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Beckstoffer's To Kalon Donation Is First Under New Federal Law

"Napa Valley is the poster child for this law, there's no doubt about it," said Napa Valley grapegrower Andy Beckstoffer.

He was one of three speakers at a Tuesday press conference in Oakville heralding the significance and benefits of a new federal law which offers tax incentives to farmers who agree to continue farming their land rather than developing it.

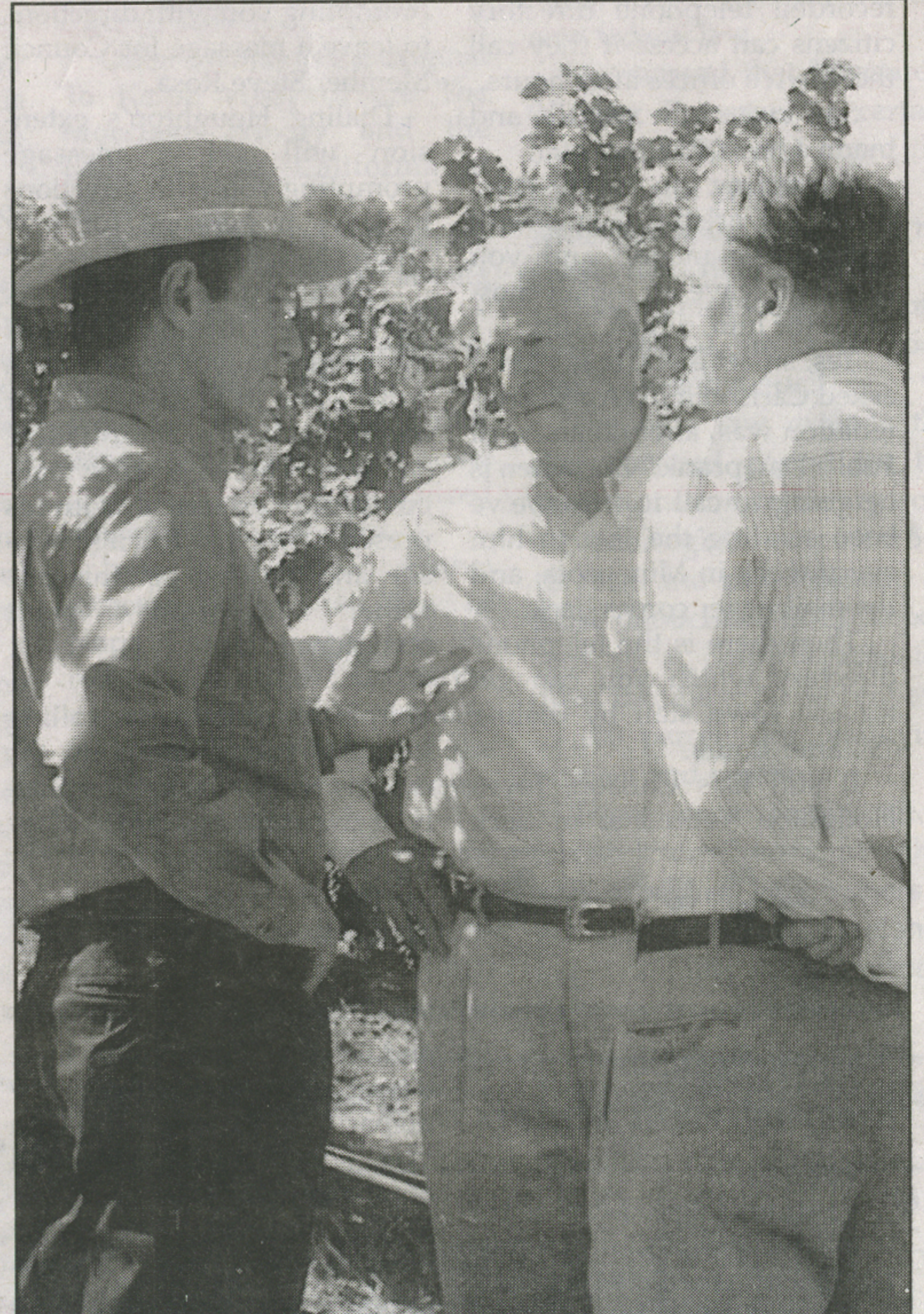
Beckstoffer has signed a conservation easement for the 89-acre To Kalon vineyard which will forever prevent a winery or homes from being built upon it.

During the next 16 months the law allows other farmers to step up as Beckstoffer did and donate similar conservation easements.

A conservation easement is a legal restriction that a

landowner places on his or her property to define and limit the type of development that may take place there. Generally, conservation easements are donated to a non-profit organization, like The Land Trust of Napa County, which carries the responsibility to inspect the land periodically and enforce the restrictions in perpetuity.

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Beckstoffer Protects To Kalon With Conservation Easement

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Congressman Mike Thompson (D.-Calif.) was instrumental in securing approval of the bill which President George W. Bush signed into law August 17.

Beckstoffer made several trips to Washington, D.C., to lobby for the legislation.

Thompson said every minute two acres of agricultural land is lost in this country.

"This is bad for the environment, and it's bad for local government," he said. "It's important we do everything we can to make sure agriculture is a strong partner in our district," he commented.

Thompson said the law will help protect all kinds of land all over the nation -- from cranberry bogs to timber bearing tracts.

Because Napa Valley has strong existing protections for agricultural land, he said the county is seen as the "poster child" for the effort which is gathering momentum throughout the nation.

Thompson announced after the press conference he was heading to Missouri to speak with representatives of the wine industry developing in that state about Napa Valley's and its "visionary" concepts and practices.

"This donation will preserve Napa Valley's most historic and prestigious vineyard forever. It is our way of giving back to the community, and it is really good business. You get to keep the land in the family and you get to keep it in farming," said Beckstoffer of his To Kalon conservation easement. "I hope it encourages my friends and neighbors to put their prime vineyard land in conservation easements."

Beckstoffer purchased To Kalon, located on the west side of Highway 29 opposite Opus One, in 1993.

The 89-acre parcel was part of the original To Kalon vineyard first planted by Hamilton Crab in 1869.

Other owners of the original To Kalon vineyard are The Mondavi Winery and the University of California at Davis.

In the 1880s, the wines produced by Crab ranked among Napa Valley's top vintages.

To Kalon has continued to produce some of the Napa Valley's most sought-after wines ever since, and its name is one of the most recognized vineyards in California.

John Hoffnagle, executive director of The Land Trust of Napa County, explained the role of The Land Trust as the agency qualified and prepared to accept and administer the contracts that delineate conservation easements.

He explained that 10 percent -- or 50,000 acres -- of Napa Valley is already protected from development. Of that land 20,000 acres are covered

by conservation easements.

Hoffnagle said the goal of The Land Trust is to secure as many as 50,000 more acres in easements over the next 16 months which have been designated as a "test run" for the new federal law.

He stressed that Measure J (the Ag Preserve) is certain only until 2020 and urged the public and landowners to think about the land in terms longer than 10 to 20 years.

"Sometimes we get complacent because life is so good here," he commented.

The new law extends the carry-forward period for tax deductions for voluntary conservation agreements from 5 to 15 years and raises the cap on those deductions from 30 percent of a donor's adjusted gross income to 50 percent and to 100 percent for qualifying farmers and ranchers.

These new terms allow farmers, ranchers and other modest-income landowners to get a larger benefit for donating valuable development rights to their land.