

California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force Community Engagement Session Reports

This document provides a brief summary of each community engagement session, in chronological order from earliest to most recent.

Some engagement sessions had more extensive feedback collection. If so, that information can be found in the appendix.

EcoFarm Conference Listening Session

Date: Jan. 23, 2025

Task Force Representatives: Chair Hawkins and Member Nakahara

Staff Support: Tessa Salzman, California Strategic Growth Council (SGC)

Total Attendance: Approximately 30 people

Summary Author: Tessa Salzman

Presenters provided an overview of the Task Force and outreach to date. The participants then divided into three smaller groups to discuss general challenges, potential solutions, and resources needed related to equitable land access. The participants highlighted a range of persistent barriers for small-scale and historically disadvantaged farmers.

Attendees expressed frustration with outdated, inaccessible, and slow-moving United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs including Farm Services Agency loans, zoning restrictions, parcel sizes that are either too small or too large, and funding that favors large-scale operations. There was concern about land being concentrated in the hands of large corporations and absentee owners, along with difficulties around lease terms, insurance liabilities, and the exclusion of undocumented or non-English-speaking farmers from important programs. Many participants also emphasized how one-size-fits-all policies and a lack of culturally appropriate outreach limit access and reduce trust, particularly in communities who have been impacted by land dispossession and discrimination.

In terms of solutions, participants called for a shift toward collective and community-based land management structures such as land trusts, incubators, and cooperative models. There was strong support for creating new zoning and legal frameworks that support alternative land ownership structures, as well as using tax incentives, eminent domain, and statewide planning to limit land speculation and promote productive use of land for community agriculture. Additional proposals included tailored educational efforts (both for

landowners and the public), culturally competent technical assistance, reforms to loan and grant programs, and ensuring undocumented farmers are eligible for these resources. Some attendees also proposed adding ancestral land recognition to the land title so when land is sold, the buyer must reflect on who originally stewarded the land.

Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) Small Farms Conference

Date: March 23, 2025

Task Force Representatives: Members Payán and Zhou

Staff Support: Camille Frazier, SGC

Total Attendance: Approximately 45, all virtual; about eight to 12 responses to each survey question

Summary author: Camille Frazier

Presenters selected and shared four goals from the February 2025 draft of the report. The goals were chosen based on what would likely resonate with those attending a conference focused on small farmers. The selected goals were: 1) Support adequate housing and infrastructure on agricultural land, 2) Facilitate equitable transition of private lands, 3) leverage public lands, and 4) improve equitable access to resources.

The presenters began with a brief overview of the Task Force, followed by slides detailing the overarching goal and relevant recommendations. Presenters then paused for attendees to complete the survey for each slide, which asked: 1) What resonates with you? What concerns you? What is missing?

A complete list of poll responses are listed below. Generally, attendees found that the goals and strategies resonated with them. Their primary concerns were related to: 1) the barriers or challenges that might make it difficult to achieve the goals and 2) ensuring that the specific actions were nuanced and thoughtful so that they would not lead to further inequities. For example, in relation to housing, most attendees agreed that housing on agricultural land is necessary but cautioned that it needed to be dignified and affordable and done in such a way to prevent losing agricultural land for residential development. In addition, several participants noted that it was unclear who would be responsible for the action and how it would be funded.

Coachella Valley Listening Session: Condensed Synthesis Summary

Date: Feb. 11, 2025

Task Force representatives: Members de Barraicua and Payán

Participants: Migrant Farmworkers, Tenant Farmers, Small Farmers, and Huerto Operators. The session was conducted in Spanish.

Partner Organizations: Líderes Campesinas & Pueblo Unido CDC

Total Attendance: Approximately 20

Summary author: Elias Aceves, Researcher and Guest Presenter at the February meeting

Executive Summary

This report synthesizes findings from listening sessions with various agricultural stakeholders in Coachella Valley, revealing critical challenges faced by small-scale producers in accessing markets, navigating regulations, managing climate risks, and securing adequate infrastructure. We identify 10 critical themes and community-proposed solutions from the session.

This summary and the longer synthesis (Appendix B) was prepared by Elias Acevas, who was a guest presenter at the February 2025 meeting of the Task Force.

Key Insights

- **Market Access Over Land Access:** Tenant farmers prioritized better market access over land ownership due to additional costs.
- **Unfair Pricing:** Wholesalers significantly undercut buying prices for small producers.
- **Infrastructure Barriers:** Restrictive zoning prevents building necessary infrastructure like cold storage.
- **Climate Vulnerability:** Small & tenant farmers lack adequate insurance coverage against climate events.
- **Limited Support for Home Gardens:** "Huerto" projects need more funding and technical assistance.
- **Educational Limitations:** Agricultural education fails to showcase diverse career pathways.
- **Regulatory Complexity:** Small operators struggle with complex regulations.

- **Water Affordability:** High water costs discourage land ownership.
- **Distribution Challenges:** Limited channels force reliance on unfair wholesaler pricing.
- **Land Tenure Insecurity:** Rental arrangements create challenges with landlords and limit access to assistance.

Synthesis of Key Themes

1. Local Market Development & Fair Pricing

Agricultural producers need publicly-funded local food hubs. Participants prioritized market access over land ownership due to additional costs. Los Angeles wholesalers undercut small producers, forcing adaptation to more profitable crops rather than cultural preferences.

Communities request farmers' markets with reduced barriers to entry and mechanisms for price transparency.

2. Zoning & Infrastructure Support

Restrictive regulations prevent development of basic processing facilities. Participants cannot build necessary cold storage due to zoning regulations. Government grant programs for shared infrastructure are needed, along with streamlined permitting processes and technical assistance through county-level service centers.

