

OPINION

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GUEST VIEW

Bipartisan bill would give area conservation programs big boost



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The Dust Bowl years of the 1930s forcefully bonked our Coulee Region farmer-ancestors over the head in demonstrating how vulnerable the ruggedly beautiful landscape is to loss of good soil through erosion.

Fortunately, the Coon Creek Watershed led as our nation's first soil conservation program, and we demonstrated to the rest of the country how to better care for precious farmland.

Today, with overwhelming economic pressures on farmers driven largely by spiking corn and soybean prices coupled with a high percentage of absentee landowners, the lessons of the past of century sometimes are

forgotten, and our fragile landscape again is put at risk.

Ephemeral farmland conservation programs are not sufficient, by themselves, to assist farmers in protecting the long-term viability of our food production capabilities.

One of the most valuable tools we have today to ensure good stewardship of our fields, pastures and forests is a permanent, voluntary conservation easement that land trusts such as the Mississippi Valley Conservancy, Minnesota Land Trust and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation can work out with private landowners in this region.

But many farmers cannot afford to relinquish the future development potential of their farmland without enhanced income tax incentives, which help tip the balance toward more sustainable farming practices. We've had such incentives in place since 2006 to great effect. Unfortunately, Congress allowed the incentive legislation to expire no less than four times during the past seven years, only to be renewed

retroactively the following year in two-year increments.

This see-sawing of legislation inhibits the ability of farmers to engage in long-term planning for their land. The incentive has been gone since Jan. 1 and will stay that way unless Congress acts.

Without an incentive in place and assured, many of the gifts of conservation easements the incentives were intended to promote will simply not take place. The time to plan and execute the gifts will have already passed by. Good farmland may get sold off and abused when otherwise it could have been conserved.

A survey by the Land Trust Alliance showed that this incentive helped 1,700 land trusts increase the pace of conservation by a third — to more than 1 million acres a year. Our hardworking farmers deserve this incentive to continue to be able to steward the land now and for countless generations into the future.

For all these reasons, I urge citizens to express their support for legislation to permanently reinstate this critical charitable incentive, H.R. 2807, the Conservation Easement Incentive Act.

The past few weeks have been a whirlwind of activity for the conservation tax incentive, culminating in its passage by the Ways & Means Committee 23-14, with, for example, all Republicans in favor. This is a historic first for the incentive — no bill to make it permanent had ever come before the committee. Several committee members, including retiring champions Jim Gerlach, R-Pa., and Chairman Dave Camp, R-Mich., spoke glowingly about the need to make it permanent.

This success is due to broad, bipartisan support for conserving working farms and forests and protecting habitat through private, voluntary means, as is done with charitable land trusts working with individual landowners.

In Wisconsin, we have broad support for the conservation easement incentive. The following members of Congress are co-sponsors: Democrat Rep. Ron Kind, Republican Rep. Sean Duffy, Republican Rep. Thomas Petri, Democrat Rep. Mark Pocan, Republican James Sensenbrenner and Democrat Sen. Tammy Baldwin. Minnesota and Iowa similarly have bipartisan support. I want to thank these legislators for their long-term thinking and leadership.

In an era of Congressional gridlock and do-nothing government, I can think of no other issue that is so unifying. Passage of the legislation is the right thing to do. We just need to get it done.

We are one step closer to making the incentive permanent, but we now need to convince House leadership that this is a priority for their members and should be brought to the floor for a vote as soon as possible.

Tim Jacobson is CEO of Visjonær Consulting, which has a mission to strengthen nonprofit organizations. He is past executive director of Mississippi Valley Conservancy in La Crosse and a former board member of Gathering Waters Conservancy in Madison.