

# Road Map Toward Accelerating a Just Land Transition in California

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## HIGHLIGHTS

*California's San Joaquin Valley is undergoing a land transition to address persistent and dramatic groundwater depletion caused by irrigated agriculture. Achieving groundwater sustainability may require transitioning up to 1 million acres of irrigated agriculture to different land uses. A just land transition ensures equitable benefits for farmers, farmworker communities, and frontline communities, fostering stronger local economies and climate resilience planning. To inform this policy brief, UCS partnered with academic, agriculture, environmental justice, governmental, and philanthropic organizations to identify guiding principles and the short- and long-term steps California must take to secure a just land transition future.*

## Introduction

In the San Joaquin Valley of California, a land transition is underway, due in part to the success of the state's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). SGMA was enacted to address the persistent and dramatic depletion of groundwater driven primarily by irrigated agriculture. Achieving groundwater sustainability may require the transition of more than 500,000 acres of currently irrigated farmland to different land uses (Escriva-Bou et al. 2023). Though the San Joaquin Valley may have the majority of land that needs to be transitioned, other agricultural regions of the state will also need to take action.

This policy brief outlines guiding principles and recommendations for accelerating a just land transition in the agricultural regions of California. In a just land transition, farmers and farmworker communities are not left alone to face drastic consequences as water scarcity grows. Frontline communities are active leaders and participants in the transition. While some early progress has been made in the San Joaquin Valley regarding intentional and strategic cropland repurposing, there is far more to do—and the clock is ticking.

The facilitation of a just land transition reflects a transformation in how California manages its irrigated agricultural land. A just land transition entails an intentional and strategic shift away from unsustainable water-intensive farming toward a sustainable agriculture system that addresses pollution, systemic injustices, and community economic development, while enhancing climate resilience (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. An Intentional and Strategic Shift Toward a Landscape with Multiple Benefits

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*A just land transition centers community needs, supports local economies, protects environmental and public health, preserves food security through regenerative agriculture, and enhances climate resilience. Land transition projects can directly benefit frontline communities by, for example, reducing pollution, providing renewable energy, recharging groundwater, creating local parks, restoring wildlife corridors, and supporting clean industries and workforce development.*

*Adapted from UCS 2023.*

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A just land transition can ensure that equitable benefits for all involved groups are at the core of land transition decisionmaking. By prioritizing and centering equity, a just land transition fosters stronger local economies, supports economic diversification, minimizes negative impacts, ensures the fair distribution of benefits, preserves future food security, and builds sustained climate resilience.

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) partnered with academic, agriculture, environmental justice, governmental, and philanthropic organizations to inform this brief, exploring these two questions:

- What north star principles guide us to a just land transition?
- What next steps does California need to take—in this moment and in the next few years—to secure a just land transition?

This document is purposely concise and meant to spark further advocacy, conversation, and research. We welcome your shared partnership and urge your action to create a just land transition future for California.

## Principles to Guide a Just Land Transition

The following guiding principles should inform efforts to secure a just land transition future for California. These principles serve as a north star to return to collectively and regularly as we navigate through this work.

- **Recognize Indigenous Rights and Tribal Sovereignty:**<sup>1</sup> Abide by treaty-protected rights and support tribal governance and land-back objectives.
- **Use Public Dollars to Create Public Benefits:** Public funds used to transition toward sustainable and diversified local economies maximize public benefits (See UCS 2023).
- **Be Community Centered:** Frontline communities are leading voices in just land transition conversations and decisionmaking. “Frontline community” is used within this document to refer to communities located in proximity to cropland transition and climate change likely to experience the first and worst impacts.<sup>2</sup>
- **Ensure the Benefits Flow to Frontline Communities:** Frontline communities directly benefit from any just land transition solutions.
- **Be Science Driven:** The best available science and data guide just land transition solutions. (See Fernandez-Bou et al. 2024; Fernandez-Bou et al. 2023; Environmental Defense Fund 2021.)
- **Build Climate Resilience:** Solutions are informed by, and responsive to, the realities of our changing climate, particularly regarding water stress.
- **Protect Environmental and Public Health:** Solutions protect people’s health and the environment, augmenting and expanding existing efforts.
- **Prioritize Economic Development and Civic Infrastructure:** Solutions prioritize workforce development and planned labor transitions for agricultural workers, augmenting and expanding existing efforts.

## Short-Term Steps to Facilitate a Just Land Transition

With these steps, California can decisively accelerate toward securing a just land transition future. Recommendations are organized into short-term and long-term steps along four intervention points: the state legislature, regulatory agencies, local governments, and philanthropy.