3. Climate Resilience & Risk Management

Participants report devastating crop losses without adequate insurance. Small and tenant farmers receive minimal support compared to large landowners. State-subsidized insurance products for tenant and/or small farmers and a publicly-administered climate disaster fund are urgently needed.

4. Huerto Development Support

Home gardens (*huertos*) are vital community resources. Participants need funding and technical improvements to commercialize these operations. Regulatory pathways for certification and protection from mandatory cutting due to pest regulations are essential, along with community-based training networks.

5. Financial & Business Resources

Participants struggle to access appropriate financing and business guidance. State-administered loan programs, business assistance, and legal aid for agricultural

regulations would address these barriers. Centralized resource centers would help operations identify and access existing support programs.

6. Educational Pipeline & Workforce Development

Family-based knowledge transfer currently dominates agricultural training. Participants request agricultural entrepreneurship in K-12 curricula and education that presents agriculture beyond manual labor. Specialized agricultural academies, scholarship programs, and mentorship networks would enhance awareness of diverse career trajectories.

7. Regulatory Navigation & Simplification

Complex requirements overwhelm small producers. Participants need simplified regulatory pathways, multilingual materials, and continuous outreach when policies change. Coordinated inspections across agencies would reduce administrative burden, while pest management regulations should offer appropriate flexibility for small-scale operations.

8. Water Access & Affordability

Water costs fundamentally shape agricultural viability. Participants report little perceived difference between renting and owning due to high water costs. State-supported community water systems with democratic governance structures and legal protection of community water rights are needed.

9. Distribution Network Development

Limited market access is the primary barrier to growth. Participants cannot connect to vendors offering fair prices. State-supported cooperative distribution networks and transportation infrastructure would address these gaps.

10. Implementation & Governance

Participants describe communication barriers with agencies and programs designed for “corporate agriculture” rather than small-scale producers. Regular listening sessions with transparent reporting and multilingual resources are essential for meaningful engagement.

Common Themes & Integrated Community-Proposed Solutions

Common Concerns Across Groups

1. **Market Access & Fair Pricing:** Unfair pricing from intermediaries and preferences for local farmers’ markets.

2. **Insurance & Climate Vulnerability:** Inadequate insurance options amid escalating climate risks.
3. **Regulatory Complexity:** Frustration navigating regulations not designed for small operations.
4. **Water Affordability:** Fundamental economic constraint impacting land tenure decisions.
5. **Educational Improvement:** Desire for education showcasing diverse agricultural career pathways.

Integrated Solutions

1. **Tiered Support Systems:** Differentiated programs for various stages from home gardens to commercial operations.
2. **Cooperative Models with Clear Governance:** Structures addressing past challenges through transparent processes.
3. **Comprehensive Educational Strategy:** Programs honoring traditional knowledge while building pathways to technical roles.
4. **Multi-Level Market Development:** Varied market channels appropriate for different production scales.
5. **Integrated Regulatory Navigation:** Coordinated assistance providing personalized guidance through regulatory processes.
6. **Participatory Governance:** Institutionalized community participation with regular forums and transparent reporting.

Implementation should prioritize inclusive processes that engage community members, build on existing strengths, and create adaptable frameworks responding to changing needs and challenges.

Appendix A: Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) Small Farms Conference Zoom Poll Responses

Support adequate housing and infrastructure on agricultural land

What resonates with you?

- provide for housing
- housing construction for farmworkers
- I like that it emphasizes local policies, as all parts of California will have unique preexisting zoning and permitting practices.
- increasing opportunities for zoning to increase to include farm worker housing.
- thinking about cluster housing on ag zoned land that allows for more than 2 houses (one owner and one worker)
- It's important to acknowledge the value of creating housing for the ag workforce.
- I am looking for three to five acres land to purchase in Lodi, Galt, and Lockford, California. The land is just too expensive.
- I believe that the housing on agricultural land is important for the small to medium farms. It is a big incentive for employees to offer onsite housing.
- Both seem accurate, I would say for the first rec, beyond "incentivize" local government I recommend "provide local government with best practices, policies and concrete steps to take..."
- Agree this is super important! One thing I have heard related to the first item here is the need for regulations allowing tiny houses and composting toilets (super specific but it's what I've heard!)
- Aligning housing and agricultural equity
- seems sensible
- housing on ag land!!
- Can you rezone land permitted for housing for agricultural purposes?

What concerns you?

- A lot of land does not (currently) belong to the ones who work it.
- Ensuring housing is affordable for workers
- dignified housing for farmworkers

- I would be interested to know what safeguards could be implemented to prevent subdivision-style development while facilitating agricultural housing on ag land.
- each county implements their own version of Williamson Act
- How will affordability of the constructed units for food workers be guaranteed?
- Getting the loan and if can qualify.
- I worry that permitting housing construction developments for farmworkers may be too exclusive with income limits.
- No one entity is identify to do these tasks, so they aren't very concrete actions.
- Renting or leasing land: putting in work and finances that cannot go with renter when land is sold or otherwise when land is no longer available.
- Who is implementing these recommendations? I believe Williamson act implementation is set largely at the county level so can that be addressed statewide?
- Dignified housing for farm workers.
- What level of risk is there that this proposal will kick off a slippery slope effect re: housing/development in agricultural zones? E.g., let's say a housing developer purchases agricultural land.
- Does this make farms more affordable?
- How to do this and what are the odds and timeframe?

What's missing?

