



# HEALING LAND, COLLECTIVE POWER

Possibilities, Barriers, and Visions of  
Transforming Land, Work, and Ownership  
Towards Cooperative Agriculture for  
Ventura County Farmworkers



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# PART I. INTRODUCTION

# 01





Ventura County, California is one of the nation's top agricultural regions, with a \$2 billion per year agricultural industry that is one of the United States's largest producers of crops like lemons, strawberries, celery, and avocados.

Because of the focus on highly labor-intensive specialty crops picked by hand, tens of thousands of farmworkers live in Ventura County communities like Oxnard and Santa Paula, where families experience scarce access to public land for recreational green space, despite the county's longstanding commitment to preserving open space largely as privately-owned farmland.

Many farmworkers aspire to farm their own land rather than work for large agribusiness corporations, but with some of the most fertile farmland in the country in the idyllic climate of California's Central Coast, farmland in Ventura County is some of the most expensive in the nation.

**Ventura County agriculture is on the precipice of change, and needs innovation to thrive in the 21st century. Investing in farmworkers to steward land of their own through cooperatives can create a better life for those whose labor feeds the world and a healthier community for all of us. To achieve this transformational vision, we must change policy to promote land access, support permitting, and fund sustainable farming practices.**




The Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), Lideres Campesinas, and the Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project (MICOP) are three organizations that engage and develop farmworker leaders in Ventura County to advocate for better working and living conditions. Our organizations worked in partnership from 2022 to 2024 to analyze the potential for new innovations and policy interventions that would transform agricultural land ownership in Ventura County to advance economic and environmental justice for farmworker communities.

In particular, we explored the potential to develop farmworker-led cooperatives or land trusts that would increase the accessibility of green space or support the restoration of natural ecosystems in Ventura County while providing more economic mobility and agency for agricultural workers. We assessed existing barriers to the development of these alternative farming structures and potential policies to overcome these barriers.

Our research included surveys and focus groups of farmworker leaders on their interests in forming cooperatives or land trusts, interviews with expert practitioners in the field of alternative agriculture, GIS mapping of farmland ownership from county tax assessment data, and a literature review of existing academic research. An advisory committee of farmworker leaders with all three organizations made final decisions on the policy recommendations in the conclusion of this report.

We surveyed 73 Ventura County farmworkers in the spring of 2023 regarding their interest in becoming farm owners/operators as well as alternative agricultural models such as land trusts and cooperatives. The survey aimed to explore the participants' demographics, farm work experience, crop types, language proficiency, and their interest in becoming farm owners or operators while also exploring the common challenges.



# PART II. SURVEYS WITH FARMWORKERS INTRODUCTION

We surveyed 73 Ventura County farmworkers in the spring of 2023 regarding their interest in becoming farm owners/operators as well as alternative agricultural models such as land trusts and cooperatives. The survey aimed to explore the participants' demographics, farm work experience, crop types, language proficiency, and their interest in becoming farm owners or operators while also exploring the common challenges.

## Selection Process:

Due to the nature of finding willing participants there might be a voluntary bias within this survey. The selection process was by referral or prior knowledge of farmworker contacts. The interviewers were composed of community members/trusted messengers from the respective organizations listed above who conducted the survey. Respondents were also given compensation of \$50 and the survey was confidential.

## Demographics:

The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 73 years, with a single participant at each end of the spectrum. Some of the participants have known nothing but agricultural work, one even stated “All I remember as a child is growing corn and beans” and “I do not know any other type of work”. Among the participants, 56% were women and 44% were men.