### California Legislature

- Establish an explicit definition of “meaningful benefit” that ensures projects funded by Proposition 4 directly benefit frontline communities. The definition should require all public funding for land transition projects to be accompanied by a meaningful community engagement plan, a community benefits agreement process, and consideration of mechanisms by which communities can become owners of land and/or project assets.
- Create an equitable access pathway for land transfers and long-term leases for those interested—including farmer cooperatives, socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher-serving organizations, community land trusts, tribal governments, and land trusts—to purchase land directly.<sup>3</sup>

- Establish guardrails around consolidated and privatized land ownership, and incentivize alternative land ownership arrangements, such as smaller or community ownership models.

## **Regulatory Agencies**

- Implement a strong definition of “meaningful benefits” for programs that prioritize community investments (such as the Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program [MLRP] at the Department of Conservation), and more fully incorporate recommendations, feedback, and participation from community advocates. (See California Department of Conservation 2025.)
- Require a process for ensuring affirmative community support for land transition projects involving public funds. This process should be codeveloped through a meaningful process of engagement with frontline community(ies)—for example, codevelopment of a community benefits agreement or community-led project.
- Continue probationary basin declarations under SGMA, where appropriate, to ensure groundwater sustainability agencies and plans avoid undesirable results, especially for drinking water.

## **Local Governments**

- Require a process for ensuring affirmative community support for land transition projects involving public funds. Such processes could include an allowance for a right of first refusal by frontline communities or a meaningful process of engagement with the frontline community(ies) for any proposed community benefits agreement.<sup>4</sup>
- Develop local civic infrastructure that will support a just land transition by building decisionmaking power in frontline communities. Examples include community land trusts to acquire and manage land, community choice aggregators for local renewable energy, and cooperatives or other models that center community participation and ownership.
- Adopt consistent interpretations of the Williamson Act so that local government discretionary rules do not pose additional barriers to community-supported renewable energy projects and other land transition solutions for these parcels. (See California Department of Conservation 2023.)

## **Philanthropy**

- Convene a partnership table of funders and organizations to engage on just land transitions. Members should be from relevant communities (e.g., agriculture, economic development, environmental justice, environmental protection, public health) and focus on long-term and coordinated just land transition investment and planning.
- Fund organizations to develop networks of local elected officials and community leaders who want to be innovators and champions of just land transition. These members could be, for example, mayors, council members, and county supervisors. (See Community Water Center’s Community Water Leaders Network and its AGUA [Association of People United for Water] Coalition for examples.)

- Expand direct investment in community-based organizations and technical assistance providers working on just land transition, to continue building local capacity for project development, implementation (including long-term maintenance), and policy advocacy, as well as evidence for scaling place-based solutions for the region.

## Long-Term Steps to Accelerate a Just Land Transition

- Develop a long-term California Just Land Transition Master Plan to guide public and private efforts to accelerate a just land transition future. The plan should be accompanied by estimates for the level of public investment needed in the coming years to secure a just land transition future.
- Establish requirements for state, county, and other relevant local planning entities to adopt processes that incorporate just land transition principles when making land use and zoning decisions.
- Develop a Just Land Transition Opportunity Zones Program to spur local partnership development and collaborative multistakeholder just land transition project development across the state.
- Provide additional financial investment in cropland repurposing and strategic planning programs (like MLRP or the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program) that build on current efforts and spur bolder, longer-term land planning. An explicit portion of public investments should be for capacity building and planning, as well as appropriate levels of technical assistance.

## Conclusion

A just land transition that is based on intentional and strategic cropland repurposing, follows the previously mentioned guiding principles, and works to implement critical next steps could help the current California agriculture system become sustainable at a feasible pace, helping farmer, farmworker, and other frontline communities.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> While this is an important principle, no Indigenous experts or tribal affiliates were involved in this policy brief.
- <sup>2</sup> This definition is not exclusive and may overlap with definitions describing communities that are designated as disadvantaged or unincorporated communities (see Cal. Health & Safety Code §39711; Cal. Water Code §79505.5; Fernandez-Bou et al. 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> A socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher is defined in 7 USC § 2279 and 7 USC § 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> This could be modeled after the City of Detroit's *Community Benefits Ordinance* and reflect expert-identified principles for meaningful community benefits agreements (Bedsworth, Hoff, and Johnson 2024); cities like Sacramento have started down this path (see that city's *Draft Community Benefits Ordinance Framework*).