

**POLICY BRIDGE**

# Land equity in California: Challenges and opportunities across the policy landscape

Sean F. Kennedy<sup>1,\*</sup>  and Camille Frazier<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the State of California has enacted several policies and programs intended to improve land access for the State's socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. This policy bridge provides a brief overview of factors shaping land ownership and access in California before describing 4 recently enacted initiatives demonstrating how the State has operationalized farmer and land equity through legislative, policy, and programmatic mechanisms. These actions are grounded in effective organizing among non-State organizations and demonstrate an emerging commitment to both procedural and distributive forms of justice. While the long-term results of these recent developments remain to be seen, they demonstrate an evolving commitment among diverse State and non-State entities to understand and address systemic inequality in agricultural land access and tenure in California.

**Keywords:** Land equity, Land justice, Agriculture, California, Food systems

**Introduction**

Stable and secure land tenure is vital in achieving long-term prosperity for California's farmers, a robust food system, and healthy natural and working lands (Richardson, 2015). Like much of the United States, however, California's history has been characterized by inequitable access to land, especially for Indigenous communities who have been dispossessed of their traditional territory and others experiencing marginalization around the intersection of race, class, gender, and other identities (Huntsinger and Diekmann, 2010; Minkoff-Zern et al., 2011). This dispossession has had and continues to have long-standing impacts on communities that extend beyond the loss of the land itself, including the loss of natural resources of value, lack of access to affordable and reliable governmental services, and forced relocation to areas with fewer or lower quality natural resources (Horst et al., 2021).

Recently, the State of California has taken up the issue of inequity in agricultural land access and stable tenure. These State efforts exist alongside, yet are separate from, recent Federal programs such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Increasing Land, Credit, and Market Access grant program (USDA, 2023). In this article, we discuss 4 recent actions by the State of California that address land access and equity in the agricultural sector: (1) the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) Program, (2) the Farmer Equity Act (AB 1348), (3) the 30×30 California initiative, and (4) the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force. Both authors have been

closely involved in the establishment and administration of the California Land Equity Task Force, and as such, this policy bridge offers a perspective from within the unfolding work of the State.

This descriptive policy bridge aims to identify ongoing processes to advance land equity objectives across California while highlighting opportunities for future action and research. We begin with a brief overview of the complex and intersecting drivers of agricultural land inequity in California. We then examine the 4 State policy mechanisms noted above and explore the ways different conceptions of justice, such as distributive and procedural justice, inform alternative yet potentially complementary pathways for advancing land equity objectives across the State. We conclude by briefly describing the confluence of State and non-State actors that have made agricultural land equity a priority.

**Trends in agricultural land access and ownership**

For over 2 centuries, State-backed expropriation of land coupled with inherited wealth disparities, historically unjust lending practices, and limited access to support services have produced profound inequities in land access in California, as elsewhere in the United States (Horst et al., 2021). These historical processes intersect with contemporary dynamics to exacerbate existing and create new contours of inequity (Minkoff-Zern et al., 2011; Carlisle, 2014; Sowerwine Getz and Peluso, 2015; Calo, 2018; Fairbairn, 2020; Shoemaker, 2021). These inequalities are reflected in the USDA's 2017 Census of Agriculture. In California today, white producers operate over 94% of farms (66,439 farms) and own over 97% of farmland

<sup>1</sup> California Strategic Growth Council, Sacramento, CA, USA

\* Corresponding author:  
Email: [sean.kennedy@sgc.ca.gov](mailto:sean.kennedy@sgc.ca.gov)

(23,801,206 acres), compared to 15.6% and 12% for Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish producers, 6.6 and 3.2 for Asian producers, 3% and 2.5% American Indian or Alaska Native producers, and 0.9% and 0.5% for Black or African American producers, respectively (USDA, 2017a). Women and BIPOC producers represent 37% and 9% of all farmers in the state, respectively (USDA, 2017a, 2017b).<sup>1</sup>

Recent survey data suggests that current demographics are shifting at the national level, posing new opportunities and challenges. Of the 4,344 respondents to the 2022 National Young Farmers Survey who were under the age of 40 and actively farming, around 64% identified as “female, nonbinary, or a gender other than cisgender male” (Ackoff et al., 2022, p. 16). Of these respondents, almost 80% identify as “White or European descent” (Ackoff et al., 2022, p. 19). These numbers provide insight into the future of farming. Nationally, an estimated 70% of U.S. farmland will change hands in the next 20 years, and many family operations do not have a next generation skilled in or willing to continue farming (National Institute of Food and Agriculture [NIFA], n.d.). But, for beginning farmers who have been systematically excluded from land ownership, purchasing land is a primary challenge. As noted in the National Young Farmers Survey, BIPOC farmers face particular barriers to finding and maintaining access to affordable agricultural land. While 59% of all survey respondents answered that finding affordable land to buy was “very or extremely challenging” for BIPOC farmers, the percentage rose to 65 (Ackoff et al., 2022, p. 8). Compared with 54% of all respondents, 75% of Black farmers said they currently need more access to land, whether to buy or lease (Ackoff et al., 2022).