73

Farmworkers were surveyed

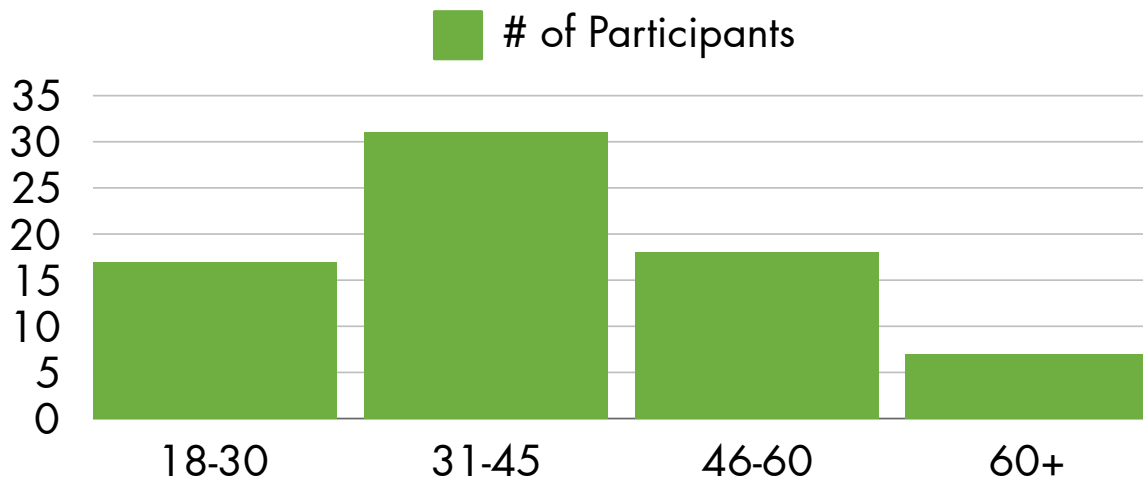
56%

of participants were women

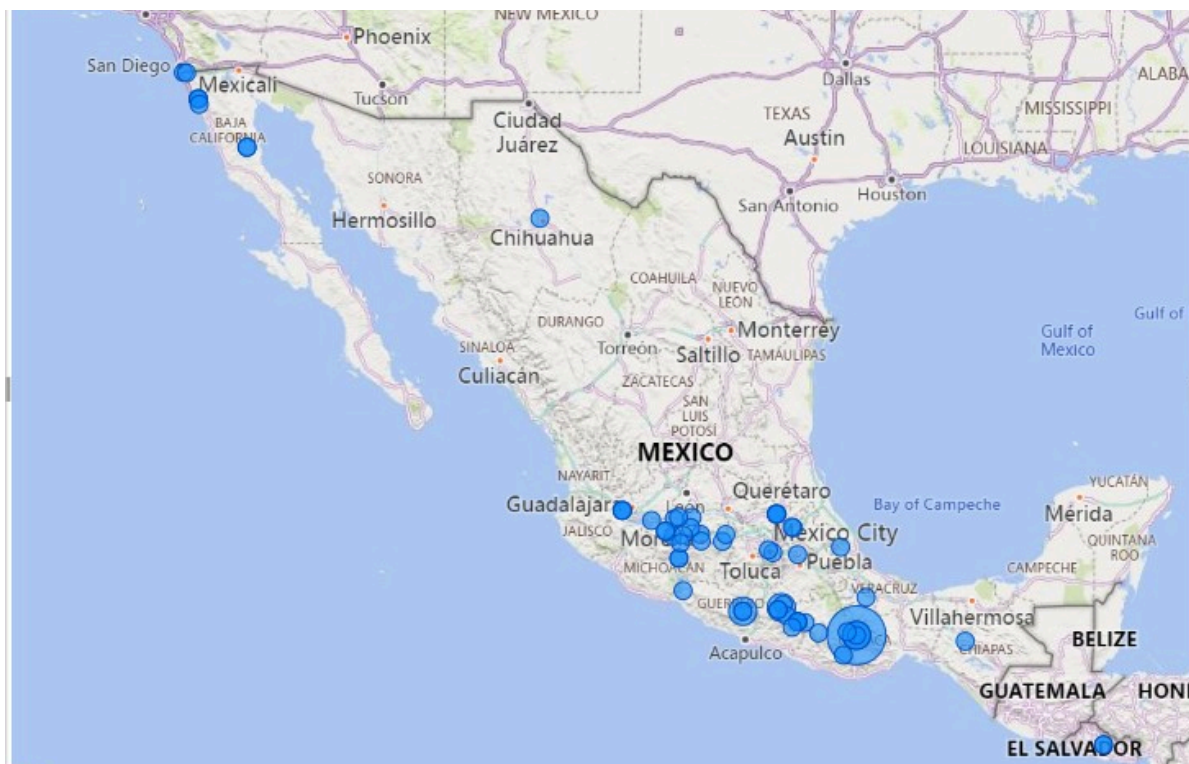
44%

of participants were men





As can be observed in the map generated: Most participants were from central and southern Mexico, with a few from the north of Mexico and one from El Salvador. The size of the map bubbles correspond to the number of participants from those specific areas, Oaxaca having the greatest concentration. The vast majority of participants were also agricultural workers before coming to the United States, but other common occupations were students or other labor occupations.





## **Farm Work Experience and Crop Types:**

35 of the participants worked in fruit harvesting, within that group 20 specified that they worked in strawberry agriculture, Ventura County's biggest crop. Secondly, vegetables as a category and lemons were also common occupations. Some participants worked with other crops, such as tomatoes, cannabis, and avocados.

## **Language Proficiency:**


Spanish was the most spoken language reported among the participants. However, large numbers of farmworkers surveyed spoke indigenous languages such as Mixteco and Zapoteco, and some spoke English.



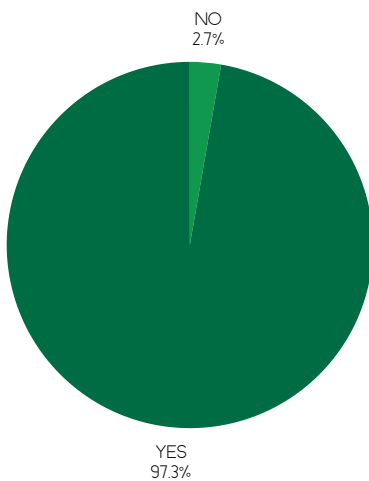
A word cloud featuring the word 'SPANISH' in large, bold, green letters at the center. Surrounding it are other languages in various colors and orientations: 'ZAPOTECO' in yellow, 'ENGLISH' in green, 'NAHUATL' in black, 'MIXTECO' in grey, and 'PUREPECHA' in light blue.

## **Interest in Becoming Farm Owners or Operators:**

The survey results revealed that 99% of farmworkers surveyed were interested in owning their own farm, 97% of the participants would be interested in managing farmland owned by a community organization or other agency, while 93% were interested in being part of a farmworker cooperative. 100% of the participants were interested in learning about agricultural practices that were beneficial for the environment or come from indigenous knowledge.





