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Land left wild to get tax break

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Landowners who manage their land for wildlife and conservation will get a property tax break under a bill approved Wednesday by the state legislature.

The new law carves out a special designation for conservation lands that has long been applied to commercial farming and forestry uses, basically setting tax valuations lower.

Environmental groups said the measure would keep more lands from being sold and developed.

"We think this is going to be a great new tool to give landowners a choice in how they manage their land," said Will McDow, Southern forests project manager for the Environmental Defense Fund, an advocacy group. "We don't expect this to stop the loss of forest and farmland, but we hope this will help landowners who want to do the right thing."

McDow said North Carolina loses about 100,000 acres of forest and farmland a year. One reason, he said, is that landowners face high tax bills, prompting them to sell.

A sticking point to the bill had been a perception that landowners would get tax relief for letting their property go fallow. McDow said the measure passed Wednesday works to guard against that by creating specific categories for wildlife habitats and creating land management guidelines that must be followed. To qualify for the tax breaks, landowners must demonstrate that their property is a restoration project for grasslands, wetlands, long leaf pine forests, rock outcrops and bat caves, or stream areas.

"You either have to have one of those habitat types, or you have to have a state-listed endangered or threatened species," McDow said. In addition, the state Wildlife Resources Commission will draw up protocols for how the land should be managed. County tax assessors will then apply those rules in determining whether the land meets the criteria.

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