These differences have far-reaching consequences. Land access is a central element of one’s ability to generate and accumulate wealth from agricultural production, and recent scholarship has pointed to billions in lost wealth for Indigenous and Black communities who have faced centuries of government-enacted dispossession (Farrell et al., 2021; Reznickova, 2023). Importantly, it is not just monetary wealth that is lost when ties to land are severed but also other forms of well-being, including cultural belonging and ecological relations of care. As land ownership characteristics are a significant predictor of economic decision-making and conservation practices, land ownership also directly impacts the ecological sustainability of agricultural practices and farmers’ ability to respond to climate change risks (Macaulay and Butsic, 2017; Petersen-Rockney et al., 2021). As noted in the 2022 National Young Farmers Survey Report, “land ownership provides the security critical for farmers’ long-term

investments in soil health, infrastructure, and irrigation. It enables them to farm in deep relationship with the land and to build financial equity. The stability that comes from land ownership can also have immense impacts on farmer mental health and resiliency in the face of the many challenges of farming, such as climate change” (Ackoff et al., 2022, p. 33).

Given the negative consequences of insecure land tenure, increasing equitable access to affordable and ecologically sustainable agricultural lands is foundational to interrupting existing trends and moving toward a more just and sustainable food system. Below, we provide a brief overview of some of the primary drivers of land inequity in California: historical injustices, land financialization and consolidation, governance structures, and ideologies that justify disparities. We then turn to how the State has begun to address these histories and work toward solutions through the policymaking process.

### Drivers of land inequity

The current inequities in land access have deep and complex historical roots. The State of California was founded on the violent removal of California Native Americans from their lands and continued forms of discrimination and dispossession, as formally recognized in Governor Gavin Newsom’s apology issued in 2019 (Executive Order N-15-19). A series of State-backed Federal policies, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Minkoff-Zern et al., 2011) to the Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920, barred Asian immigrants from buying and leasing farmland (Suzuki, 2004). As elsewhere in the United States, Black farmers have faced centuries of discriminatory practices by both State and Federal agencies and have faced disproportionate impacts of farmland consolidation (Gilbert et al., 2002a). The Bracero program set the stage for the State’s current reliance on the exploited labor of migrants from Mexico and Central America (Mitchell, 2010).

While a detailed discussion of the complex ways in which these historical factors have shaped and continue to shape land inequities is beyond the scope of this particular article, our intent here is to frame land inequity as a multifaceted process with distinct histories and implications for particular groups across California. In the following sections, we highlight the ways these historical policies and processes—and others—intersect with contemporary dynamics to both reinforce and potentially reshape current patterns of land inequity.

### Financialization and consolidation

In recent decades, accessing farmland has become increasingly difficult in California. Since the financial crisis of 2007–2008, speculative investments in agricultural land across the United States have risen substantially, covering approximately 25% of all acquisitions (Holt-Giménez, 2017; see also Fairbairn, 2020). This process has significantly increased the cost of agricultural land. Since 2018, the value of farm real estate in California has increased by 28.3% (USDA, 2022). In 2022, the average cost of California farm real estate was \$12,000 per acre, an increase of 10.1% from the year prior (USDA, 2022, p. 9). The cost of

1. It is important to note that existing forms of data collection and analysis result in conflicting demographic estimates. For example, the California Department of Food and Agriculture’s “2020 Equity Report” states that women account for “less than a quarter of all farmers in the state” (CDFA, 2020, p. 5). The Report notes many challenges with gathering and interpreting demographic data, from the inadequate analysis of urban agriculture to the complexities of racial identities and census categories (CDFA, 2020, pp. 7–8; see also Gilbert et al., 2002b).

agricultural real estate has outpaced the growth in sales value. Between 2020 and 2021, the total sales value of California agriculture increased by 3.6% (California Department of Food and Agriculture [CDFA], 2022, p. 2). These trends have only worsened as elite interests in acquiring farmland for uses other than agriculture have challenged existing regulations meant to protect agrarian lands and communities. The buy-up of thousands of acres of protected agricultural land in California's Solano County by tech industry executives looking to build a future city is but one recent and well-publicized example (Dougherty and Griffith, 2023).