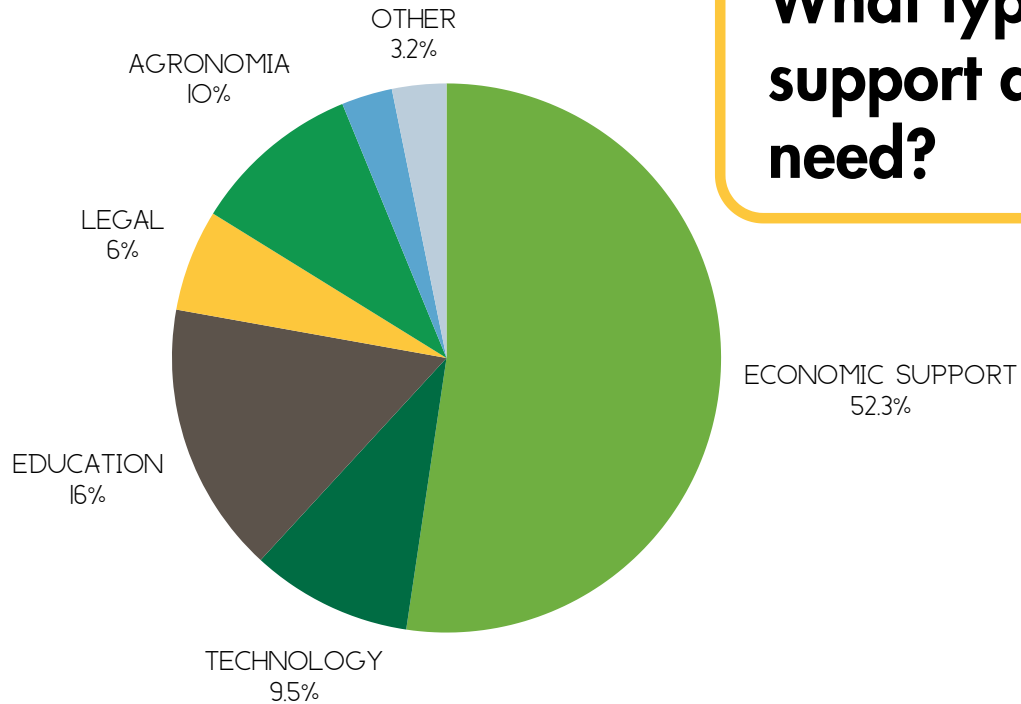


**Would you be interested in managing a farm on land owned by a community organization or other agency?**

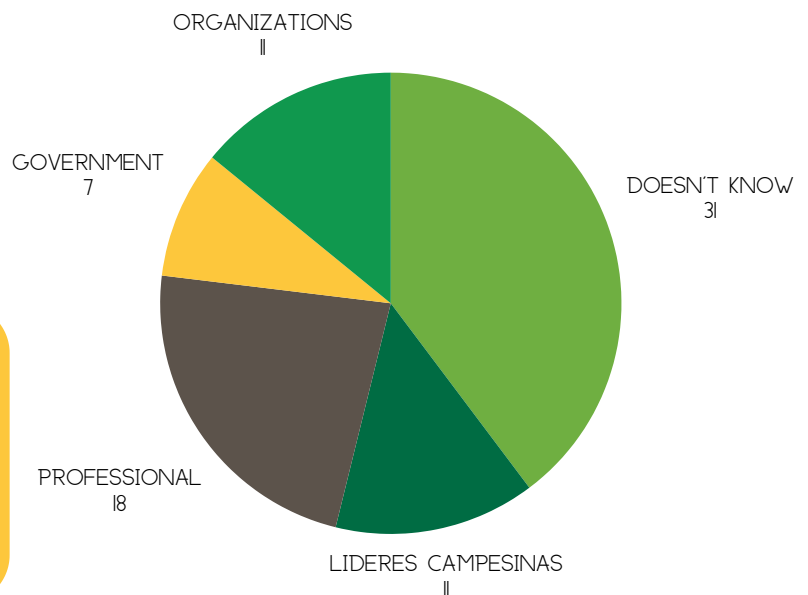
**Barriers to Success:**

Farmworkers are well aware of the many barriers they would face in becoming farm owners or operators or in forming cooperatives or land trusts. For one, incomplete immigration status is always an ongoing and underlying factor that perpetuates barriers and inequities. On top of this, lack of land access was considered a major barrier. For this, workers reported economic aid, such as loans or other programs facilitating land acquisition, was an essential support needed to overcome this barrier. Workers also mentioned the need for technological and education assistance. 43% shared that they did not know where to find the assistance they would need.

## What type of support do you need?



## Where would you go to find help?



# PART III: FOCUS GROUPS WITH FARMWORKERS

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In the fall of 2023, we held two focus groups with ten farmworkers each, one in Spanish, and one in Mixteco. Focus groups were selected based on pre-existing relationships with our organizations or by referral and participants received a \$100 gift card.

Farmworkers reflected on some of their negative experiences with the existing agricultural system, such as working with harmful chemical pesticides and fertilizers, mistreatment at the hands of supervisors of agricultural corporations, and low pay that is unable to sustain families in the Central Coast of California.



When asked about how they would like to see the agricultural system change, focus group participants spoke about the ability to have more autonomy and shared decision-making over their own land through a cooperative structure where they could decide what to grow, share work and profits together, and use more environmentally healthy farming practices. Participants were mixed in the exact structure of cooperative agriculture they would prefer.

Some preferred the idea of a full cooperative where all operations would be shared together, while others preferred some shared aspects such as a land trust, but where individual families could have their own small plot to farm.

Similarly to the themes that emerged in our surveys, farmworkers are well aware of the many obstacles to achieving this vision. First and foremost, they spoke about the challenges in accessing loan capital to start a farm and particularly affording the costly monthly rent for farmland in the region as well as equipment. They also recognized the need for highly technical knowledge of running a business, the science of modern agriculture, and selecting which crops to grow and where to sell them.



Language and immigration status barriers were another issue, especially when it came to navigating permitting and legal issues. However, focus group participants saw a cooperative organization as a resource to address these challenges, providing information and training as well as financial support for farmworkers seeking to transition to become farm operators.





# PART IV: INTERVIEWS WITH ALTERNATIVE AGRICULTURE PRACTITIONERS

**In the spring of 2023, we interviewed 15 experts in alternative models of agriculture, including representatives of land trusts, cooperatives, farm incubators, small farm owners, advocacy and technical support groups. Below are major themes that emerged.**

## **Importance of land access and tenure:**

Secure land tenure was one of the most critical elements of success emphasized by many of our interviewees. Investments in sustainable and regenerative agriculture take years to reap benefits, from achieving organic certification to improvements in soil health from practices like cover cropping, hedge rows, and composting. Farmers and cooperatives using environmentally conscious practices who rent their land from larger corporate or legacy landowners often lose their land and have to move before recouping the financial costs of those practices. However, most small and beginning farmers, particularly former farmworkers, lease their land rather than own. Particularly for small farmers and former farmworkers starting organic farms of their own, negotiating at least a 3-5 year lease is recommended.



Most interviewees stressed that access to land was the single biggest barrier facing practitioners of alternative models of agriculture. Farmland is expensive, particularly in an area like the Central Coast of California. Being able to access the initial capital to purchase land is challenging for newer, smaller, and nontraditional farmers, and buyers are competing with global cash investors who are increasingly buying up farmland quickly. Scale is important in the success of farming and even traditional for-profit small farms struggle against global competition. It is particularly hard for cooperatives and agricultural land trusts to raise the capital for large scale land purchases in the most agriculturally productive areas.

**One solution that some practitioners used to access land is to leverage the resources of environmental conservation groups** who might purchase an easement on the farmland guaranteeing certain environmentally sustainable farming practices in exchange for supporting the cost of buying farmland in an ecologically important area. Another solution is using land donations from socially-conscious landowners or public or nonprofit agencies who see this as a way of fulfilling a social goal or mission. Nonprofit and governmental agencies can also help aspiring farmers access financial capital, establish relationships, and provide credibility with both lenders and potential sellers.






## **Balancing vision with practicality:**

Most of our interviewees emphasized the financial challenges of farming in a way that uplifts workers, land, and communities. Many spoke to the difficult tradeoffs between hard economic realities and their aspirational vision for sustainable environmental practices, fair pay for those working the land, and serving the surrounding community with affordable food. Success can require finding a balance by focusing on the most cost-effective environmental practices or accessing markets that will pay more for food products than their own communities.

Creating housing on farmland can lead to major financial savings, but presents permitting and other logistical challenges. Many alternative farming organizations subsidize their operations with grants to run community-oriented programs such as agriculture education. Some rent their farms as spaces for events like weddings and retreats. Others found that moving up the economic value chain by developing their own food packing or processing operations allowed them to be more financially viable.

Some focused on direct-to-consumer marketing like CSA boxes and farmers markets, while others sold to aggregators who ran regional packinghouses for wholesale distribution. Institutions like school districts that make large purchases can also be a reliable source of income. Marketing directly to consumers allows farmers to keep more of the value of their products, while selling to wholesale distributors can provide more stable income. Relying on a diversity of markets provides the most resilience to shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic.







