



CURE

Citizens United for Resources and the Environment, Inc.

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Your Future - Your Choice

Citizens United for Resources and the Environment, Inc. ("CURE"), a non-profit organization located in Southern California, strongly supports conservation partnerships and urges Congress to preserve the use of the conservation easement incentive as recognized in Section 170(h) of the Internal Revenue Code. Eliminating or limiting the current tax incentive would result in less land being conserved, a particularly acute problem in California where thousands of acres of farmland and biologically diverse areas are lost to development each year.

Less than 17 percent of the United States is considered prime farmland, and the continued loss of farmland for development raises serious concerns about food security, economic prosperity and climate impacts for future generations. In Riverside County, one of the fastest-growing regions in California, urban development has significantly diminished area farmland. Since 1984, 170,000 acres in Riverside County have been developed at a compound, annual growth rate of 3.6 percent. That development has eliminated 84,000 acres of prime farmland from ever being farmed again.

In 1979, Riverside City recognized the potential consequences of over-development and passed an initiative known as Measure R, the "Taxpayer's Initiative to Reduce Costly Urban Sprawl by Preserving Riverside's Citrus and Agricultural Lands, Its Unique Hills, Arroyos and Victoria Avenue." The measure limits development to one home per five acres across approximately 5,000 acres in the Riverside Greenbelt area. But, such smart zoning initiatives like Measure R -- unlike conservation easements -- are not permanent. And now, almost 40 years later, increased housing demand and an aging farmer population threaten to undo the Greenbelt's development restrictions and eliminate the important farmland and green spaces buffering our community. Due to these pressures, CURE, the Riverside Food Systems Alliance ("RFSA") and GrowRIVERSIDE have set a goal to preserve 1,000 acres of the Greenbelt from development while still allowing those lands to be sustainably farmed.

Unfortunately, because of Riverside's high land costs, the state of California and the federal government lack sufficient funds to protect the Greenbelt from the encroaching development pressures, making it imperative to pursue privately funded conservation models. To make that happen, CURE is seeking investors willing to acquire land and protect it permanently from development, while simultaneously funding programs that ensure the land can be profitably and sustainably farmed. A privately funded conservation partnership would not only save the Greenbelt's numerous orange groves and crop lands from becoming housing plots but would also fund training for young farmers to provide healthy and affordable food, in addition to developing community capacity and resilience.

Conservation partnerships would allow cities like Riverside to address the increasingly important public problem of balancing development and conservation. Unfortunately, in 2017, the Land Trust Alliance ("LTA") rewrote its Standards and Practices to include language that arbitrarily targets and de-incentivizes conservation easement donations from conservation partnerships. Consequently, the LTA's opposition to partnerships has already stalled land preservation efforts across the country and threatens to completely de-incentivize conservation for Riverside's Greenbelt landowners, who instead might be forced to re-prioritize their financial needs and sell to developers. The LTA's mischaracterization of conservation partnerships and the rare abuses that occur has led them to lobby Congress to codify harmful and retroactive legislation, H.R. 4459 and S. 2436. The main rationale behind the LTA's criticism -- rare instances of inaccurate and over-valued appraisals -- are not addressed by either bill. And rather than addressing any potential wrongdoing arising from conservation partnerships, these proposed bills solely eliminate tax incentives for conservation partnerships. A better alternative -- and one proposed by organizations like the Partnership for Conservation (P4C) and CURE -- is for Congress to ensure taxpayers are submitting accurate and complete appraisals, no matter who or what entity is making a conservation easement donation. Unlike the misguided legislation promoted by the LTA, both P4C and CURE are proposing solutions that maximize private sector participation in conservation while solving the rare problems that occur with private donations of conservation easements.