

Agricultural and open space conservation bill introduced

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WASHINGTON ‐ A new bill introduced on Tuesday is meant to aid in the protection of thousands of acres of our nation's shrinking agricultural lands and open space.

Congressman Mike Thompson (D-Napa Valley) introduced the bill, which will permanently allow landowners to get significant tax deductions if they place a conservation easement on their property.

These conservation easements allow property owners to continue using the land, while protecting the land from future development.

"We've seen a 50-percent increase in conservation easements since Congress passed my provisions to enhance these tax benefits on a temporary basis in 2006," said Congressman Thompson.

If current development trends continue in California, another two million acres will be paved over by 2050, Thompson said. "It's time we made these protections permanent. By making sure that landowners can count on this program, we'll take a big step forward in preserving our agricultural lands and open spaces."

When landowners donate a conservation easement, they maintain ownership and management of the land and can pass the land on to their heirs, while forgoing their rights to develop the land in the future.

Conservation easements have historically been an effective tool for protecting farmland and open space, and Thompson anticipates this bill will enable more farmers and other property owners to conserve their land. The bill enjoys broad support from a grassroots coalition of farmers, and conservationists.

The tax provisions allow property owners to get a deduction of up to 100 percent of their adjusted gross income for 15 years.

These tax provisions have a long record of success. In August 2006, Congress passed provisions written by Thompson that enhanced the tax incentive for the donation of conservation easements by allowing landowners to deduct a larger share of their income over a longer period of time.

With these enhanced tax provisions, 535,000 more acres were put into trusts in the last two years, according to a survey by the Land Trust Alliance.

The first land protected by Thompson's provisions were in California's 1st District, which includes Lake County.

Andy Beckstoffer of Beckstoffer Vineyards gave a conservation easement on 89 acres of the historic To Kalon vineyard in Oakville just five days after the measure was signed into law.

The new bill currently has 93 cosponsors. Thompson is a member of the Ways and Means Committee, which has jurisdiction over all tax measures in Congress.