## **Diversity of organizational structures:**

Our interviews showed the wide diversity of organizational structures in the alternative agriculture world. Some of our interviewees ran traditional for-profit businesses or supported farmworkers in becoming owners of small private organic farms. Others experimented with cooperatives and land trusts using structures such as a 501c2 nonprofit organization for permanent collective land ownership. A land trust who owns the land may be a separate organization from worker cooperatives who farm the land. Incubators support target populations such as former farmworkers by providing them small plots of land to farm while being trained through their programs to ultimately develop their own small organic farms. While many resources such as farm equipment, incubation farmland, and technical support are initially shared, their ultimate goal is to spin off individual private farms.

Organizations pursuing cooperatives and land trusts face a scarcity of technical assistance aimed at their unique organizational needs and structures. They also can deal with more challenging internal governance and decision-making processes. However, some are able to draw on indigenous-based traditions and knowledge that many farmworker communities hold, such as the ejido system in Mexico. One area to explore further may be which parts of a farming operation are best held cooperatively vs. privately.








For example, cooperatives have played a major role in sharing the costs of inputs like farm equipment, or providing the necessary scale in marketing and distribution. Even when farms are not fully run as cooperatives, some groups of farmworkers seeking to operate small farms have found success in pooling their resources to purchase a large plot of land together and creating separate subleases. While funding and administering a cooperative can be challenging, it is also possible to practice some cooperative governance principles using a traditional business structure that can remove barriers to financing and permitting.

### **Tapping into skills and resources:**

Several interviewees emphasized that successful organizations required a mix of sometimes contradictory skill sets in practical farming, business administration, and community engagement. Often the best farmers of the land are not naturally suited to marketing and negotiating business contracts, or applying for government grants and running community education programs. However, an ecosystem of organizations has emerged that provide a depth of technical assistance and capacity building for aspiring small farm owners, many of whom are former farmworkers, that include organic certification, food safety, permitting support, financial education, and support applying for government grants. Major institutions like the University of California Cooperative Extension, local Resource Conservation Districts, the California Department of Food and Agriculture, and US Department of Agriculture can provide important technical support and knowledge.





## **Changing policy and systems:**

One thing many interviewees acknowledged was that small-scale farming in a global commodity market can feel like an impossible challenge. This economic system is even more hostile to non-traditional models such as cooperatives and land trusts. In addition to the individual project level, there is a need for systems change in local, state, and federal policy. Many mentioned the need for easier access to credit and grant funding for beginning farmers or cooperatives particularly in the first few years to address the high costs of farmland, water, and equipment. Others spoke to reducing the barriers to applying for existing grant programs. Addressing permitting to make it easier to build housing, food processing, and other facilities on farmland would support the financial viability of some of these organizations. Some interviewees also raised examples of laws and regulations to prevent the consolidation of farmland ownership by large corporations.

Several current opportunities for state-level policy change arose such as the new Agricultural Land Equity Taskforce and the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) program, both housed in California's Strategic Growth Council agency. Despite the large amounts of resources that subsidize agribusiness in the United States, agricultural subsidies largely support large corporations and industrial agriculture rather than the most sustainable and socially responsible farming practices. However, because of the public interest in conserving farmland, particularly from a climate and environmental perspective, programs to invest in sustainable and regenerative agriculture can be better targeted to uplift racial and economic justice and allow farmworkers to access land of their own in a way that transforms our relationships to the land and those that work it.

**Thank you to the individuals and organizations who contributed time to interviews for this research:**

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**Helen McGrath**

**María Ines Catalan**  
**Minnow**  
**Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust**  
**Seeds of Solidarity**  
**The Abundant Table**  
**The Agrarian Trust**  
**White Buffalo Land Trust**



# **PART V: ACADEMIC LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the spring of 2024, we researched existing academic literature on the subjects of cooperative agriculture, farmworker to farm owner transitions, and the role of conservancies and land trusts in farming. The existing body of research shows that agricultural cooperatives have long played a major role in agriculture worldwide, but face unique economic challenges that have diminished their role over time. However, well-designed cooperatives can be vital in supporting farmworkers transitioning to farm operators, and can collaborate with environmental conservancies in addressing the largest and most important barrier, which is access to affordable land.



Agricultural cooperatives first emerged in the late nineteenth century as a powerful tool for economic empowerment and agricultural development, especially for small or beginning farmers. The cooperative structure deviates from traditional labor arrangements, operating under a model that places ownership and control into the hands of its members.

From the beginning stages of land procurement to the final stages of commercial retailing, agricultural cooperatives provide forms of economic assistance including technical support, credit extensions, and marketing services to bolster their members. While cooperatives hold the promise to greatly benefit their members, it is critical to consider potential limitations within the cooperative model.





Traditional economic theory identifies five key barriers to the success of cooperatives, known as property rights problems.


Firstly, the free rider problem describes a situation in which members benefit from a resource without contributing to its full cost, posing a threat of internal conflict within the cooperative (Cook 1995).

Secondly, a horizon problem arises “when a member's residual claim on the net income generated by an asset is shorter than the productive life of that asset” (Cook 1995). In short, present economic environments disincentivize future investments for growth due to a lack of return.

Thirdly, the portfolio problem describes the restrictions under the cooperative model that limit its members' ability to develop their risk portfolio. As a result, directors and managers may face pressure from members to restructure the cooperative's investment portfolio, even at the risk of lower expected returns (Cook 1995).

Fourthly, a control problem occurs when the interests of a cooperative's members and its management diverge, often presenting as a cooperative grows in size (Staatz 1987).

Finally, the influence cost problem describes a scenario in which members attempt to modify the operations of a cooperative in favor of their benefit. As cooperatives compete with powerful industrial conglomerates and deteriorating capital markets, the threat of property rights problems further puts into question the viability of cooperatives. However, approaches to overcoming such obstacles may be found in analyzing international examples of agricultural cooperatives.




Across the world, cooperatives have taken hold of the agricultural sector to produce impressive results in favor of farmers— both big and small. The success of early South African agricultural cooperatives was heavily determined by government support, including subsidized loans for commercial farmers and agricultural marketing services (Ortmann and King 2007). Throughout Brazil, cooperatives facilitate the accessibility of technological advancements and crucial veterinary operations to livestock producers who are otherwise unable to employ such services (Dias and Teles 2018).

In an impressive case study, the Bangladesh Milk Producers Cooperative Union Limited (BMPCUL) provides a guaranteed market characterized by restricted price fluctuations, minimized risks, and reliable economic revenue. BMPCUL additionally offers training services and financial loan programs to offset initial input costs for small dairy farmers. Moreover, BMPCUL leases pastured land from the government for the purpose of grass cultivation and cattle grazing, a reportedly vital cooperative resource among Bangladesh farmers—the majority of whom are landless (Sultana, Ahmed, and Shiratake 2020). Though agricultural cooperatives are not without limitations, their transformative capacity remains evident as we turn toward California’s Central Coast.