A related challenge is land consolidation, which reduces the availability of smaller-sized farms suitable for typically resource-constrained beginning farmers and leads to greater specialization in operations and products, factors that disproportionately impact socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in California (Shoemaker, 2021, pp. 1726–1728). Statewide, the largest 5% of properties—with “property” defined as all parcels owned by a given landowner—account for 50.6% of California cropland. The smallest 84% of properties comprise just 25% of cropland (Macaulay and Butsic, 2017). This ongoing process of consolidation is the result of both recent and historical processes. European occupation not only brought violence and displacement but also shifted the social relations underpinning the forms and functions of agricultural practices. California's plantation-style agriculture emerged from the large Spanish land grants of the mid-18th to mid-19th centuries, laying the foundation for the “system of large, corporate-owned farms run on wage labor” that continues today (Matsumoto, 2021, n.p.).

### **Governance structures**

New forms of environmental and food system governance also affect access to land. For example, increased uncertainty regarding water availability and associated policy responses can present significant challenges to small and beginning farmers without established water rights (Espinoza et al., 2023). The historic passage of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) in 2014 set forth a statewide framework to help protect groundwater resources over the long term, potentially exacerbating land scarcity by reducing irrigated agricultural land in the coming years (Espinoza et al., 2023). Stringent food safety standards—which can require high compliance costs—impede diversification and serve as barriers to land access, particularly for small farmers (Carlisle et al., 2022).

Agricultural regulations can be uneven and under-enforced, differentially impacting immigrant family farms while failing to protect those for whom the laws were initially intended. In Siskiyou County, for example, restrictions on the cultivation of cannabis have negatively impacted Hmong American farmers in particular (Polson and Petersen-Rockney, 2019). Agricultural labor laws prohibiting labor sharing discriminate against and challenge small Southeast Asian refugee farmers who rely on cultural practices of labor reciprocity and unpaid help from extended family and clan networks to sustain their economic viability (Sowerwine Getz and Peluso, 2015). As

these examples suggest, the shifting contours of climate, labor, and food safety legislation and their uneven enforcement are more likely to adversely affect BIPOC producers and can thereby further exacerbate existing inequities.

### **Ideologies that justify and reproduce disparities**

At times, efforts intended to address land access remain anchored in ideologies that exacerbate the very challenges they seek to address. Adam Calo (2018) argues that knowledge deficit interventions are often grounded in individualistic and entrepreneurial measures and, therefore, fail to resolve struggles in acquiring the necessary start-up capital, securing markets for their produce, and identifying or acquiring suitable farmland. Beginning farmers' struggles stem not from a lack of knowledge but from the political economy of an agricultural system that encourages consolidation, global market chains, and economies of scale (Calo, 2018). In addition, the beginning farmer movement can often exacerbate racial and economic disparities by perpetuating the “yeoman myth,” a conception of farming as an “individualistic, heroic endeavor, typified by anachronistic white landowning families who overcome hardship through grit, perseverance, and marketing ingenuity” (Calo, 2020, p. 14). By ignoring the power structures that undergird this myth, efforts to support beginning farmers may fail to provide the forms of entitlements and land redistribution necessary for a more inclusive farming workforce (Calo, 2020).

These continued disparities, even among those actively reshaping agricultural production, suggest that policy-makers have a critical role in generating a more sustainable and equitable food system in California. With this in mind, the following section outlines 4 key developments recently enacted by the State of California to actively address the issue of land inequity: the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation program, the Farmer Equity Act of 2017, 30×30 California, and the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force.

### **The policy landscape**

The following analysis highlights emerging focus areas across diverse State mechanisms (programmatic, legislative, and advisory) and entities (California Department of Food and Agriculture, California Strategic Growth Council [SGC], and California Natural Resources Agency [CNRA]). While not intended as a comprehensive inventory of State actions, we note an increasing commitment to forms of justice that are both distributive, meaning they work toward the equitable distribution of government resources, as well as procedural, in that they bring citizens into the governance process (Schlosberg, 2007).

