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Sustainability Communicator is a quarterly publication about population, consumption, and conservation issues. Its purpose is to promote dialogue and action among League members and others interested in building a sustainable future.

SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATOR

Izaak Walton League of America Sustainability Education Program News

June 2005

Volume 8, Number 2

easements

Donated Easements Could Lose Tax Breaks

By Jim Baird

IWLA Sustainability Education Program director

Since 1980, the federal government has allowed landowners to take an income tax deduction when they donate a conservation easement on their property to a charity or government body for conservation purposes. According to the Brandywine Trust in Pennsylvania, "Voluntary conservation has permanently protected more than 35 million acres of working agricultural lands, working forests, wildlife habitats, historic landscapes, and parklands." More than 5 million acres have been permanently protected through conservation easements in just the last 5 years, according to the trust. Beyond the acres specified in a particular easement, these donations serve to leverage the funds of local, state, and federal land protection programs that purchase easements outright.

Despite the effectiveness and popularity of this conservation tool, the Congressional Joint Committee on Taxation has proposed dramatic reductions in the tax incentives. The impact on land protection could be enormous. The proposed changes (see box) attempt to address abuses in the process and were spurred by a few questionable high-profile land deals. While experts agree that there are problems in the system, their extent is overblown. According to Steve Small, a tax attorney in Boston who helped write the tax code enabling the easement deductions, "My view is that 95 percent of the conservation easement deals are fine." He and others have proposed a number of remedies for tighter policing and enforcement that would clean up problem areas without jeopardizing the incentives that help drive the system.



JAY CLARK

Conservation easements protect valuable wildlife habitat, farmland, and wetlands.

Proposed Changes to Easement Deductions

The Joint Committee on Taxation's proposals would:

- Prohibit any deductions for donating a conservation easement on the property on which a landowner lives. That would eliminate most conservation easements.
- Reduce the deductions allowed for donating a conservation easement from 100 percent of what the easement is worth to no more than 33 percent of its value. Few agricultural landowners could afford to donate their family's most valuable asset under those conditions.
- Limit deductions for donating land to the value of the land when acquired instead of its appreciated value.

Visit www.lta.org for information and action.

Let It Grow

Across the country, people are turning their yards into greenscapes.

By Suzanne Zanelli

On a spring day in my childhood backyard, you might see a red-tailed hawk swoop down on silent wings. Or hear the sweet, lilting melody of a Baltimore oriole above the din of the lawnmowers. Though such sights and sounds might be common in a park or a rural farmstead, I grew up in suburban Long Island—where car horns and the whine of Weedwackers were far more familiar. My mom, you see, had transformed our 20-by-30-foot backyard into a microcosm of the natural world, with a pond, wildflowers, fruit shrubs, and garden vegetables. Not only was our backyard an oasis of life in a desert of manicured lawns, we enjoyed practical benefits as well: smaller water bills thanks to low-maintenance plants; smaller electricity bills thanks to the cool shade provided by spruce, maple, and hemlock trees; and smaller grocery bills thanks to our homegrown vegetables, fruits, and herbs.



JIM GROSSMAN

We weren't the only people cashing in on backyard conservation. All over the country, homeowners are realizing the benefits of green landscaping, or "greenscaping" for short.

On the other side of the country, for example, Hidden Springs, Idaho, is a master-planned community 10 miles north of bustling Boise, yet it's far removed from urban life. The 1,844-acre development includes wooded trails, pristine wetlands, and a 100-acre working farm, which supplies vegetables and fruits to the local market.

Susie and Paul Headlee are two of Hidden Springs' most ardent conservationists, committed to softening their impact on the local environment. "This is a development, and people move out here to live close to nature," Susie Headlee says. "We're going back to restore it." Their yard is a riot of colors and scents, of berry bushes, crabapples, herbs, native wild-

Get Greenscaping

Here are some ideas and resources for transforming your landscape into a greenscape.

- The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's beautifully illustrated guide to conserving wildlife in your own backyard, *Attract Wildlife*, has detailed instructions for building wetlands, planting native species, conserving water, and more. <http://www.nh.nrcs.usda.gov/features/Publications/bycbook.pdf>
- Certify your own yard as a Backyard Wildlife Habitat Site through the National Wildlife Federation. The group's Web site explains what you have to do and lets you see what other homeowners in your region are doing to make yards more wildlife friendly. <http://www.nwf.org/backyardwildlife-habitat/index.cfm>

- Learn how to build a rain garden by visiting www.raingardennetwork.com and www.raingardens.org. A rain garden is a landscaped, shallow depression planted with wildflowers and other native vegetation to replace areas of lawn. They prevent rainwater from carrying excess fertilizer and sediment downstream, and provide you with low-maintenance natural habitat for many local species of butterflies and birds.
- Create a vernal pool in your backyard using the Izaak Walton League's instructions at <http://www.iwla.org/sos/awm/#vernalguide>. Vernal pools are a type of wetland habitat that is important for the life cycles of many frogs, birds, and insects. For school or community wetland restoration projects, check out Environmental Concern's program online at http://www.wetland.org/educ_pow.htm.

