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# Continue conservation easements

Posted: Sunday, November 3, 2013 12:01 a.m.

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Congress doesn't have much of a record at finishing business lately. Budgets, debt ceiling agreements — it seems Congress would rather dissolve into partisan dispute.

Faced with such disarray, there's reason to fear that an essential conservation law could go by the boards as of Dec. 31. The state's congressional delegation must recognize the law's value to South Carolina.

At risk are the federal incentives for conservation easements which will lapse with the New Year.

As pointed out in David Quick's story on our "South" section front today, South Carolina has been a leader in conservation easements, which enable the preservation of forest and farm land as productive, tax-paying property, while providing a variety of public benefits.

Those include habitat for animals and birds, flood control, water quality and restricting urban sprawl. All are vitally important in the coastal region, which continues to see a continual upswing in population growth.

Federal tax incentives help make the program possible, and the conservation community, including 1,700 land trusts nationwide, is encouraging Congress not only to pass an extension of the law, as it has three times previously, but to make it a permanent law, with enhanced benefits for working farmers and ranchers. That will ensure more valuable habitat and scenic landscapes can be preserved in perpetuity without the full expense of public acquisition.

The value of conservation easements can be seen in Charleston County, where 88,000 acres have been protected by the Lowcountry Open Land Trust, primarily through easements.

There is no better single example of the importance of conservation easements than the ACE Basin — in Colleton, Charleston and Beaufort counties.

"The ACE Basin has been the hallmark for others to emulate across the country as an example of collaborative conservation," says Mary Pope Hutson, executive vice president of the national Land Trust Alliance.

More than 134,000 acres in the ACE Basin have been protected in perpetuity, largely by private property owners who wanted to ensure that the land will never be consumed by the large-scale residential and resort development seen elsewhere along the coast. The result has been a spectacular success, with a vast, virtually unbroken area of coastal acreage preserved from untoward development.

Nationally, some 11 million acres have been protected via conservation easements. Again, federal tax incentives created the opportunity, and the expansion of those benefits will encourage more working farmers and ranchers to join the program.

Ms. Hutson calls easements the most cost-effective tool for conservation in America.

Of the state's congressional delegation, only 1st District Rep. Mark Sanford has signed onto the legislation at this point. Passage of this bill should be a priority for South Carolina's congressmen, House and Senate.

Strengthening the easement program will ensure that South Carolina's working farms and acres of forest — its stunning coastal vistas and rich habitat — can be preserved against development

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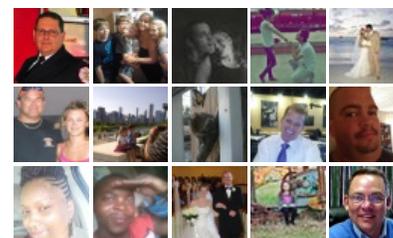
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