#### ***Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation program***

The Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation program, or SALC, was established by the SGC in 2014 (SGC, 2023a). SALC was created to complement SGC's Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities Program (AHSC), which uses revenue from the State's cap-and-trade program to

limit sprawling development patterns by supporting high-density infill development near transit. SALC limits sprawl more directly by protecting agricultural lands in peri-urban areas at risk of urban development through the purchase of agricultural conservation easements, development of agrarian land strategy plans, and other mechanisms designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) and support a more resilient agricultural sector. Since its first round of awards in 2015, the SALC Program has awarded \$373 million to projects and indefinitely conserved more than 194,000 acres of agricultural land in 36 counties.

SALC provides 3 types of awards (SGC, 2023a). The first, planning grants, support the development of local and regional land use policies, economic development strategies, and plans to preserve critical agricultural land. In many instances, plans may also recognize and protect the environmental cobenefits of conserving agricultural lands. The second, Agricultural Conservation Acquisition grants, are used to permanently protect strategically located, highly productive, and critically threatened agricultural land via the purchase of permanent agricultural conservation easements and fee title purchases. Finally, Capacity and Project Development grants expand organizational capacity to develop agricultural conservation acquisition projects.

Recent changes to the SALC program exhibit a distributive approach to achieving land equity. Over time, the program has increasingly prioritized funding for projects benefiting socially disadvantaged groups to address inequities in the distribution of State funds. The 2023 Guidelines, for example, state that: “Acquisition projects that provide secure land tenure to a beginning or Veteran farmer or rancher, a California Native American tribe, a farmer or rancher who is a member of a Federally recognized or non-federally recognized California Native American tribe on the contact list maintained by the Native American Heritage Commission, or to a farmer or rancher that is a resident of a priority population, as defined in these Guidelines, will be prioritized for funding and may receive one hundred percent funding for eligible costs” (SGC, 2023a, p. 10). The selection criteria for the capacity grants allocate 30% of the scoring based on “[t]he extent to which the proposal will advance equity and opportunity by providing meaningful benefits to a priority population or increasing new, Veteran, or Native American farmer or rancher access or tribal access to State funding for agricultural conservation acquisitions” (SGC, 2023a, p. 20).

This change resulted from public feedback about the inaccessibility of SALC funds among BIPOC and women farmers. In 2021, the Department of Conservation (DOC) and the SGC hosted a series of online listening sessions to gather feedback and ideas from the public regarding equity components of the SALC program (DOC, 2021). Input collected during the listening sessions informed several updates to the Round 9 SALC program guidelines explicitly intended to improve access and center equity in the program. Specific changes include applying investment targets program-wide (previously only applied to

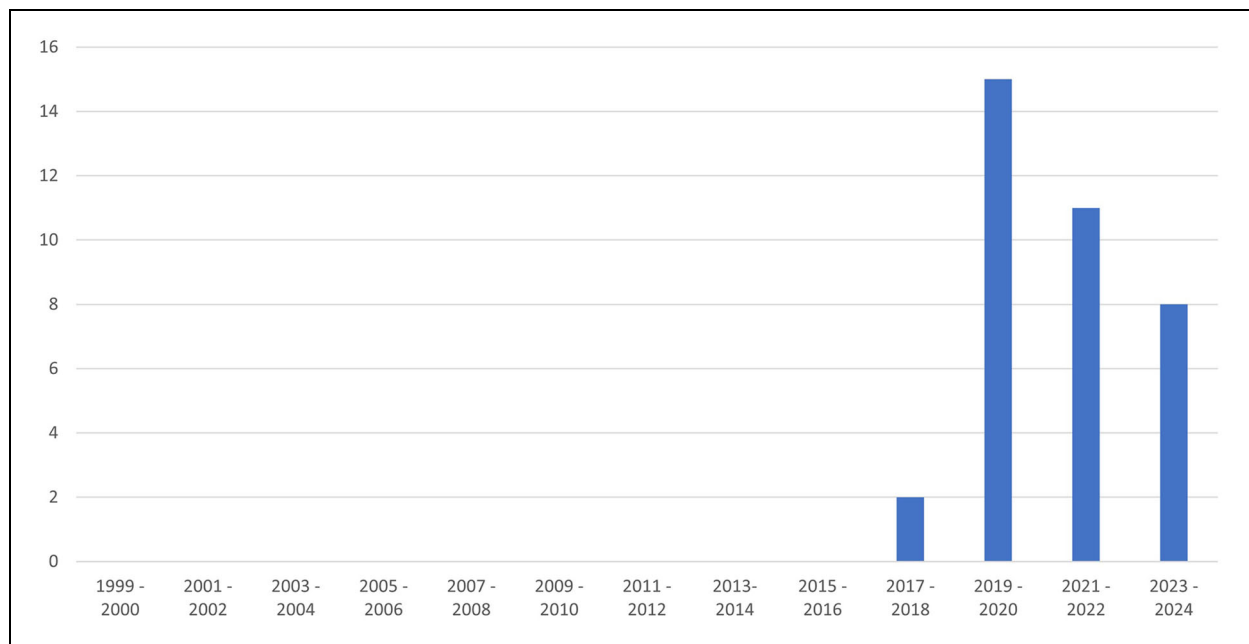
Acquisitions), supporting tribes in the development of 501(c)3 organizations to increase the avenues through which they can access the program, reducing the match requirement for easements from 25% to 10% to better provide access to the program in areas of the state where match funding is scarce, and providing 100% funding for planning applications that benefit priority populations (SGC, 2023b). To support beginning farmers and ranchers who have recently purchased or are leasing property, the definition of agricultural land was expanded to include properties available for sustained commercial agricultural production, even if not currently in production. These changes represent an effort by the State to address inequities through distributive means.