**The prosperous Central Coast citrus and strawberry industries of today owe much of their success to the history of cooperatives. As early as the late 19th century, groups such as the California Fruit Growers Exchange, today known as Sunkist Growers, emerged to improve the profitability of citrus farmers under their cooperative.**

Some of Sunkist’s most notable achievements include their negotiations with railroad companies that ultimately provided growers with reliable distribution channels and access to global markets (Hartig 2001).

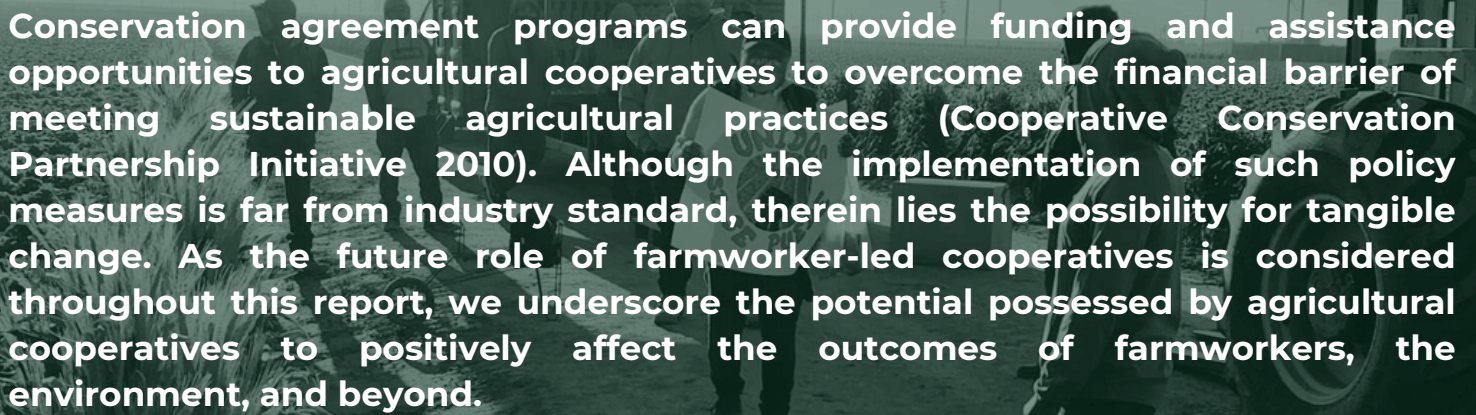


As strawberry farming became increasingly popular in California at the turn of the 20th century, cooperatives were established throughout the Central Coast to assist small farmers in production, marketing, and technical needs. Naturipe, formerly known as the Central California Berry Growers Association, equipped its predominantly Japanese members with bargaining power to effectively market and distribute their strawberry crop amidst widespread anti-Asian sentiment. (Wilhelm and Sagen 1974; Parsons 1997).

Following World War II internment of Japanese Americans, Mexican farmers rapidly replaced the once Japanese-dominated workforce. In response, cooperatives urged institutions, such as the University of California, to provide language inclusive training within their agricultural outreach programs to adequately support the changing demographic of farmers (Wells 1990). Agricultural cooperatives played a vital role in developing the Central Coast's robust citrus and strawberry industries, but have since reduced their former presence.

Today, efforts to support Central Coast small farmers largely target land access. The high cost of land in coastal California has deprived small farmers in the region of the opportunity to purchase agricultural land, resulting in a commercial-scale producer monopoly that further exacerbates land inaccessibility (Calo and Master 2016). One remedy to this barrier may be found in utilizing conservation easements and agreements to secure agricultural land for small farmers while reaching environmental sustainability goals.

Although agricultural activity is presently responsible for a significant portion of greenhouse gas emissions, conservation easements can include provisions that require landowners to implement sustainable land management practices—such as soil conservation measures, water conservation techniques, and habitat restoration procedures—to reduce environmental harm across the food system (Rodegerdts 1998). In leasing land to cooperatives under conservation easements, land trusts may safeguard natural resources and promote the long-term sustainability of agricultural operations, while simultaneously enabling small farmers to confidently establish their agricultural operations with secure and long-term tenure.



Conservation agreement programs can provide funding and assistance opportunities to agricultural cooperatives to overcome the financial barrier of meeting sustainable agricultural practices (Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative 2010). Although the implementation of such policy measures is far from industry standard, therein lies the possibility for tangible change. As the future role of farmworker-led cooperatives is considered throughout this report, we underscore the potential possessed by agricultural cooperatives to positively affect the outcomes of farmworkers, the environment, and beyond.

