process, while others emphasized the importance of engaging with legislation that identifies the Task Force as an implementation partner.

The group agreed to maintain the AB 524 Subcommittee and gather broader input before their June meeting. Staff will collect feedback to inform future discussions and potential revisions to the letter.

### **Use of Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) Resources**

Staff provided an update on the \$1 million in GGRF resources allocated to support the Task Force's work. Although SGC holds decision-making authority due to conflict-of-interest rules, staff welcomed Task Force recommendations on how to use the funds.

Members recommended piloting a local assistance grant program to help with land acquisition and related costs such as legal fees and down payments. Others suggested using part of the funds to develop public-facing resources like toolkits or databases, though some expressed concern about long-term maintenance. Members also proposed funding translation services and outreach to Tribal and small-scale producers. Staff will refine these options and bring them back for discussion at a future meeting.

### **Final Deliverables**

Staff shared an outline of final deliverables, including: the Task Force's report of policy recommendations, fact sheets tailored to specific audiences, a project website to host the report and companion materials, an online resource repository, and an interactive map to highlight various resources. Staff also proposed the final December Task Force meeting be used in part as a celebration.

Members recommended making final materials accessible in multiple languages and inviting participants from site visits and engagement sessions, invited guest speakers, legislators, and community leaders to the final meeting.

### **Public Comment:**

None.

## **Action: Meeting Scheduling**

Task Force members drafted a resolution on meeting scheduling protocols to clarify the process for setting future dates at their March 27 meeting. Draft language was shared with Task Force members after the meeting and additional feedback was incorporated as follows:

For future (not already calendared) meetings of the full Task Force, the Task Force directs staff to schedule meetings according to all of the following criteria:

1. Bagley-Keene compliance,
2. Virtual or in-person availability of ~~either~~ the Chair and ~~or~~ Vice Chair, and

3. Virtual or in-person availability of at least two of three Tribal Representatives.

Once a Task Force meeting is scheduled, the date will be maintained regardless of changes in attendance, if Bagley-Keene compliance is maintained.

**Public Comment:**

None.

**Action:**

Member Rittenhouse made a motion to approve the resolution as revised. Member Robinson Seconded.

Motion passes (12-0-1\*). (\*One absent.)

**General Public Comment**

None.

**Closing**

Chair Hawkins closed with appreciation for the group's progress and their renewed commitment to completing the final phase of work. He adjourned day two of the meeting at 1:02 p.m.