

Land trust works to save ag land

By ED MERRIMAN
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SILVERTON, Ore. — Nearly 3,000 acres of irreplaceable prime farmland in the Willamette Valley are lost to development each year despite Oregon's land use planning system, causing non-profit groups like the Northwest Land Conservation Trust to offer farmers an alternative to preserve their farms.

The trust works with landowners to establish easements that preserve farm, forest, watershed, wildlife habitat, scenic and open space lands in Oregon, according to Neil Austin, a Silverton-area orchardist and co-founder of the organization.

Austin and Malcolm Higgins, another Silverton-area farmer, established the trust to help farmers and other people preserve land for future generations.

"In the past we thought our land-use laws would protect us, but they haven't done that," Higgins said. "We are still losing lots of

prime farmland."

Putting farm or forestland into conservation easements can ensure that it won't be gobbled up by expansions of urban growth boundaries, housing and business developments, Higgins said.

Once an easement is established, title to the property remains in the landowner's name. The land may be used, sold, mortgaged or passed along to the landowner's heirs, subject to the restrictions of the easement, Higgins said.

The Northwest Land Conservation Trust helps farmers set up easements that ensure part or all of their land will be farmed in the future. Easement may also be established on parts of a farm to preserve natural areas as wildlife habitat, a watershed or for other uses, Higgins said.

It's up to landowners who establish conservation easements to decide whether to allow public access, he said.

"Our main concern is to ensure we have a place for our children, and that farmers will be able to

farm," Austin said. "We think we can help farmers by showing them a legal way to put their land into an easement."

When an easement is granted to a trust, the trust assumes responsibility for monitoring and enforcing it forever, Austin said.

Higgins says placing land in a conservation easement may be one way for farmers who are operating inside an urban growth boundary to protect their agricultural tax deferrals.

By establishing easements specifying that their land must be farmed or preserved in a natural state, farmers committed to keeping their land in agricultural production inside urban growth boundaries would clearly separate themselves from speculators who buy farmland and temporarily raise crops merely to defer taxes until they develop it.

Northwest Land Conservation Trust is a non-profit organization working mostly in the Willamette Valley, where more than 90 percent of the state's prime farmland

is located. More than 570,000 acres of prime Willamette Valley farmland has already been lost to planned growth allowed inside urban growth boundaries.

Austin and Higgins contend the future of the remaining prime farmland in the Willamette Valley is threatened by rapid economic expansion and population growth.

Many Willamette Valley cities, including Portland and Salem, have developed most of the industrial land inside their urban growth boundaries and are considering boundary expansions, threatening even more farmland, Higgins said.

"Natural resource lands are being lost to houses, computer factories, shopping malls and expanding urban areas at an alarming rate," he said.

"Basically we are trying to protect the land in its natural state, which will in turn provide us with an ongoing opportunity to produce food here in the Willamette Valley," Higgins said. "I have seen

what has happened to farmland in the area around Seattle and Olympia in the last 30 years.

Dairies, produce farms and food processing plants once prevalent in the Renton/Auburn Valley in the Seattle area are gone "and the attack is on the Skagit Valley, where more and more farmland is going into industrial development along the I-5 corridor.

"We still have a chance to keep that from happening here in Oregon," Higgins said.

Conservation easements can also be used to prohibit clearcutting on forestland, Higgins said. The easements also can provide

tax advantages on estate taxes, personal income taxes and property taxes.

Higgins' farm is one of the first in Marion County to receive a property tax reduction because of a conservation easement preserving wildlife habitat, prohibiting clearcutting and keeping the land in timber and agricultural production.

For more information on the Northwest Land Conservation Trust contact Higgins at (503) 873-8777, Austin at 873-2349 or write to P.O. Box 18302, Salem, OR, 97305.