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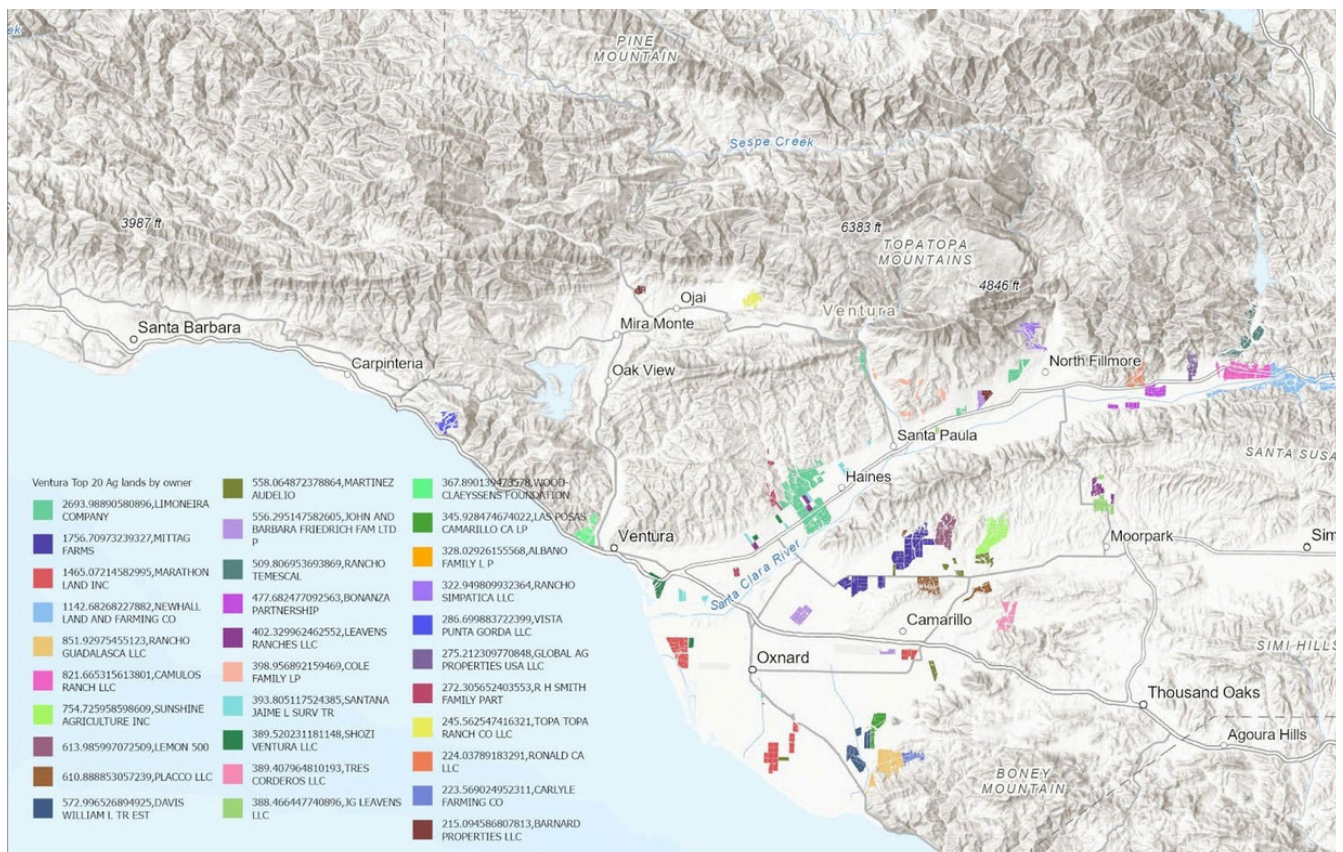
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# PART VI: ANALYSIS OF FARMLAND OWNERSHIP IN VENTURA COUNTY

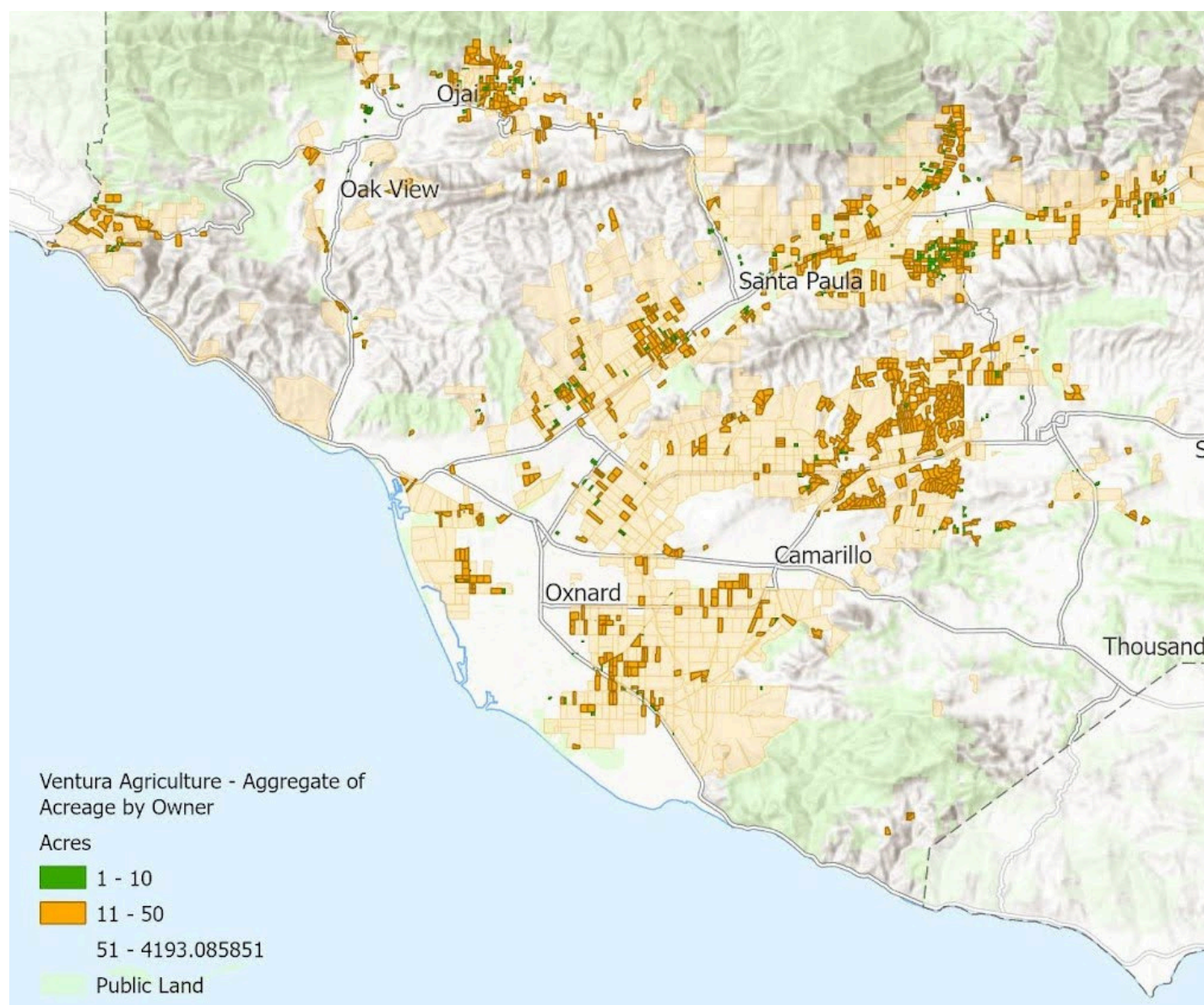
We purchased data from the Ventura County Tax Assessor's Office on the ownership of all agricultural land in Ventura County. We worked with GreenInfo Network, a public interest geospatial analysis organization, to map farmland ownership.

Below are the top 20 largest owners of farmland in Ventura County. As seen in the legend, they are overwhelmingly held by limited liability corporations that make it hard to see the true ownership of this land. Very few of these LLCs are recognizable public retail brands or major agricultural employers in the county, but many are likely subsidiaries of other corporations or land holding companies rented to agricultural operators.