- Housing regulations that ensure dignity of farmworkers.
- Perhaps something about ensuring land's primary use remains agricultural even while permitting housing for people involved in the land management.
- How can we better help farmers and farmworkers build equity like potentially owning their home at a discounted rate etc.
- Not sure, I am new.
- Who is responsible or can do these actions?
- Collaboration with community land trusts or other affordable housing orgs to own/lease/build/maintain homes affordably?
- Utility connections? Composting privies?
- How does this apply to nonprofit spaces?

Facilitate Equitable Transition of Private Land

What resonates?

- As a partial (1/3) owner of a family property, we're gonna need some kind of incentives for those who simply want money, to balance out plans with those who prioritize stewardship.
- Transparency (publicized land sales) seems like a very important component and I think it's a great idea. I also really like the ROFR approach and would love to see how it could be implemented.
- The state tax credit idea.
- Making land sales public information.
- Incentivizing Succession strategies and tax credits would be a great start to push landowners to sell for agricultural purposes rather than just the highest bidder.
- These all sound like good solutions, I have very little understanding of how one would do these things or if/how to make them legal and effective.
- Require land sales to be public, ROFR, succession strategy, *Lease to own!, Trusts when landowner dies.
- Tax credits will be big incentive for landowners. Minimizing taxation is very high priority for succession planning. Acquisition "and related costs" – important to bring "estate" properties to producer.
- Public info!!! can't have anonymous transfers
- Good ideas

What concerns you?

- our land is not a "farm" but a small piece with rolling hills, and soils more apt to grazing, but not really big enough for a livestock operation. Also peri-urban. What options do we have?
- Is there any way to incentivize sales by large corporate or out-of-state owners to local, on-site owner/managers?
- This sounds very heavy handed and I'm concerned it might have unintended consequences in terms of disincentivizing improvements to ag property.
- How can we ensure that "funding support" is not primarily "provide" in the form of loans, which have historically been an ineffective way to support land access for marginalized communities?
- I'm interested in land that would go to probate going into another trust, but I want more information about this.

- I am worried that as a young, white, male farmer...the focus on socially disadvantaged, historically underserved, and BIPOC may cause barriers to entry to secure land if final decision is based on that
- Farmlands get sold to mega corporations as investments, Farmland sold to developers, lot splits
- Land sales being public information seems like something that may get a lot of opposition, people are sensitive about this information sometimes.
- ultra wealthy buying up all land and water
- red tape?

What is missing?

- Ways to work with land that has ecological / watershed value, but is not prime ag land. Still, it is zoned open space, so housing is not an option unless it goes before the voters.
- An opportunity to sell portions of agricultural land to smaller scale farmers could be an interesting component. E.g. if a large corporate farm of 1000ac downsizes and makes land available to others.
- Have you considered simply supporting the use of more progressive land trust structures, like the farmers commons model that was presented earlier today, instead of state-mandated purchase constraint.
- Good farmland and land that is good at infiltrating rainwater should be designated and not immediately sold to developers.
- Would like to see collaboration with land trusts and similar entities highlighted. Would like to see discussion of state rule against perpetuities limits long-term affordability tools of land trusts.
- Adjusting, counterbalancing economic inequality.

Leverage public lands

What resonates?

- Need for planning.
- I am 100% on board with improving access to local lands, especially community-run urban ag such as gardens and small farms. Vacant lots and turf-heavy parks could better serve communities as farms.
- Making better use county-owned parcels.
- I would love to assess to public land so I can farm.

- There is so much government owned land that is sitting dormant. Allowing leases for Ag use would benefit the community, the ecosystem, and the land health.
- All of these sound like excellent solutions.
- Love everything in Local and state govt.-owned land.
- Love the idea of support for local gov to make land available for food production!
- Returning land to Tribal Nations, and other persons from families who were disenfranchised by racism or USDA (land stolen or taken away). UA!!! And pollinator spaces.

What concerns you?

- Long-term, broad vision for regional planning that includes towns and cities as well as "rural" lands.
- Consider that returning land to Tribal Nations would likely be best done with no restrictions on their use of the land; and having the State accept if they don't "do ag" the way it might expect/want.
- The mechanism for deciding which orgs or groups gain control, and for how long, would need to be carefully designed.
- Lease too expensive and not good well water.
- Strict government oversight of leased land for agricultural use. As well as limiting improvements to the property for Ag uses. (barns, irrigation, etc)
- Who will be responsible for developing, implementing and tracking this work? If we leave it to individual orgs and governments it will be slow and disorganized.
- What guarantees would farmers have to be able to remain on those lands?
- Especially seeing current issues at Federal level, how to make sure that contracts for ag production on public land are distributed equitably and in way that supports sustainable practices
- The current administration stopping forward motion of environmental work.

What is missing?

- Is there such a thing as a trust that could buy community ag (farm/ranch/forest/watershed) lands for the purpose of protecting their stewardship in a way that includes their use as working lands?
- Account for how tribal stewardship (which I do think should be prioritized) may not look like "agriculture" to the state.
- Not sure.

- Have any landowning government agencies been asked their opinion of opening to Ag use and leases?
- Is there a formula for how this can be implemented quickly and at scale without creating a ton of red tape.

Improve Equitable Access to Resources

What resonates with you?

- Sharing into and hearing others' ideas! Thank you.
- Low to 0% rates on grants/loans will be a great way to improve accessibility.
- Grants for beginning farmers and ranchers, lower interest rates!
- Down payments grants, forgivable loans are preferred instruments.
- These all sound like great recommendations.
- Redesigning resources to meet Soc disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.
- More grants, more land trust purchasing in Buy-Protect-Sell programs, low interest loans for land used for public good such as producing food.
- Love the idea of funding for "intermediary actors" (of course this is my job so I may be biased!). Down payment support and low/no interest loans also seem to be really effective. (ex Los Corralitos).
- Highlighting a comment in the chat, is it feasible or even desirable to, for instance, give tax breaks to farmers of certain races but not others?
- I was very late to this, so this may have already been covered. But how to get civic leaders hold space for UA in urban areas. Open land is almost gone in Orange County.
- Access to grants for lands and funding land trusts to aid certain disadvantaged communities.