### ***The Farmer Equity Act of 2017 (AB 1348)***

In 1919, the California Legislature created a single department, the CDFA, responsible for protecting and promoting agriculture across the state. While the department’s charge was and still is focused heavily on pest management, in recent years, the CDFA programs have expanded in scope to provide a more extensive range of financial, educational, and technical support (CDFA, 2023a). The Specialty Crop Block Grant program, for example, is now administered to improve the benefit of the program for socially disadvantaged/beginning farmers and underserved communities (CDFA, 2020). Climate Smart Agriculture Programs, including the Healthy Soils Program, allow farmers to apply for funds directly rather than through a 501(c)3 organization (CDFA, 2023a).

In recent years, these programs have directed an increasing percentage of funds to “priority populations,” as required by Senate Bill 535 (Dé Leon, 2012) and Assembly Bill 1550 (Gomez, 2016). While socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers can significantly benefit from incentive programs and gain indirectly from grant programs that prioritize funding for socially disadvantaged groups, awareness of available resources and programs remains low (CDFA, 2020). In 2017, a growing recognition that these intended beneficiaries were either unfamiliar with or unable to access new CDFA programs, in combination with other policy shortcomings, led to the passage of the Farmer Equity Act by the California legislature (AB 1348, Aguiar-Curry, 2017).

The Farmer Equity Act was conceived by the California Farmer Justice Collaborative (CFJC), a group of BIPOC farmers and organizations across the state, which mobilized a coalition of around 20 organizations to support the bill. The Act amends the California Food and Agriculture Code with the aim of including a more diverse set of farmers in the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of food and agriculture laws at the CDFA. It formally recognizes historical inequities regarding access to resources and information and directs the CDFA to better provide resources, outreach, technical assistance, and decision-making power to marginalized producers. While the Act acknowledges that “[f]armers of color have historically not had equitable access to land and other resources necessary to conduct farming in California” (Aguiar-Curry, 2017), its primary focus is on



**Figure 1. Bills referencing AB 1348 definition of “socially-disadvantaged farmers and ranchers” (California Legislative Information, n.d.).**

the inclusion of disadvantaged farmers in the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of food and agriculture laws, regulations, policies, and programs under the purview of the CDFA.

Significantly, the Act formally defines “Socially Disadvantaged Farmer and Rancher” and “Socially Disadvantaged Group” in the California Food and Agriculture Code. Under the Act, a “socially disadvantaged group” means a group whose members have been subjected to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice because of their identity as group members without regard to their individual qualities. As specified in the Act, these groups include “African Americans, Native Indians, Alaskan Natives, Hispanics, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders” (Aguiar-Curry, 2017). This definition has featured in subsequent legislation, with explicit references to “socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers” in 15, 11, and 8 bills in the 2019–2020, 2021–2022, and 2022–2023 legislative sessions, respectively (Figure 1).

