

Thompson: Tax code can green our country

Contributed by Congressman Mike Thompson
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When Earth Day was founded 39 years ago, it was generally assumed that environmental ideals and the tax code were completely unrelated from each other. But as we've learned over the last few years, using tax incentives can be a powerful tool to help green our economy and protect our natural resources.

For example, after Congress passed provisions to provide tax breaks for solar panels in 2005, there has been a 370-percent increase in solar panel installation in our country. Using the tax code to help generate environmental change can work.

For all of the success that the conservation movement has had over the years, there's still a lot more to be done.

In California, I'm especially concerned about the loss of open space and farm land. If current development trends continue in California, another two million acres will be paved over by 2050.

To put that in perspective – in the next 40 years we'll lose an area larger than the state of Delaware to development.

That's not just an empty statistic – every acre that is paved over is a significant loss of our heritage and our environmental bounty. But it's a tragedy that we can act now to prevent. That's why I've introduced legislation that provides strong financial incentives for property owners to keep their land free of urban development.

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. These easements also ease the tax burdens that might otherwise force people to sell family farms that have been passed down for generations.

Since Congress passed my provisions to enhance these tax benefits on a temporary basis in 2006, we've seen a 50-percent increase in conservation easements. With these enhanced tax provisions, 535,000 more acres were put into trusts in the last two years.

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, and ensuring that our children and grandchildren can enjoy the same trees and open vistas that we enjoy now.

Congressman Mike Thompson represents the First District – which includes Lake County – in the US House of Representatives.