What concerns you?

- Ensuring accessibility in terms of language access/technical assistance support to ensure all interested farmers have a similar chance of obtaining these funds.
- Increasing high interest operating loans for farmers. Avg loan rate was at 10%!
- This will only make a significant impact if wealthy large landholders change their perception of land as something to acquire, rather than as a resource that we steward.
- That these policies won't be happening fast enough.
- Getting elected leaders in on this conversation.

- countering economic inequality should be the first priority for reform and equity
- Not typical usage of urban lands.

What is missing?

- Who / what orgs and government departments would be providing these funds? What would be the mechanism to develop funding availability?
- Accessing affordable farmland.
- I'm interested in the idea that the Task Force doesn't want to take land via eminent domain because they want to maintain good relationships. What about ppl who violated those relations, like polluters?
- Didn't mention this before, but and land use that helps infiltrate water, and the use of composting toilets is a must.
- Would also like to see training and info sharing for intermediary actors. They may not have ever heard of some of these innovations.
- Talking to the powers that be.
- What resources?
- Re-zoning urban land up for sale and/ or unused.

Appendix B: Coachella Valley Listening Session Full Report: Findings & Synthesis

Date: Feb. 11, 2025

Participants: Migrant Farmworkers, Tenant Farmers, Small Farmers, and Huerto Operators

Partner Organizations: Líderes Campesinas & Pueblo Unido CDC

Attendance: Approximately 20

Summary author: Elias Aceves, Researcher and Guest Presenter at the February meeting

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Executive Summary

This report synthesizes findings from the Coachella Valley Listening Session conducted with migrant farmworkers, tenant farmers, small farmers, and huerto operators. The session revealed critical challenges faced by small-scale agricultural producers in accessing markets, navigating regulations, managing climate risks, and securing adequate infrastructure. Based on participant input from three distinct discussion groups, we present 10 critical themes which emerged throughout the listening session.

Key Insights

- **Market Access Over Land Access:** Tenant farmers prioritized better market access over land ownership due to additional costs like water and property taxes.
- **Unfair Pricing:** Los Angeles wholesalers significantly undercut buying prices for small producers.
- **Infrastructure Barriers:** Restrictive zoning regulations prevent building necessary infrastructure like cold storage.
- **Climate Vulnerability:** Small & tenant farmers lack adequate insurance coverage against climate events, with significant crop losses reported.
- **Limited Support for Home Gardens:** “Huerto” projects need more funding and technical assistance.
- **Educational Limitations:** Agricultural education currently fails to showcase diverse career pathways in the industry beyond manual labor for children of immigrants.
- **Regulatory Complexity:** Small operators struggle to navigate complex regulatory environments.
- **Water Affordability:** Water costs represent a significant disincentive for tenant farmers to pursue land ownership and resilient profitability.
- **Distribution Challenges:** Limited distribution channels force reliance on wholesalers offering unfair prices.
- **Certification Barriers:** Different buyers require various food safety certifications that are difficult to obtain and navigate.
- **Land Tenure Insecurity:** Rental arrangements create additional challenges with landlords and limit access to government assistance.

GROUP-SPECIFIC INSIGHTS

Detailed notes from each discussion group during the listening session

Group 1 Notes

Food Safety & Market Access

- Different food safety certifications needed depending on the buyer (Costco, Winco, etc.)
- Need for guidance navigating certification requirements

Agricultural Losses & Climate Challenges

- Lost 100 acres of green beans
- Climate and temperature limitations in Coachella restrict what they can grow
- Interest in greenhouses as climate solutions but lack resources to build them
- Lost significant moringa crops
- Need better compensation for losses from natural disasters

Land & Tenure Issues

- USDA doesn't help them because they rent rather than own land
- Landlord restrictions on harvesting and business activities
- Concerns about succession – no one to leave the land to when they're gone
- Landlord wouldn't allow harvesting because farmer was "doing business" on rented land

Labor & Business Challenges

- Trust issues with workers (mentioned lawsuits)
- Need more time to dedicate to crops
- Too many political issues with land ownership, production, and hiring
- Some mention of communal approaches ("land belongs to everyone")
- Care deeply about their land despite long hours with limited compensation

Financial & Support Needs

- Working with large companies/stores isn't profitable due to low payments
- Costs include rent, seeds, workers for planting and harvesting
- Need practical help beyond just talk
- More help for machinery and equipment
- More guidance with workers and hiring
- Better disaster relief for renters
- Easier, more flexible loans for disaster recovery
- Recognition that farming is their livelihood, not a hobby
- Inclusion in budget considerations as small farmers

Community Resources

- Interest in creating a community nursery in a parking lot for 12 trailers
- Interest in forming a union for mutual support
- Need information on engaging with local governments

- Need dedicated information resources for small farmers

Group 2 Notes

Land & Huertos

- Participants grow various herbs for home remedies, vegetables, and fruits in their gardens
- Some manage large acreages while others maintain small household gardens
- Blueberries, grapefruits, citrus, strawberries, and pomegranates are common crops
- Land acquisition required considerable effort, homeownership, and developing natural pest management strategies

