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## Farm Bill may benefit conservation easements

Bill merges 2 programs, includes \$1 billion in funding

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Thousands of acres in Montezuma County are protected by conservation easements that prevent subdivision, and a change in the 2014 Farm Bill may make this kind of conservation easier for those in rural counties.

The new Farm Bill will merge two conservation programs, Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, which has been used in the county, and the Grasslands Reserve Program into the Agricultural Lands Easement Program. President Barack Obama was scheduled to sign the bill into law on Friday.

The new program will receive \$1 billion dollars of funding nationally over the next ten years to purchase development rights from landowners to preserve the land so it can continue to be farmed or ranched, according to the Land Trust Alliance, an advocacy group.

The new program will also offer a waiver to the hefty cash match requirement that must come from a local source.

The Farm and Ranch Protection Program offered an alternative to selling farm and ranch land to developers. The program paid farmers 50 percent of what they would receive from a developer, a local third party provided a 25 percent cash match, and the landowner donated the final portion of rights, said Chris West the Executive Director Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust. The owner continued to farm or ranch on the land and hold the land privately. The new program will be very similar.

But with a waiver, a farmer could donate half of his or her development rights, and no cash match would be required.

The Land Trust Alliance will be working with the Department of Agriculture to come up with the requirements for the waiver, said Russ Shay, director of policy for the Land Trust Alliance. The alliance is working on the policy, in part, because of the greater conservation that results by preserving open space.

"A lot of this money is going to ranch land protection and in effect is protecting important wildlife habitat," he said.

As Colorado's population grows, there will be more pressure to subdivide farm and ranch land.

"We're going to lose a big chunk of agriculture," West said.

This program is meant to prevent some of that land conversion by transferring conservation requirements with the deed of the property from operator to operator.

An outside party, like a conservancy, manages the easement and ensures that the farmer or rancher is complying with the agreement, said West. This includes requirements like keeping water rights on the land. However, this kind of management can allow for oil and gas development, West said.

The Montezuma Land Conservancy has used the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program to fund the permanent protection of 15,000 acres of land in Montezuma County. All of this land is still privately owned and operated. However, the conservancy has not used the Farm and Ranch program in recent years.

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