

The Pueblo Chieftain

Conservation program benefits Colorado

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There is a nice bonus for Colorado in the Farm Bill that President Obama signed last month (Feb. 7).

Senate Conservation Subcommittee Chairman Michael Bennet, D-Colo., fought hard for programs that will enable Colorado conservation organizations and local governments to partner with landowners to keep our state's unique ranches and farm lands in agriculture.

The new Agricultural Lands Easement program will provide grants to purchase conservation easements that permanently restrict development on important ranches and farm lands. These voluntary agreements will ensure that land stays in agriculture and continues to be an important — and growing — part of our state's economy.

The predecessors to this program have already conserved more than 1 million acres of economically and ecologically important agricultural lands. The new program will easily double that total.

Senator Bennet joined Senate Agricultural Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow of Michigan in leading the effort to pass this bi-partisan bill, working with other Colorado leaders, including Rep. Scott Tipton, R-Colo., a member of the House Agriculture Committee.

Senator Bennett also changed the law to allow the agriculture secretary to waive a local cash-match requirement. This waiver will allow the program, at no additional cost, to

protect the most important ranches and farmlands, even if they are in rural counties that don't have the funding to match the federal grants.

But the question is: Why should this land conservation matter to the vast majority of Americans who are neither farmers nor ranchers?

While producing crops, livestock and other agricultural commodities for all Americans, properly managed working ranch lands and farms protect important habitat for our wildlife and fish; maintain cherished scenic vistas; and safeguard our water supplies and the water quality of our rivers. In addition, conserving these farms and ranches keeps farmers and ranchers on the land, and it protects an important part of our state's economy.

Colorado has 29 land trusts that are members of the Land Trust Alliance, and they have protected more than 1.1 million acres using conservation easements alone. For example, more than 150 years of Colorado history — and a part of its future — were preserved when the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust and the Trust for Public Land completed an effort to protect 650 acres of the Hutchinson Ranch in Chaffee County. Protection of the Hutchinson Ranch was made possible by funding from the Farm Bill programs that Senator Bennet just improved, along with lottery-funded Great Outdoors Colorado and Chaffee County.

Though these lands — including such unique resources as the Hutchinson Ranch — are productive and important for agriculture, without action they are very much at risk. Non-agriculture development overtakes two acres of productive agricultural land every minute. But conservation easement programs ensure that our state's most beautiful and productive ranches and farm land will continue into the future.

Near Rocky Ford in Southeastern Colorado, 12,200 acres of the Mendenhall Ranches were protected using Farm Bill conservation funding last summer. The Mendenhalls used the easement to secure the future for their ranch, which is almost entirely native shortgrass prairie, home to cattle and increasingly rare grassland wildlife.

That is why the Farm Bill's Agricultural Lands Easement program makes both economic and ecologic sense for Colorado and for America. And that is why we should all thank Senator Bennet for his leadership in making the conservation programs in the Farm Bill work for ranchers and farmers.

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- See more at: <http://www.chieftain.com/opinion/2343992-120/colorado-conservation-agricultural-farm#sthash.GtkxEsaj.dpuf>