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Couple who turned farm to wetland faces huge tax bill

Sharon Abercrombie | Jan. 5, 2012 Eco Catholic

Three years ago, John and Marilyn Saveson decided to turn 33 acres of their New Albany, Ohio, farm into a federally protected wetland to provide a permanent refuge for wildlife. The couple lives in a fast-developing area around the outskirts of Columbus and didn't want to see more suburbs and concrete smothering the land. But now, because of their ecological sensitivity, the elderly couple is facing a possible property tax bill totaling $56,119.

Spencer Hunt, a *Columbus Dispatch* writer, reported Dec. 26 that the Franklin County auditor's office says the land no longer qualifies for a farmland property-tax break as it once did [1]. Since 1995, the state tax department has allowed land enrolled in the wetlands program to remain agricultural for tax purposes. In 2010, though, it began questioning whether farmland converted to wetlands should be taxed as agricultural because crops no longer are grown there, said an agency spokesman.

The proposed tax bill change has taken the Savesons, federal conservation officials and environmentalists by surprise. In 2009, the Ohio Department of Taxation assured the couple that putting land in the Wetland Reserve Program wouldn't change its tax status. But a new interpretation of state law has given county auditors the go-ahead to disqualify federally supported wetlands-conservation programs.

Farming and environmental advocates are challenging the new ruling.

"Any land enrolled in a federal conservation program qualifies," said Chad Endsley, the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation's director of agricultural law. "The law has not changed."

David Celebrezze of the Ohio Environmental Council said the ruling would mean fewer people will want to conserve land in areas where development drives up property values and taxes.

"It's a perverse incentive to not restore, not protect and not care for our natural world," Celebrezze said in a Dec. 30 letter to the Ohio Department of Taxation.

According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Washington, D.C., since 1992, more than 11,000 private landowners in the United States have voluntarily enrolled over 2.3 million acres into the Wetlands Reserve Program.

Wetlands serve as "kidneys": Celebrezze writes that they can slow flood waters that could impact bridges, roads, schools, office buildings and homes; depending on size, they can cycle millions of gallons of stormwater a year and slowly release it. They can provide habitat to thousands of species and increase quality of life, for both animals and humans.

"Healthy wetlands can filter sediment and pollution from entering our waterways," he said. "This is especially important as sediment is the number one waterway pollutant," according to the Ohio EPA. "In addition, over-application of fertilizer on farm fields causes the development of harmful algal blooms and other negative

impacts to Ohio's waters."

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[1] http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2011/12/26/tax-may-swamp-wetland-deals.html