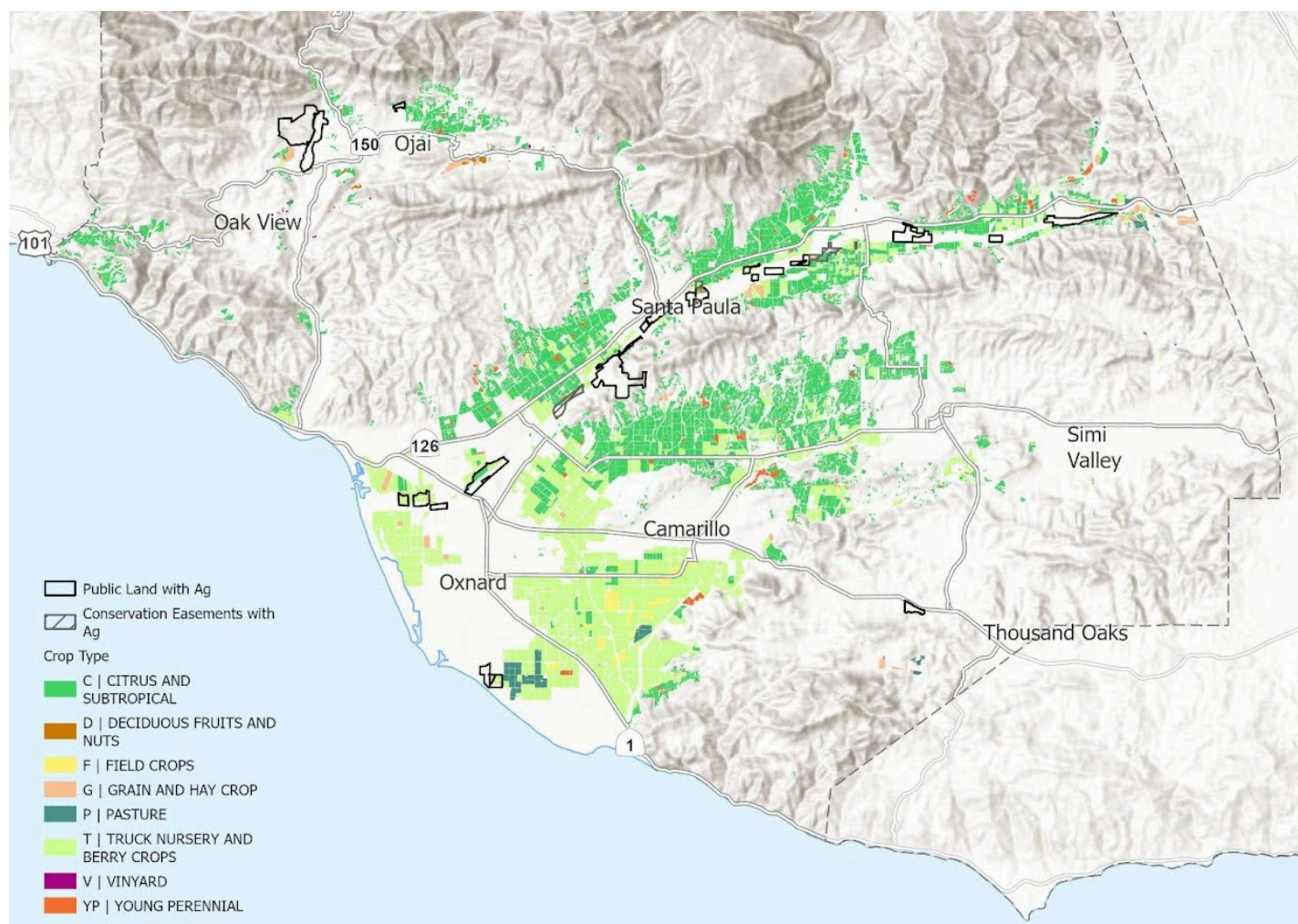
Agricultural land in Ventura County as in many other parts of the country is heavily concentrated in large corporate landowners. Large parcels of land are expensive to purchase and make it hard for beginning farmers, farmers of color, and current farmworkers to afford the purchase price without being part of a larger organization such as a cooperative or land trust with access to institutional capital. However, pockets of small-scale farming continue to exist throughout the region.

Parcels of farmland under 10 acres, which are very small farms at the size that beginning farmers might be able to access, are primarily located in the Santa Clara Valley, near the citrus and avocado growing towns of Fillmore and Santa Paula, as well as the Ojai Valley where there is a greater concentration of boutique and organic agriculture. Medium-sized farms from 11-50 acres that could allow a cooperative to reach scale are also common in the Santa Clara and Ojai Valleys, as well as the Somis area between Camarillo and Moorpark. Large-scale parcels of land over 50 acres dominate the Oxnard plain, where the majority of farmworkers in Ventura County work in labor-intensive row crops like strawberries.



Our research shows that one of the greatest potential opportunities for land access for a farmworker cooperative could be in collaboration with public or nonprofit conservation organizations. Ventura County has large amounts of land owned by environmental conservancies, who are transforming hundreds of acres of land in some of the largest restoration projects in California, such as the Ormond Beach Wetlands and the Santa Clara River. Once these restoration projects are completed, they will open public access to green space to nearby working-class immigrant communities such as Oxnard, Port Hueneme, Santa Paula, and Fillmore. However, significant parts of this land are currently being leased for farming operations. Regenerative agriculture buffering environmentally sensitive habitat such as river watersheds and coastal wetlands can reduce pesticide and fertilizer runoff and improve the quality of local green space.

Land trusts could lease or purchase important agricultural land buffering recreational green space, and reduce the cost of farmland by utilizing easements that require regenerative farming practices on the land. A farmworker cooperative bordering public land could also provide enhanced green space access through community-oriented educational programming about sustainable agriculture or offering public trails through the farm property that connect with trails in the park or preserve.



# PART VI: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our organizations participated in local and statewide policy development processes related to the use of agricultural land in Ventura County and California. The County of Ventura developed the Resilient Agricultural Lands Initiative, a strategy to preserve farmland in the region through strengthening the viability of farming and reducing pressures for farmland to be converted into other uses. CAUSE, MICOP, and Lideres Campesinas participated in this process and provided comments that influenced the RALI plan to not just preserve the status quo of agricultural production, but advance economic equity in serving the interests of farmworkers as well as farm owners and expand opportunities for transitions of land ownership. Irene de Barraicua, one of our project leads, also was selected to serve on the state of California's Agricultural Land Equity Task Force, led by California's Strategic Growth Council, which is currently developing policy recommendations for state agencies and lawmakers to advance equitable access to farmland for communities of color, tribal communities, and farmworkers.

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## **OBJECTIVE G**

*SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW FARMS AND FARMERS TO PROVIDE DIVERSITY AND LONG-TERM RESILIENCY IN THE LOCAL AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY.*

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### **STRATEGY 2E**

Establish a program targeted to support succession planning, new farmers, employee-owned businesses, and existing farmworkers and employees in accessing land and securing equitable land tenure, with a focus on turnover of local land ownership and facilitating land ownerships to family or BIPOC and small farm businesses.