Business Interests

- Some participants rent agricultural land (up to 20 acres)
- Seasonal crops include corn, melon, and watermelon with harvest from March to early June
- Landlords typically manage maintenance and equipment
- Little perceived difference between renting and owning due to high costs of water and taxes
- Interest in LLC formation and tax management for agricultural businesses

Youth & Education

- Agricultural skills primarily learned through family rather than formal education
- Strong interest in schools teaching agricultural skills and business concepts
- Desire for education that presents agriculture as more than just manual labor

Cooperative Models

- Mixed experiences with cooperative farming models
- Challenges reported with water access and distribution in cooperatives
- Preference for starting small and independent before considering cooperative approaches
- Suggestion that clearer agreements and communication could improve cooperative success

Government Support

- Concerns about restrictive regulations, particularly regarding pest management
- Preference for natural methods like beneficial insects and organic fertilizers
- Desire for government programs that understand small-scale agricultural operations

Goals and Vision

- Many focus on subsistence farming for family consumption

- Others interested in gradual expansion with potential for commercial growth
- Market access identified as primary barrier to expansion
- Interest in local markets rather than distant Los Angeles markets
- Need for legal and regulatory guidance to access commercial markets

Challenges and Barriers

- Unequal payment compared to corporate agriculture
- Lack of information about permits, regulations, and legal requirements
- Limited connections to vendors and distribution channels
- Difficulty securing fair prices from local retailers
- Adaptation of crop selection based on profitability (shift to chickpeas and watermelon)

Community Asks

- Request for local seasonal farmers' markets
- Need for machinery upgrade assistance
- Support for home-based (huerto) agriculture and small-scale operations
- Concerns about mandatory cutting of gardens due to pest regulations
- Difficulty accessing financing and affordable loans
- Need for crop insurance accessible to small producers
- Challenges with climate impacts including freezing and extreme heat
- Interest in irrigation system support
- Request for simplified food safety certification processes

Additional Insights

- Los Angeles wholesalers undercut buying prices for their produce
- Asked for local market creation to ensure intermediaries in urban centers did not dictate prices
- Complaints about not being allowed to build cold storage due to zoning regulations
- Felt cheated by climate events wiping out crops without proper insurance coverage
- Noted that large landowners receive better subsidies and insurance
- Asked for more help with huerto commercialization
- Called for education showing various pathways in agriculture beyond manual labor

Group 3 Notes

Goals and Vision for Agriculture

- Make a stable living for families
- Grow their businesses
- Provide quality food and vegetables to surrounding communities

Barriers to Goals

- High costs of materials, particularly chemicals
- Specialized tools aren't readily available like construction tools
- Large corporations buy at very low prices and resell at higher prices
- Unfavorable or nonexistent loans
- Costly requirements they aren't always aware of
- Lack of centralized information

Requested Resources and Support

- Better loans with favorable terms
- Centralized access to information, tools, and products
- Legal help with paperwork
- Continuous outreach when policies change
- Help with production costs
- Exposure to different career opportunities within agriculture

Messages for State Leadership

- Agriculture is changing, making it harder for smaller farmers to compete
- Need for a cooperative to support smaller farmers with resources, information, and tools

SYNTHESIS

Synthesis of community feedback and regional challenges

1. Local Market Development & Fair Pricing

Agricultural producers in Coachella Valley emphasize the need for California state government to establish publicly-funded local food hubs addressing their primary concern: “Market Access Over Land Access.” These small-scale tenant farmers consistently prioritized “better market access over land ownership due to additional costs like water and property taxes.” Reports from Group 2 highlight how “Los Angeles wholesalers significantly undercut buying prices for small producers,” creating untenable economic conditions. Faced with these challenges, many have had to “adapt crop selection based on profitability,” shifting to crops like chickpeas and watermelon rather than following cultural preferences.

Urgent calls from the community request the creation of farmers’ markets with reduced barriers to entry. This directly responds to participants’ requests for “local seasonal farmers’ markets” to address their “difficulty securing fair prices from local retailers.” Participants from Group 2 specifically voiced the need for “local market creation to ensure that these intermediaries in urban centers did not dictate prices” and expressed strong interest in “organizing a monthly farmers market.” Moreover, Group 3 emphasized that “larger corporations want to buy our product at a very low price and then resell at higher price; we do all the work, and they get to reap the benefits,” necessitating state-mandated price transparency mechanisms.

Multiple participants also voiced that they “can’t hold out for better prices” due to limited storage options, which is explicated further in the next section.

2. Zoning & Infrastructure Support

Restrictive regulations stand as major barriers according to community testimony, leading to requests for California state and county governments to reform publicly-administered rural zoning codes. Multiple participants described being unable to develop basic processing facilities, with one noting, “We can grow the food, but we have nowhere to keep it fresh.” Particularly vocal on this issue, Group 2 participants “complained about how they were not allowed to build cold storage (given zoning regulations) of their own,” forcing them to “pay extra to cold storage companies.”

Government grant programs for shared infrastructure represent a crucial need identified by Group 1, who highlighted their struggle with “climate and temperature limitations in Coachella that restrict what they can grow.” Their expressed “interest in greenhouses as climate solutions but lack the resources to build them” reflects a common theme across discussions. For many participants, especially those in Group 3, specialized equipment support from state agricultural extension services would address their observation that agricultural tools aren’t readily available, “forcing them to improvise and make their own tools.”

Streamlined permitting processes would acknowledge the different circumstances and capabilities of small-scale operations compared to industrial agriculture. Several participants described complex and costly permitting processes that effectively barred them from developing even modest infrastructure improvements. County-level service centers would provide technical assistance currently accessible primarily through private consultants beyond the financial reach of many small producers. Integrated rural development planning addresses the fragmented approaches that overlook systematic challenges faced by small-scale agriculture. The communities request that local governments establish state-recognized & centralized communal infrastructure management committees with formal authority to ensure facilities respond to diverse producer needs.

