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Thursday, June 2, 2005

Guest Opinion: Private land conservation a win-win solution

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Next year, for the first time in U.S. history, we will become a net importer of food. Think about all that means.

When our country was founded, 95 percent of its citizens were farmers. Now fewer than 1 percent of our citizens work in food production, reports Victor Davis Hanson of Tribune News Service.

Close connections between our food, the health of our land and the health of our families is what made our country great. No small amount of our success was due to the pioneering spirit of self-reliance and responsibility to land and community.

Now, globalization and urbanization are changing all that. As more people lose connections to our land and the food it produces, we will be poorer as a nation in many ways.

In southern Arizona, small groups of dedicated people are working together to protect those connections by preserving working landscapes.

A ranching family, working with Arizona Open Land Trust and Pima County, recently protected its land from development forever by selling to the county the right to develop 480 acres of its ranch.

This "conservation easement" is a contract that bars them, or anyone who buys the land, from ever developing it. The family also sold outright title to 9,500 acres to the county for conservation.

Not only is this the single largest private-land protection deal in county history, but it also allows the working cattle ranch to continue, as it has for more than 100 years.

The family stays on the 480-acre homestead and manages the 36,000-acre ranch, including federal and state grazing leases, under renewable contract with the county, but at the family's expense.

It's a win-win way to protect and manage land at the least expense to taxpayers over time, in one of the fastest-growing counties in the country, while keeping the ranching tradition alive.

But if Congress listens to recommendations of the Joint Committee on Taxation this June, such deals would be impossible. The committee is recommending elimination of the 25-year-old tax incentive for land conservation.

Currently, landowners who care about conservation and are willing to protect clean water and other important resources on their property have several options:

They can enter into a voluntary conservation easement, which protects these resources forever but allows families to continue to live on and farm the land and pass the property onto their children. Now they receive a tax deduction for the value of the development rights they give up.

- The Joint Committee proposes forbidding any deduction for voluntary conservation agreements if the landowner continues to live on the land. In all other cases, the donor could deduct only one-third of the value of the donation. This would effectively eliminate the tax incentives for charitable land donations.

They can choose to donate their land or sell it for less than its value. Landowners who do so qualify for a tax deduction.

- The Joint Committee would slash this incentive by limiting deductions to the price that the landowner originally paid for the property (their "basis"). This would make it extremely difficult for farmers, ranchers and others who have owned lands for decades to be able to afford to donate.

With state and federal budget deficits limiting government purchase of conservation land, private landowners have a critical role to play in conservation.

One of the best ways to conserve our natural legacy is through incentives to these owners. Private land conservation is working because it is voluntary, nonregulatory, respects private property rights and keeps land on the tax rolls.

In Pima County, this is protecting significant ecological landscapes as part of our own blueprint for the future, the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.

Yes, a few have tried to skirt the tax system - and have given conservation tax incentives a black eye. But instead of common-sense reforms to tighten the laws, some in Congress see an opportunity to cut off the tax break as a way to get a few more bucks to feed the federal budget.

But cutting conservation incentives won't fix the growing deficit. What it will do is prevent conservation of thousands of acres of important landscapes - many of them working farms and ranches - in Pima County and throughout the country.

This could be the death knell for preservation of family lands.

**I urge everyone who values working landscapes in southern Arizona to contact their elected representatives in Congress and let them know what is at stake: our land, our way of life - our connections to the future.**

*Roseann Hanson is a native Tucson writer and artist who has worked for two decades professionally and as a volunteer for conservation of Sonoran Desert lands and our traditional ways of life.*