As part of its effort to include socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in its policies and programs, the Act establishes a Farm Equity Office and Farm Equity Advisor position within CDFA’s Executive Office. In 2020, the Farm Equity Advisor released the “2020 Farmer Equity Report” (CDFA, 2020). The report identifies 4 challenges facing socially disadvantaged producers: land tenure, language, engagement with the agricultural industry and boards and commissions, and access to available resources and programs. The report includes specific recommendations for CDFA to address each challenge. Recommendations specifically related to land tenure include identifying opportunities for cross-promotion of CDFA programs with other programs, loans, and other resources that assist socially disadvantaged groups, recognizing and incorporating land tenure issues and leased land in CDFA’s

programs and policies, and enhancing intergovernmental agency collaboration by including opportunities to build awareness of land tenure issues to leverage funding, programs, and land tenure policies that will better serve socially disadvantaged farmers and their communities.

In September 2023, the CDFA released a Racial Equity Action Plan (REAP) to establish goals and strategies for addressing the recommendations in the Equity Report (CDFA, 2023b). Importantly, the REAP calls for internal changes to CDFA as well as changes to its programs and engagements with producers. It establishes outcomes, goals, and actions to address a range of equity challenges at all levels of the CDFA and its policies and programs. Many of the REAP’s objectives and actions are focused on distributive mechanisms; for example, it calls for establishing technical assistance for all CDFA programs to ensure greater success rates among socially disadvantaged producers in obtaining CDFA grants and loans. This kind of programmatic change has the potential to increase socially disadvantaged producers’ access to the capital necessary to purchase or lease agricultural land.

Alongside the goal of more equitably distributing government resources, the REAP marks an important shift within the CDFA because it centers procedural changes as key to achieving farmer equity. For example, it calls for the CDFA to “formalize the BIPOC Producer Advisory committee and Small-scale producer advisory committees” and to begin the process of creating a “formal Tribal Advisory Committee or other formal advisory structure that enables CA Native American tribes to advise, inform and guide CDFA programs and structures to increase access and percentage of funding going to CA Native American tribes” (CDFA, 2023b, n.p.). These new committees are advisory rather than decision-making, meaning that their control over the legislative process is limited. However,

one of the REAP's primary objectives is to "achieve racial diversity throughout CDFA at all levels, reflective of California's demographics" (CDFA, 2023b). The actions listed under this objective call for the CDFA to hire and retain a more diverse staff, with the goal of including BIPOC perspectives in the decision-making processes of the State.

The REAP was released only 2 months prior to the writing of this article, making it difficult to comment on the CDFA's implementation of the REAP and its effects. Still, it is important to highlight that the REAP's emphasis on both distributive and procedural forms of justice holds great potential to shift the existing contours of land inequity in the State.

### **30×30 California**

In October 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsom issued Executive Order N-82-20, establishing a State goal of conserving 30% of California's lands and coastal waters by 2030 (Newsom, 2020). Known as "30×30," the goal aims to accelerate the conservation of California lands and coastal waters through voluntary, collaborative action with partners across the state. California's 30×30 commitment is part of a national and global effort to increase biodiversity conservation, reflected in the Biden administration's America the Beautiful initiative, a nationwide effort launched in 2021 to restore and conserve 30% of lands and waters by 2030 (United States Department of the Interior, 2021).

In 2022, the CNRA released "Pathways to 30×30: Accelerating Conservation of California's Nature" ("Pathways"), which details strategies and opportunities for achieving the 30×30 target (CNRA, 2022a). "Pathways" is structured around 3 key objectives, included in Executive Order N-82-20: (1) protect and restore biodiversity; (2) expand access to nature; and (3) mitigate and build resilience to climate change. Each objective is accompanied by a series of conservation priorities, several of which directly involve land equity. The conservation priority of expanding access to nature, for example, includes protecting California Native American tribal ancestral lands for cultural practice, ceremony, tribal management, and subsistence hunting and harvesting. While the plan focuses primarily on conservation, the scope includes working landscapes under conservation easements, such as sustainably managed private grazing lands, ranches, and working forests with formal durable protections for biodiversity.

Agricultural land is more directly addressed in another CNRA report released concurrently with "Pathways" in 2022: the "Natural and Working Lands Climate Smart Strategy" (CNRA, 2022b). The "Strategy" outlines plans for advancing "climate smart" policies and programs and highlights "equity" as 1 of 7 core priorities. In the section on environmental justice, the authors prescribe the following actions: (1) protecting vulnerable communities, (2) addressing California's historical wrongs toward California Native Americans, (3) preserving and protecting traditional cultural resources and landscapes, (4) dismantling structural racism, (5) expanding economic

opportunity, (6) increasing access to nature, and (7) empowering communities (CNRA, 2022b, pp. 9–10).