3. Climate Resilience & Risk Management

Devastating crop losses have created urgent requests for state legislature to mandate expanded public disaster insurance accessibility. Participants shared vivid accounts of how freezing temperatures and extreme heat devastated their crops, with one poignantly noting, “The big farms have insurance, but when we lose our crops, we lose everything.” Particularly affected, Group 2 participants “felt cheated by how climate (such as freezing) could wipe out their crops and subsequently put them into the red without proper insurance coverage.” Their experiences highlighted systemic inequity, noting that “insurance companies and even the state/federal government have massive subsidies and insurance coverage for large landowners and agribusiness for these same circumstances” while small and/or tenant farmers received minimal support.

State-subsidized insurance products for tenant farmers would directly address Group 1's reported significant losses, including "100 acres of green beans and substantial moringa crops."

Establishing a publicly-administered climate disaster fund would respond to widespread concerns that "USDA doesn't help renters effectively after disasters" and the community's call for "better disaster relief specifically designed for those who rent land rather than own it, along with easier, more flexible loans for disaster recovery."

Several participants also expressed a desire to adapt their growing practices in response to changing weather patterns but expressed frustration about limited access to information on climate-resilient techniques and resources to transition.

4. Huerto Development Support

Home gardens (*huertos*) serve as vital lifelines for many in the community, leading to calls for state government to establish a state-funded and administered Huerto Development Program. Participants described these gardens as essential for "growing various herbs for home remedies, vegetables, and fruits" including "blueberries, grapefruits, citrus, strawberries, and pomegranates." Particularly passionate about this issue, Group 2 participants "asked for more help regarding funding and technical improvements for 'huerto' projects," expressing interest in "learning how to turn these huertos into commercial operations."

Regulatory pathways for commercial certification would support Group 1's "interest in creating a community nursery in a parking lot for 12 trailers" to enhance home-based growing. Many participants embrace the philosophy that "land belongs to everyone," highlighting the importance of publicly-funded community-based training networks. Regulatory reform is also urgently asked to address participants' concerns about "mandatory cutting of gardens due to pest regulations" that threaten these vital *huerto* food systems.

Community members ask that county agricultural extensions create publicly-funded community-based training networks to facilitate knowledge exchange, reflecting how participants described primarily learning agricultural skills "through family rather than formal education." Several participants emphasized the need for technical assistance with natural pest management strategies, which they preferred to conventional chemical

approaches. Mobile demonstration units would extend technical resources to these historically underserved communities in mobile trailer parks.

5. Financial & Business Resources

Access to appropriate financial tools emerged as a major barrier, with communities requesting state financial agencies implement publicly-administered loan programs. Participants shared their difficulty “accessing financing and affordable loans” while expressing interest in “LLC formation and tax management for agricultural businesses” but finding little guidance tailored to their scale. Financial challenges were emphasized by Group 1, who detailed costs including “rent, seeds, and labor for planting and harvesting,” making profitability difficult when buyers offer low prices. Their requests included “easier, more flexible loans for disaster recovery and recognition that farming is their livelihood, not a hobby.”

Business assistance programs would address Group 3’s frustration that “loans are not favorable or don’t exist.” State-chartered agricultural credit institutions with specialized sector knowledge could respond to community requests for “better loans with more favorable terms” along with “help with costs of production.” Many participants recounted being denied financing despite successful production histories because they did not fit conventional lending criteria.

The communities ask that the state fund government-operated business technical assistance programs extending essential administrative knowledge to operations without dedicated management staff. Legal aid focusing on agricultural regulations would help equalize access to regulatory guidance, addressing participant concerns about “lack of information about permits, regulations, and legal requirements.” The communities request centralized resource centers to address the information fragmentation repeatedly mentioned by participants who described struggling to identify and access existing support programs. For example, current California state law on equipment sharing programs offer alternatives to capital-intensive individual ownership models, reflecting participant requests for “machinery upgrade assistance” that could be fulfilled if information was distributed effectively to these communities.

6. Educational Pipeline & Workforce Development

Family-based knowledge transfer currently dominates agricultural training, prompting requests for state education departments to mandate

integrating agricultural entrepreneurship into publicly-funded K-12 curricula. Throughout the discussions, participants expressed “strong interest in schools teaching agricultural skills and business concepts” and a “desire for education that presents agriculture as more than just manual labor.” Reform of educational approaches was particularly emphasized by Group 2, who voiced concerns about “the role of primary – middle – high school schools in educating their children in all aspects of agriculture.”

Publicly-funded specialized agricultural academies could transform how agriculture is taught, moving beyond the limited view that “agriculture is not merely you are either a farmer – farmworker, but all components which constitute the industry,” including “scientific study of agronomy, tax and business planning, engineering for irrigation and machinery.” The current educational approach leaves many children “predetermined in their career choices” according to participants, necessitating broader exposure to agricultural career pathways. Group 3 explicitly voiced the need for “exposure to different career opportunities within agriculture,” highlighting this cross-cutting concern.

The communities request that the state higher education system create state-funded scholarship programs specifically targeting children of agricultural workers to acknowledge persistent barriers to educational advancement. Mentorship networks would enhance awareness of diverse agricultural career trajectories, while technical apprenticeships in precision agriculture, irrigation engineering, and soil science create alternative skill development pathways.

