



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact:

Lisa V. Hancock
Montgomery County Lands Trust
215-513-0100
lhancock@mclt.org

Conservation Easement Incentive is Berry Productive

Conservation leaders mark preservation of farm and recognize Congressman Jim Gerlach for his leadership on an important conservation tool.

Limerick, PA - June 29, 2011—Standing against the idyllic backdrop of the Hawthorne Farm in Limerick Township today, local conservation leaders celebrated the preservation of the farm and recognized Representative Jim Gerlach for his leadership on legislation that helps family farmers conserve their lands for future generations.

Don Hawthorne donated a conservation easement on 28 acres of his farm to Montgomery County Lands Trust in order to preserve an active Christmas tree farm, fruit orchard, and blueberry patch prized by the local community. Mr. Hawthorne was able to protect his property thanks to a 2006 tax incentive that has helped thousands of farmers, ranchers and other landowners of modest means to conserve their land. That incentive is scheduled to expire at the end of 2011.

Congressmen Jim Gerlach (R-PA) introduced H.R. 1964 last month to make this important tax incentive permanent. To date, this bipartisan bill has 260 co-sponsors representing 48 states. A companion bill (S.339) that has been introduced in the Senate has 14 co-sponsors.

"Knowing that farming will likely continue on this land long after I am gone gives me peace of mind. It really would be wonderful if the federal tax incentive would be made permanent so other farmers who choose to preserve their land can benefit," said landowner Don Hawthorne.



Voluntary conservation agreements, also known as conservation easements, are a popular tool for protecting natural areas, working farms, and ranches and can make it easier for families to leave their land to the next generation. A landowner who grants a conservation easement continues to own and manage his or her land, but restricts its use to protect the property's significant natural, agricultural, scenic and open space resources, or "conservation values."

"Without a doubt, the conservation easement tax credit is a tremendously practical option for many landowners and an effective tool for preserving farmland and natural resources that contribute immensely to the quality of life in our communities. Many of my colleagues in Congress seem to understand. That's why at a time when Congress seldom reaches a consensus, this legislation has received overwhelming bipartisan support from 270 members of the U.S. House of Representatives," said Congressman Jim Gerlach (PA-6th district). And that's why I am extremely honored to work side-by-side with Montgomery County Lands Trust, Natural Lands Trust, the Brandywine Conservancy and other organizations to permanently extend the conservation easement tax incentive for family farmers, moderate-income property owners and others."

The enhanced tax incentive applies to a landowner's federal income tax. It:

- raises the deduction a donor can take for donating a voluntary conservation agreement from 30% of their income in any year to 50%;
- allows farmers and ranchers to deduct up to 100% of their income; and
- increases the number of years over which a donor can take deductions from 6 to 16 years.

"We at Montgomery County Lands Trust believe conservation has broad benefits when we work with our generous partners," said Dulcie F. Flaharty, Executive Director of Montgomery County Lands Trust. "The preservation of the Hawthorne farm and other landscapes dear to our local communities was made possible due to personal generosity, complemented by the conservation tax incentive. Congressman Gerlach's leadership on the land conservation caucus has helped produce an outcome that will deepen the impact of the work done by the Trust. Thank you, Congressman for making possible the realization of conservation dreams that were previously out-of-reach for many land owners."



“Congressman Gerlach deserves significant credit for taking the lead in introducing this legislation to permanently extend the enhanced tax incentive for donating conservation easements,” said Sherri Evans-Stanton, Director of the Brandywine Conservancy’s Environmental Management Center. More than 83,000 acres of critical farmland, natural, cultural and recreational resources have been permanently protected within Gerlach’s congressional district. Many landowners were able to utilize this important conservation tool. When landowners donate conservation easements to preserve their land, they are voluntarily giving up value in what for many is their greatest asset. This bill has the positive effect of returning some of that value to the landowner, and by doing so, encourages more land and natural resource preservation.”

The economic benefits of preserving open space are clearly documented in this region. A recent study commissioned by the GreenSpace Alliance and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission found that open space in Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia counties adds \$16.3 billion to the region’s home values, saves more than \$130 million in water treatment and flood control costs, and, through recreation at area parks and trails, avoids \$1.3 billion in health related costs.

“Preserving open space contributes to our quality of life in countless ways,” noted Molly Morrison, President of Natural Lands Trust. “However, preserved lands are more than just pretty places, they are productive assets that make substantial contributions to our economy. Congressman Gerlach and his colleagues understand that encouraging donations of conservation easements isn’t just good for our environment, it is good for our economy, as well.”

###