The "Strategy" is broken into sections based on geographic regions, with specific recommendations and plans for action detailed in each (CNRA, 2022b). These regional reports include discussions of community engagement and ways to involve local citizens and agencies in the planning and decision-making process. While the specific mechanisms and outcomes are to be decided, both "Pathways" and the "Working and Natural Lands Climate Smart Strategy" center the goal of local participation in planning and implementation, thereby emphasizing a procedural approach to environmental justice.

In addition to broad objectives and principles, both "Pathways" and the "Natural and Working Lands Climate Smart Strategy" include several priority actions by State agencies related to tribal land equity, such as, "execute strategic land acquisitions" (CNRA, 2022a, p. 39). As part of the implementation of these priorities, the CNRA announced the Tribal Nature-Based Solutions Program in July 2023 (CNRA, 2023). The program funds projects that "focus on the following three categories: 1) Planning for multi-benefit nature-based solutions projects, 2) implementation of multi-benefit nature-based solutions projects, and 3) ancestral land return for the purpose of advancing multi-benefit nature-based solutions projects" (CNRA, 2023, p. 6). Whereas state policy previously emphasized consultation as its core obligation to tribal communities, the State now seeks to move beyond consultation in favor of actions to fund the direct acquisition and develop comanagement agreements that reflect a commitment to even deeper partnership. Through these and related actions, the State is actively seeking opportunities to support tribal management and acquisition of ancestral lands as part of government-wide land conservation initiatives.

### **California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force**

Despite increased State attention to issues of agricultural land equity in California over the past few years, those adversely affected by the history of land inequity continue to call for new approaches and solutions that promise more radical shifts toward achieving land equity. Advocacy organizations such as the Community Alliance with Family Farms call for more inclusive and equitable forms of consultation in stakeholder engagement that go beyond asking for input and disseminating information to create avenues for socially disadvantaged groups to influence decision-making (Community Alliance with Family Farmers [CAFF], 2022). Recent efforts like the CDFA's REAP hold promise, but it remains to be seen how well the State can and will implement prescribed solutions.

In 2022, the State Legislature established the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force to develop recommendations to equitably increase access to agricultural land for food production and traditional tribal agricultural uses. The Task Force builds on the State's commitment under the Farmer Equity Act (AB 1348, Aguiar-Curry, 2017) to ensure the inclusion of socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in the development, adoption, implementation,

and enforcement of food and agriculture laws, regulations, policies, and programs. Initially proposed by a coalition of agricultural non-profit organizations representing BIPOC and women producers, the Task Force is intended to serve as a forum to engage in collaborative conversation and visioning to facilitate progress toward greater equity in the food system.

Per the enabling statute (Ting, 2022), the Task Force consists of a regionally diverse group of up to 13 members, including native and tribal liaisons, a land trust representative, individuals with expertise in issues affecting socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, an individual with expertise in agricultural land acquisition and finance, a State Board of Food and Agriculture member, a farmworker representative, a beginning farmer, the CDFA Farm Equity Advisor, and an individual from the CDFA BIPOC Farmer Advisory Committee. Following a 3-month nomination and review period, in April 2023, the Strategic Growth Council, in consultation with the CDFA Farm Equity Advisor and the California Truth and Healing Council, appointed the 12 initial members to the Task Force. The first meeting was held in October 2023. Per the Budget, on or before January 1, 2026, the Task Force shall submit a report to the California Legislature and Governor that includes policy recommendations on addressing the agricultural land equity crisis.

As stated previously, the authors are directly involved in the work of the Task Force. While this involvement may influence our analysis, we nevertheless argue that the Task Force holds great potential to better understand and address historical inequities in land access across California. For one, the Task Force realizes the growing commitment within the State to incorporate BIPOC farmers and advocates within State procedures. Its role in this regard is limited, as the Task Force is an advisory rather than decision-making body. Still, the enabling legislation makes clear the State's intent for the Task Force to generate actionable policy recommendations to "equitably increase access to agricultural land for food production and traditional tribal agricultural uses" (Ting, 2022).

To this end, the Task Force's Charter includes objectives aimed at providing a nuanced understanding of and response to the current inequities in land access, including to "review diverse State and non-State projects and mechanisms to identify opportunities, challenges, and resources needed to advance equitable land access" (California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force, 2023, p. 2). This work, conducted in public by a diverse group of producers, tribal representatives, State actors, and community organizers, has the potential to increase awareness of existing challenges and provide actionable pathways toward equitably increasing access to agricultural land in California. At the very least, it opens a relatively uninhibited space within the workings of the State to imagine alternative and more just forms of agricultural land ownership, access, and use.