7. Regulatory Navigation & Simplification

Overwhelmed by complex requirements, community members strongly advocate for state agricultural departments to create a publicly-staffed navigator program. The frustration was captured by one participant who noted, “There are so many rules, and they keep changing, but no one explains them to us.” Regulatory hurdles particularly affect growing practices, with several expressing frustration about “restrictive regulations, particularly regarding pest management” and a “preference for natural methods like beneficial insects and organic fertilizers.”

Government-mandated simplified regulatory pathways would address Group 1’s challenges with “food safety certifications that vary by buyer, creating a confusing regulatory landscape.”

Multilingual regulatory materials would respond to Group 3's observation that "there are a lot of requirements that cost money that we don't always know of" and that "the information isn't centralized." Many participants emphasized the need for "continuous outreach to our communities when policies change," highlighting communication gaps between regulators and producers.

The communities ask that state regulatory bodies implement publicly-coordinated inspections across agencies to reduce the cumulative administrative burden created by fragmented oversight systems. Pest management regulatory reform should consider appropriate flexibility for small-scale operations while maintaining ecological standards, directly responding to concerns about "mandatory cutting of gardens due to pest regulations." The communities request specialized agricultural dispute resolution mechanisms to provide accessible processes designed for agricultural contexts, while community-based regulatory promoters would build local capacity for compliance assistance.

8. Water Access & Affordability

Water costs fundamentally shape agricultural viability in the region, driving community requests for state water boards to establish publicly-supported community water systems. Numerous participants reported "little perceived difference between renting and owning due to high costs of water and taxes," while others described "challenges with water access and distribution in cooperatives" alongside "interest in irrigation system support." Particularly direct on this issue,

Group 1 urged authorities to "not raise water prices for farmers" and called for "an average price for everyone," emphasizing water costs as a major constraint on profitability.

Democratic governance structures for communal water management would address participants' emphasis on the need for "clearer agreements and communication" to avoid water access conflicts. Many expressed confusion about allocation systems and limited understanding of water access options, highlighting the need for educational workshops for these communities' producers.

The communities ask that state legislation provide government-recognized legal protection of community water rights for the collaborative approaches

that participants identified as potentially beneficial when properly structured.

9. Distribution Network Development

Limited market access stands as the primary barrier to growth according to most participants, leading to calls for state support of publicly-backed cooperative distribution networks. One frustrated farmer explained, “We can grow great produce, but we have limited connections to vendors and distribution channels.” Group 1 highlighted economic disparities, noting that “working with big companies and stores doesn’t yield returns because they pay less and they make much more money.” From Group 3 came emphatic testimony that “larger corporations want to buy our product at a very low price and then resell at higher price; we do all the work, and they get to reap the benefits.” Group 2 also noted these intermediary relationships which often undercut these producers.

Transportation infrastructure represents another critical need, with one participant clearly stating: “We know how to grow food. We need help getting it to people who will pay fair prices for it.” The communities request that the state provides funding for producers to create (individual or cooperative) transportation channels. State-supported transportation networks connecting production areas to markets would address infrastructural gaps that currently limit options for operations without integrated distribution capacity.

10. Implementation & Governance

Many described communication barriers with regulatory agencies, while others noted that existing programs seemed designed for “corporate agriculture” rather than small-scale producers.

The disconnect was captured by one participant who remarked, “They make policies without understanding how we work,” while another emphasized that “government programs that understand small-scale agricultural operations” were urgently needed.

Regular listening sessions with transparent reporting would address one participant’s frustration about how to “remain updated with the task force’s progress,” noting that “the government always comes, and then they disappear, and we never hear what happens.” From Group 1 came the specific request that “USDA not just help big corporations” and that “the county be fair with everyone, not just small farmers.” Many expressed the need for “more information on how to get involved with their cities and

counties to provide feedback.” Group 3 highlighted structural challenges, observing that “agriculture is changing and it is making it really hard for smaller farmers to compete,” underscoring the need for structures that could amplify their collective voice.

Multilingual resources & facilitation are essential for meaningful engagement by the Valley’s linguistically diverse agricultural stakeholders with participatory planning processes for resource allocation decisions.

CROSS-GROUP ANALYSIS

Trends, similarities, and differences across all three discussion groups

Common Themes Across All Groups

The three discussion groups demonstrated remarkable convergence on several key issues, suggesting these represent foundational challenges for small-scale agricultural producers in the Coachella Valley:

1. **Market Access & Fair Pricing:** Universal concerns emerged about unfair pricing from intermediaries and large buyers, with consistent reports of “Los Angeles wholesalers undercutting producers” and “large corporations capturing disproportionate value.” Strong consensus across all groups points toward local farmers’ markets as preferred solutions that state programs should prioritize.
2. **Insurance & Climate Vulnerability:** Significant crop losses due to extreme weather events affected participants across all groups, who identified inadequate insurance options for small producers as a critical gap. This universal concern highlights escalating climate risks faced by farmers in the region, requiring expanded program access through state agencies.
3. **Regulatory Complexity:** Frustration with navigating complex regulatory environments “not designed for small-scale operations” permeated all discussions. Repeatedly mentioned was the need for “centralized information resources,” revealing systemic failures in making regulatory guidance accessible that state departments must address.
4. **Water Affordability & Land Tenure:** High costs of water emerged as a fundamental economic constraint across all discussions, with particular emphasis on how these expenses impact the viability of land ownership versus renting. Long-term agricultural sustainability depends on water pricing reforms by state authorities, along with proper public financing across multiple scales of operations (from *huerto* to hundreds of acres).

5. **Educational Improvement:** Expressed throughout all groups was the desire for

improved agricultural education that “presents diverse career pathways beyond manual labor,” revealing widespread concern about intergenerational mobility and sector perception that educational curricula must address.