#### **Actions:**

- Assess needs of beginning and immigrant farmers, currently in the County or interested in starting farming operations in the County, for land access, technical assistance and financial assistance. Research and understand the current landscape of land access and tenure in the region, including the challenges and barriers that farmers, farmworkers and employees face.
- Explore incubation programs in the model of the *Agriculture and Land Based Training Association (ALBA)* in the Salinas Valley and how that might inform a similar program in Ventura County.
- Review local regulations that may be impacting family/local succession of agricultural lands.
- Develop robust succession planning resources to aid current landowners in pro-active solutions that consider land conservation and economic vitality in their transition plans.
- Explore the idea of partnerships with land trusts and conservancies who could make land available to former farmworkers in order to meet environmental and social equity goals.
- Develop a clear mission and goals for the program, and identify specific strategies and actions that will help you achieve those goals.
- Track outcomes and follow-up actions of the Robert Wood Johnson funded work of CAUSE, MICOP, and Lideres Campesinas to explore the potential for farmworkers to develop collective forms of land management such as agricultural land trusts or cooperatives in the County. Using data from their work, assess the various barriers to land tenure and management facing farmworkers, and create policies and/or initiatives to address those barriers.
- Work with the **Ag Roundtable** and community stakeholders to advocate for policies and regulations that support equitable land access and tenure.
- Consider offering financial assistance or other resources to help new farmers and farmworkers get started, such as low-interest loans or grants.
- Continue to foster a supportive and inclusive community of farmers, farmworkers and stakeholders to provide support and resources for those working to access land and secure equitable land tenure.

**Potential Funding Sources:** USDA, ag lenders, niche lenders that help support new farmer operations such as California FarmLink



MICOP, CAUSE, and Lideres Campesinas developed a steering committee of farmworker leaders from all three organizations that assessed different options for policy recommendations to address some of the barriers they saw in preventing the development of farmworker cooperatives. The steering committee created the name Comité MILPA (Misión Independencia Logrando Poder y Aprendizaje) or in English, the MILPA Committee, with the acronym standing for Mission Independence Achieving Power and Learning. They voted on the following priority policy recommendations:


### **Top Priority Policies:**

#### **First Opportunity to Purchase Ordinance:**

Cities across the United States faced with affordable housing crises are developing Tenant/Community Opportunity to Purchase Ordinances (TOPA/COPA) that require owners of large multifamily housing complexes to offer first right of refusal to current tenants and nonprofit/public agencies when they list their properties for sale. A similar principle could be applied in communities trying to conserve valuable prime farmland and enhance social, economic, and environmental equity. When farmland is sold within the local jurisdiction, the seller could be required to first offer it to existing workers on the farm as well as employee-owned cooperatives, land trusts, and conservation organizations.

#### **Succession Planning for Farmers:**

The small farmer population is aging across the United States, and many legacy family farmers are finding that their children are not interested in continuing the family business. Instead, large corporations and investors are purchasing the land of retiring family farmers. One policy included in Ventura County's RALI strategy that our farmworker steering committee viewed as a priority was for the county to provide assistance with succession planning for small farmers nearing retirement, and encourage sale or donation to small and beginning farmers, farmers of color, former farmworkers, and cooperatives, conservancies and land trusts.






## **Support with Permitting for Cooperatives**

Navigating the permitting process is challenging for any beginning business or nonprofit, but particularly for alternative structures such as employee-owned cooperatives. Cooperatives that might require on-site member housing, food processing facilities, community meeting space, or public access and educational programming might especially experience difficulty with permitting. Farmworkers seeking to develop their own alternative model of agriculture face additional barriers related to language and literacy, immigration legal status, and technology access. Local or state governments could provide staff to assist with these permitting processes or develop streamlined processes for farmworkers seeking to start their own cooperative farm.

## **Second-Tier Priority Policies**

### **Funding to Transition to Organic**

Organic farming offers many environmental and health benefits to agricultural communities, but can come at a higher cost. Small beginning farmers can earn more for organic certified produce, but while transitioning land that has been farmed conventionally for many years, organic certification is not available during a transitional period while toxic chemical residues remain in the soil. Local, state, or federal funds could support small and beginning farmers during this transition as an incentive to convert environmentally damaging farming practices to more beneficial ones. With limited funds, this could be targeted towards key geographic areas such as adjacent to public parks and green space, homes or schools, which could also provide benefits of making innovative organic farms accessible near communities for education and other programming.






### **Requiring Farmland Preservation in New Development**

Across the country, farmland is being converted into residential, commercial, and industrial uses. This is often sprawl development of tracts of large single family homes or large warehouses for heavy-duty trucking of goods through rural areas. This can result in negative environmental impacts and a reduction of land available for public green space or open space. Large-scale conversions of farmland could be required by permitting agencies or community benefits agreements to set aside a percentage of land to remain in agriculture and be used for socially beneficial purposes such as being donated to a land trust, conservancy, community garden, or farmworker cooperative.


### **Department of Agricultural Equity**

A Department of Agricultural Equity within local, state, or federal government could achieve many of the goals above. It would provide dedicated staffing to advance social, economic, and environmental justice for farmworkers, small and diverse farmers, and agricultural communities. This could include initiatives to support the development of farmworker cooperatives, conserving agricultural land and opening new opportunities for land stewardship to farmers of color, and investing in regenerative agricultural practices that protect the health of the environment and residents of rural communities. This agency could also help make existing programs within agencies such as county agricultural commissioner offices, CDFA or USDA more equitable and accessible to people of color, women, immigrant, and indigenous populations.





# PART VII: CONCLUSION



Despite barriers to realizing a vision of collective land stewardship led by farmworkers, many opportunities are aligning as change is dawning on the agricultural and conservation worlds. Organizations dedicated to preserving natural ecosystems are seeing the need to advance racial and economic justice and see human life as part of nature. The agricultural community is questioning what the next generation of farming will look like and how current farmworkers can be part of that future. Farmworker leaders are envisioning new forms of farming where they can have greater autonomy and dignity, healthier work in harmony with the land, and enjoy more of the fruits of their labor.

These intersections create possibilities to not just advance a better economic future for farmworkers, but improve green space access for surrounding communities. Agricultural cooperatives and land trusts can break down the modern binary between public conservation land and private industrial agriculture, by stewarding land as caretakers in ways that nourish people with quality food, create a healthy environment for rural communities, and sustain the livelihoods of those whose labor feeds the world.

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