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HILL COUNTRY CONSERVANCY: Major Conservation Legislation Congress Passed Will Have Local Benefits

AUSTIN, TEXAS (Dec. 18, 2015) – Hill Country Conservancy, a land trust based in Austin that works to preserve large natural in the Hill Country, today praised a bipartisan congressional vote that makes permanent a federal tax incentive supporting land conservation.

Farmers, ranchers and the public will directly benefit from the incentive that encourages landowners to place a conservation easement on their land to protect important natural, scenic and historic resources. Hill Country Conservancy was among the 1,100 land trusts to support the incentive through a collaborative, multi-year campaign.

“Landowners must consider the financial implications of placing a conservation easement on their land. A permanent, enhanced incentive for conservation easement donations brings more landowners to the table by reliably allowing them to deduct a greater portion of their income, over a longer period of time,” said Frank Davis, Director of Land Conservation. “The enhanced incentive will result in more clean drinking water, iconic Texas wildlife and scenic vistas protected for future generations.”

“The Senate has shown extraordinary leadership by providing America with this great opportunity to preserve our natural heritage,” added George Cofer, Executive Director.

Hill Country Conservancy is a member of the Land Trust Alliance, the national land conservation organization that led the campaign for permanence.

“The importance of this vote – and this incentive – cannot be overstated,” said Rand Wentworth, the Alliance’s president. “This is the single greatest legislative action in decades to support land conservation. It states, unequivocally, that we as a nation treasure our lands and must conserve their many benefits for all future generations.”

In a strong bipartisan action, the House voted 318-109 and the Senate voted 00-00 to pass the bills that included the tax incentive.

First enacted as a temporary provision in 2006, the incentive is directly responsible for conserving more than 2 million acres of America's natural outdoor heritage. The incentive grants certain tax benefits to landowners who sign a conservation easement. Such private, voluntary agreements with local land trusts permanently limit uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values. Lands placed into conservation easements can continue to be farmed, hunted or used for other specified purposes. The lands also remain on county tax rolls, strengthening local economies.

Once signed into law, the incentive will be applied retroactively to Jan. 1, 2015. An earlier version of the incentive expired Dec. 31, 2014.

The incentive advanced through Congress as part of the America Gives More Act, a package of tax incentives to encourage charitable giving. It passed the House earlier this year, 279-137. A standalone version of the incentive, the Conservation Easement Incentive Act, earned 52 Senate sponsors this year, including 26 Democrats, 24 Republicans and 2 Independents. The agreement announced this week additionally encourages donations to food banks and facilitates charitable deductions from IRAs.

About Hill Country Conservancy and Conservation Easements

Hill Country Conservancy marshals public and private resources to preserve the natural areas and scenic vistas, aquifers and springs, rivers and streams, working farms and ranches, and the rural heritage of the Central Texas Hill Country for people to enjoy and cherish for generations to come.

Texas is unique in that over 90% of the land is privately owned. The local population depends on the stewardship of farmers and ranchers to keep our environment productive and viable. Hill Country Conservancy uses conservation easements as a tool to help keep these families on their land in the face of increased threat and to protect their properties in perpetuity. These win-win agreements allow landowners to donate a portion of their development rights, in turn decreasing the tax burden of owning land in a booming region.

This allows them to pass the land on to future generations with the knowledge that the property will be protected and sustainable. By using easements to allow landowners to continue to be stewards of the land, HCC not only preserves the heritage of the Hill Country, they keep our creeks flowing, our wildlife thriving, and our scenic views intact. So that our children's' children can experience them.

People move to this region because it's a beautiful place to be, but growth also has consequences and true open spaces are at risk of disappearing. The Hill Country population has doubled since 1980 and is expected to continue growing rapidly in the coming decades. That kind of growth and development has significant impacts on water quality, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation, quality of life, and the region's rural heritage. The health and viability of this community depends on us working together to preserve the quality of life that lease lands create.

More information about the Hill Country Conservancy is available at www.hillcountryconservancy.org.

About the Land Trust Alliance

Founded in 1982, the Land Trust Alliance is a national land conservation organization that works to save the places people love by strengthening land conservation across America. The Alliance represents more than 1,100 member land trusts supported by more than 100,000 volunteers and 5 million members nationwide. The Alliance is based in Washington, D.C. and operates several regional offices. More information about the Alliance is available at www.landtrustalliance.org.

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