Group-Specific Emphases

While sharing common concerns, each group emphasized different priorities reflecting their particular circumstances:

1. *Group 1 Distinct Emphases:*

- Land tenure insecurity and landlord restrictions severely limit productive capacity, requiring state policy intervention.
- Certification challenges with different buyers (Costco, Winco) create administrative burdens that streamlined processes could alleviate.
- Interest in community-based supports like a communal nursery highlights the need for public funding of collective infrastructure.
- Labor management concerns and worker relations underscore the need for guidance from state labor agencies.
- Succession planning resources would address concerns about having “no one to leave land to”.

2. *Group 2 Distinct Emphases:*

- Zoning regulations create infrastructure limitations that county government reforms could address.
- Comprehensive agricultural education reform represents a priority need for state education departments.
- Commercialization pathways for home gardens (huertos) require specific funding and technical support from state programs.
- Past experiences with cooperative models suggest the need for better governance frameworks supported by state agencies.
- The gap between small and large producer insurance coverage must be addressed through state insurance program reforms.

3. *Group 3 Distinct Emphases:*

- Business growth aspirations beyond subsistence farming require support from state business development programs.
- Tools and material costs create specific barriers that targeted state assistance could address.

- Cooperative structures for mutual support feature prominently in their vision for state-facilitated collective action.
- Continuous outreach and information sharing when policies change represents a critical need for state agency communication.
- Publicly-backed finance & loans for disadvantaged farmers on favorable terms.

Bridging Differences Through Integrated Solutions

Diverse but complementary perspectives across groups point toward cohesive public programs that integrate multiple needs:

1. **Tiered Support Systems:** Varying stages of agricultural development—from subsistence huertos to growth-oriented small businesses—necessitate differentiated support programs. Group 1's interest in creating "a community nursery in the parking lot for 12 trailers" aligns with Group 2's request for "more help regarding funding and technical improvements for 'huerto' projects" and interest in "learning how to turn these huertos into commercial operations," while complementing Group 3's goal to "step up and grow our business." Effective government programs would include entry-level support for home gardens, intermediate assistance for small commercial plots, and advanced resources for expanding operations, creating publicly-supported pathways for progression while respecting different aspirations.
2. **Cooperative Models with Clear Governance:** Past challenges with collective approaches must inform new cooperative structures with public oversight. Group 2 reported "challenges with water access and distribution in cooperatives," while Group 3 expressed desire for "a cooperative that could be formed to support smaller farmers with access to resources, information and tools," and Group 1 showed interest in "forming a union to support each other." Public programs should establish clear governance protocols, transparent decision-making processes, and equitable resource allocation mechanisms. Many participants preferred "starting small and independent before considering cooperative approaches" due to past negative experiences, suggesting incremental trust-building through small-scale collaborations might address concerns that "clearer agreements and communication could improve cooperative success."
3. **Comprehensive Educational Strategy:** Transforming agricultural education requires integrating multiple visions across groups. Group 2 articulated education that teaches "agriculture as not merely you are either a farmer – farmworker, but all components which constitute the

industry” including “scientific study of agronomy, tax and business planning, engineering for irrigation and machinery.” This complements Group 3’s request for “exposure to different career opportunities within agriculture” and Group 1’s emphasis on practical training. Multi-level educational programs should start with traditional knowledge transmission while building pathways to technical and professional roles through partnerships between community-based knowledge holders, educational institutions, and agricultural employers. Many expressed concerns that children become “predetermined in their career choices,” highlighting the need for diverse options while honoring traditional practices.

4. **Multi-Level Market Development:** Different scales of production require varied market access solutions. Group 1 requested “local seasonal farmers’ markets” while Group 2 expressed interest in “organizing a monthly farmers market.” Group 3 voiced concern that “larger corporations want to buy our product at a very low price and then resell at higher price.” Differentiated market channels appropriate for various scales would range from direct consumer sales for small producers to aggregation systems giving medium-sized operations better negotiating power with wholesale buyers. Digital platforms connecting producers to appropriate buyers would complement price transparency mechanisms addressing concerns that “Los Angeles wholesalers significantly undercut buying prices for small producers.”
5. **Integrated Regulatory Navigation:** Navigating complex requirements demands coordinated assistance programs. Group 1 faced certification challenges where “food safety certifications needed” vary “depending on the buyer (Costco, Winco).” Group 2 struggled with “restrictive zoning regulations” that “prevent building necessary infrastructure like cold storage.” Group 3 highlighted that “there are a lot of requirements that cost money that we don’t always know of” and “the information isn’t centralized.” Comprehensive navigation assistance would provide personalized guidance through regulatory processes, centralized information access, multilingual materials, and targeted technical assistance for compliance. Simplified pathways for small-scale producers must maintain standards while addressing “complex regulatory environments” where rules “keep changing, but no one explains them to us.”
6. **Participatory Governance Structure:** Meaningful inclusion in decision-making represents a foundational need across all groups. Group 1 requested “more information on how to get involved with their cities and counties to provide feedback.” Group 2 voiced concern about policies made “without understanding

how we work.” Group 3 emphasized the need for “continuous outreach to our communities when policies change.” Formally institutionalizing ongoing community participation beyond one-time listening sessions would establish accountability through transparent reporting on implementation progress. Regular community forums would maintain dialog while ensuring governance represents the full spectrum of agricultural operations, addressing widespread frustration that “the government always comes, and then they disappear, and we never hear what happens.”

These integrated approaches help bridge the differences found across the distinct emphases of each group, while also incorporating proposals and insights from the participants to inform how the task force and the state government’s approach to land access, market access, and comprehensive agrarian development.