In addition to creating new opportunities for socially disadvantaged producers and aligned organizations to influence the decision-making process, the Task Force also creates opportunities for sustained GHGs reductions and

regenerative practices in the agricultural sector and food systems more generally. In December 2022, the Strategic Growth Council approved a staff recommendation to supplement the \$1 million one-time investment with an additional \$2.25 million from SGC's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund allocation. These funds will support the Agricultural Land Equity Research and Capacity Building Program, a new, one-time research and grant program with \$1 million in grant funding that provides policymakers and practitioners insight into the existing barriers and opportunities for equitable agricultural land access and tenure in California. The program is comprised of 2 components: (1) An action-oriented research program that links grantees with a third-party research provider that, at no cost to grantees, analyzes and reports on the barriers, bottlenecks, and pathways for secure land access and tenure that emerge during the grant performance period; and (2) Funding to practitioners to engage in planning, capacity building, and development activities that support secure land access among socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. The program aims to identify the barriers and pathways to equitable and secure agricultural land tenure while laying a foundation for equitable access to and secure tenure of rural and/or urban land for food and fiber production and traditional tribal agricultural uses in California through capacity building and pilot projects that can generate models for equitable and secure access to agricultural land.

## Conclusion

As scholars, advocacy groups, and policymakers have demonstrated, the impacts of consolidated agricultural land ownership among those who are already privileged are far-reaching and detrimental to the economic and ecological sustainability of the system as a whole. This also means that the solutions to land inequity and the continued disenfranchisement of socially disadvantaged groups in California are much more complex than a singular state mechanism could address. However, in detailing how recent State programs have directly engaged with the idea of equity, particularly land equity, this policy bridge demonstrates how the State is taking an active role in reenvisioning and reshaping the future of agricultural land ownership in California through programmatic, legislative, and advisory mechanisms.

While this policy bridge has focused on State efforts, it is important to acknowledge the decades-long work of advocacy groups and organizers in their struggles to address inequities in land access. In recent years, organizations such as the CFJC and the Community Alliance with Family Farms have called for greater attention to how California's history has systematically worked against the promise of farming for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (CFJC, 2023; CAFF, 2023). Advancing concepts of farmer and land equity, respectively, these groups acknowledge that addressing the land crisis in California will require a broad, deep, multisectoral collaboration requiring engagement among farmers, tribal governments and leaders, state legislators, agency officials, community leaders, landowners, and numerous others. These groups,

and their affiliates across the state, have played an outsized role in shaping many of the State responses outlined in this policy bridge, and their efforts will no doubt influence future responses to land inequities.

The 4 state efforts discussed above have been shaped by effective organizing and action among advocacy groups. These recent initiatives and their overlapping attention to procedural and distributive justice highlight ongoing and emergent attempts among diverse State institutions and elected officials to address historical and persistent patterns of inequity that continue to disenfranchise BIPOC and women farmers. These programs have different approaches to the role of the State, its various agencies, and their relationship to its diverse constituencies that might produce new conflicts and bottlenecks. For example, whereas the SALC program emphasizes distributional justice by emphasizing resource allocation to “socially-disadvantaged farmers and ranchers” and “priority populations,” the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force focuses on procedural justice. What is needed from here are deeper analyses of these policies and their emergent, on-the-ground effects, from a diversity of viewpoints.

However critical is the issue of land equity, achieving a truly just and sustainable food system will require system-wide shifts that are themselves dependent upon transforming broader structures of inequality. The food system is but one piece of a much larger political and socioeconomic puzzle that has and continues to marginalize some communities and interests while privileging others (Ayazi and Elsheikh, 2015). The policies discussed in this paper offer avenues to partially address these inequities and, in so doing, inspire and inform other actions aimed at transforming the U.S. food system and the broader structures that shape it. Given the centrality of land ownership in shaping economic and ecological practices, existing structures of inequity must be actively addressed and transformed.

### Competing interests

Sean F. Kennedy and Camille Frazier are employed by the California Strategic Growth Council and oversee the administration of the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force.

### Author contributions

Contributed to conception and design: SFK, CF.

Contributed to acquisition of data: SFK, CF.

Contributed to analysis and interpretation of data: SFK, CF.

Drafted and/or revised the article: SFK, CF.

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