- One of the hottest things in architectural design is green roofing, www.green-roofs.org. This uses anything from succulents in very thin soil to vegetables gardens and even trees planted atop apartments and commercial buildings to provide habitat for critters while also lowering heating and cooling costs and absorbing up to 75 percent of stormwater.
- Protect your watershed by minimizing the use of pesticides and fertilizers, and provide habitat for wildlife by planting native grasses, flowers, and trees. Native plants that are adapted to local conditions often do not need chemical additives to stay healthy and strong. Visit the Plant Conservation Alliance at <http://www.nps.gov/plants/> for information and local referrals.

flowers, birds, and butterflies. But the Headlees haven't stopped at their property line. Along with Claudia Druss, the neighborhood's environmental coordinator, 30 more neighbors have gotten help with their yards, too. "We're changing the world one backyard at a time," says Susie. "We're just trying to make a difference in little baby steps."

Those outside the community are noticing. The National Wildlife Federation has designated Hidden Springs a Community Wildlife Habitat Site, a distinction shared by only nine other communities in the nation.

Greenscaping is catching on in other states, too. Martha and Roy White of Oak Grove, Missouri, received this year's annual Jackson County Backyard Conservation Award for enhancing their property with water, native vegetation, and organic composting. They were honored for saving soil, keeping water clean, and providing wildlife habitat.

It should be no surprise that the typical suburban yard—expansive turf-grass, clipped hedges, and thirsty exotic plants—cost a lot to keep up. Grass only stays bright green and weed free with plenty of fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, and mowing. The National Gardening

Association says Americans spend \$38 billion in landscape and lawn maintenance costs. Add to that the 10,000 gallons of water that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates the average lawn needs in addition to natural rainfall. In fact, lawns demand almost a third of all urban water use in the eastern United States. In drought-prone western states, they slurp up a full 60 percent of residential water.

According to the Applied Ecological Services in Wisconsin, over a 20-year period, the cost of maintaining native grasses or a wetland on a large property runs about \$3,000 per acre. Conventional turf grass over the same area requires \$20,000 per acre. What's more, these bright green lawns are actually "green deserts." Pesticides kill not only pests, but helpful plants and animals. And these green deserts become dependent upon a heavy chemical diet to keep up that managed appearance summer after summer.

But doesn't everyone want the manicured suburban look? Actually, research is showing that the natural look is gaining appeal. Homes near protected shorelines and certain types of inland wetland areas tend to be consistently easier to market, sell more quickly at higher rates, pay more in taxes, and appreciate at a greater

rate than homes that are further away. One national study showed that houses located near streamside forests increase in value by an average of \$10,427 per acre. All over the country, people are beginning to view these serene, complex ecosystems as beautiful additions to their landscapes.

So how does one go about turning a backyard landscape into a greenscape? First of all, it doesn't matter if you live in a quarter-acre suburban plot or a small urban apartment. There are many ways that you can transform your backyard into a healthy environment for both humans and wildlife. Start by thinking of ways to make your property welcoming to wildlife. Imagine that you are a butterfly or honeybee looking for sweet nectar. Are there plenty of wildflowers and flowering shrubs to lure these beneficial insects? Next, turn up a spade-full of your soil. Is it alive with wriggling earthworms, or is the soil unmoving and barren? Ask yourself whether you have half-empty bags of chemical fertilizers and pesticides that you can replace with garden tools, organic fertilizer, and seed starter kits. It takes some work, but when that first hawk alights, when you hear the plop of a frog in your backyard pond, when neighbors come over to ask you advice on how to beautify their own yards—it'll be worth it.

energy

Cow Power

By Steve Costello

Reprinted with permission from the Associated Press

The 1,500 cows at Blue Spruce Farm in Bridport, Vermont, are producing more than just milk. They're generating electricity. The methane gas from their manure is being used to produce electricity for Vermont's largest utility. "This is the first time anywhere in the country that a farm-based generation has been offered to customers as a renewable choice," Central Vermont Public Service Corp. spokesman Steve Costello said. Other farms have generated electricity for their own use.

The manure is heated up and then produces methane gas as it breaks down.



JAY CLARK

The gas is collected and used to power a generator, which sends electricity onto the power grid. So far about 1,000 customers have signed on to pay about 4 cents more per kilowatt-hour for their

electricity to support the farmers. Residential households ordinarily pay about 12 cents per kilowatt-hour.

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Earl Audet, who owns the farm with his brothers, expects the cows to produce enough electricity to power roughly 330 households. "The girls are now officially producing two streams of income, a milk check and a power check," said Audet. "This is one more way to diversify the farm, improve our bottom line, and manage our manure responsibly." It will take about three weeks for the manure to decompose. Audet has said he hoped the sale of power would cover the farm's \$70,000 annual electric bill. The Audets also hope to be free of debt in seven years, Costello said.

While the utility hopes other farmers will make

more of their manure, getting started is not cheap. It cost the Audets about \$1.2 million, half of which was covered by state and federal grants. Generating electricity from manure has other advantages. Extracting the gas from the manure gets rid of close to 90 percent of the smell. The cooked manure can also be used as bedding for animals and compost.

Information about the program is online at <http://www.cvps.com/cowpower/index.shtml>.

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Founded in 1922, the Izaak Walton League of America is dedicated to common sense conservation that protects America's hunting, fishing, and outdoor heritage relying on solution-oriented conservation, education, and the promotion of outdoor recreation for the benefit of our citizens. The League has more than 40,000 members and supporters in 21 state divisions and more than 300 local chapters in 32 states.

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