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Land preservation bill OK'd in Senate

Thompson, who pushed measure in House, says tax bill will help save ag lands

From Register Staff

A measure designed to help groups like the Land Trust of Napa County preserve open space has passed both the House of Representatives and the Senate, and awaits the president's signature before becoming law.

Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, issued a statement Friday hailing the Senate's passage of the measure and praising local grapegrower Andy Beckstoffer for his role in advocating for the bill.

The measure expands tax deductions to landowners who donate their land for conservation

purposes. Such donations, or conservation easements, are commonly sought by the Land Trust and similar groups. In exchange for promising to keep land from being developed, private property owners are given significant tax breaks.

"This measure is a landmark victory for preventing urban sprawl from swallowing up our nation's remaining farming lands and open spaces," Thompson said in a prepared statement. "By providing our farmers and ranchers with the opportunity to protect their land from development, we are taking a significant step toward preserving our country's agricultural heritage and improving the quality of our environment."

Thompson, who advocated for the measure in the House, said Beckstoffer, president of the California Association of Winegrape Growers, led grassroots efforts to increase the prospects for the

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bill's passage.

"This could do as much to preserve the Napa Valley in the long term as the Agricultural Preserve ordinance itself," said Beckstoffer, who owns more than 1,000 acres of grapes in Napa, Mendocino and Lake counties. "We are doing a good job of preserving the hillsides; this provision will give us the

chance to preserve the truly premium vineyard land as well."

"This provision is a significant boost for our conservation efforts," said John Hoffnagle, executive director of the Land Trust of Napa County. "It is absolutely vital that we protect our agricultural land from development, and this opportunity for landowners is a landmark achievement."

The law expands the current tax law by raising the cap for deductions by those who are not ranchers or farmers, and extends the carry-forward period for conservation easement deductions from five to 15 years.