

Times-Standard

Survey: Land trusts see 27 percent increase in five years; land Trust Alliance releases new survey on land trust growth

Donna Tam/The Times-Standard

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Land trust advocates are pointing to a recently released survey as proof that land conservation easements are a successful way for ranchers and farmers to preserve their land.

The National Land Trust Census, released by the Land Trust Alliance last month, shows that conservation easements increased 27 percent between 2005 and 2010. The survey found 10 million new acres conserved nationwide since 2005, with more than 2.3 million acres in California. Easements keep land from being developed.

A total of 47 million acres -- an area larger than Washington state -- are now conserved by land trusts through easements, according to the survey.

Representatives of the Northcoast Regional Land Trust (NRLT), which operates in Humboldt, Trinity and Del Norte counties, said the greatest percentage of new acreage comes through local and state land trusts. In California, land trusts conserved 2.3 million acres between 2005 and 2010, a 34 percent increase.

"California state residents value their land, and we are conserving it at the community level," NRLT Executive Director Lindsay Magnuson said in the release. "We are investing in our future by partnering with local land owners to ensure our clean water, local food, vibrant economy and rural way of life is protected for our children and for generations to come."

The nonprofit said it has conserved more than 15,000 acres of coastal and rural lands since 2000

and expects to increase

that amount by nearly 30,000 acres by the end of 2013.

Land owners receive an enhanced tax deduction for the land donation. Currently, land owners who donate a qualified conservation easement are allowed to deduct the fair market value of the easement. These deductions are capped at 50 percent of income, but farmers and ranchers are able to claim 100 percent. According to the office of North Coast Congressman Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, the carry forward period for such deductions is 15 years.

Thompson has co-sponsored a bill to make the incentive permanent -- the current incentive will expire at the end of this year. NRLT supports the bill as well as a similar bill, S 339.

Thompson's bill -- HR 1964, or the Conservation Easement Incentive Act of 2011 -- was introduced in May. It has been endorsed by more than 65 leading conservation, sporting and agricultural organizations, including the Land Trust Alliance, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the National Wildlife Federation, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, the American Forest Foundation and Ducks Unlimited.

According to Thompson's office, the enhanced tax incentive for conservation easements first passed in 2006 and has boosted donations of conservation easements by one-third -- to more than one million a year. With a lengthy planning process --

Thompson's office said it can take up to four years -- for placing land into a conservation easement, permit incentives would allow land owners to complete long-term planning.

"This incredible rate of success is evidence that Congress needs to make the enhanced conservation easements permanent so that our local land owners and land preservation organizations have the resources and the certainty they need to make sure land is conserved for future generations, wildlife is protected, and our economic sectors like agriculture and fishing are strong for years to come," Thompson said in a statement. "Not only is this good for our environment and economy - it's important for our food security."

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Info Box:

National Land Trust Census findings include:

* California ranks first in the nation in acres conserved and first in the Pacific area, which includes California, Hawaii and Nevada.

* There are now 197 land trusts operating in California.

* In California, land trusts conserved 2.3 million acres between 2005 and 2010

The census is online at www.lta.org/census.

Source: National Land Trust Census

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