

Tax bill passes for forest conservation

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The Hawaii County Council unanimously approved a bill to provide tax incentives for property owners to set aside land for conservation purposes. Having passed final reading, the bill broadens the definition of “native forests” within the county code, allowing for more property owners to dedicate land for preservation. The previous definition allowed landowners to set aside for 20 years at least 2.75 contiguous acres of forest land consisting of at least 60% native species and with 25% tree cover, which would subject that land to a special value assessment, leading to lower property taxes for the owner.

The new definition, as proscribed by the bill, creates two new categories: “functional forests” consist of 60% native and noninvasive tree species with 25% tree cover, while “successional forests” are new lava substrates with 10 centimeters or less of soil depth.

The new categories allow more landowners to set aside property for conservation, although they are also required to follow terms of a forest management plan. Should those terms not be met, or if the cover of native forest species falls below a certain threshold, the dedication would be nullified and the tax benefits canceled retroactively to the date of dedication.

Environmental lawyer Leslie Cole-Brooks, who wrote the bill, said providing more incentives for landowners to support conservation efforts will benefit everyone on the island.

“There are so many ecological benefits to restoring our forests, from groundwater restoration to local species protection,” Cole-Brooks told the Tribune-Herald following the council vote. “It’s hard to put a number on that, to say it creates this much value. These things are priceless.”

However, Cole-Brooks said there is no way to tell how many acres of land may be recategorized under the new definition, because it depends on whether landowners choose to set aside the land.

While Cole-Brooks acknowledged that preserving and maintaining land for 20 years — 50 for successional forests — is a significant investment, she said the long-scale timeline of the bill helps set groundwork for the future of conservation on the Big Island.

Cole-Brooks said the bill was developed over years with the consultation of Rebecca Ostertag, a professor at the University of Hawaii in Hilo, and Susan Cordell with the U.S. Forest Service’s Institute for Pacific Islands Forestry, as well as the Department of Taxation and Councilwoman Valerie Poindexter.

The bill met with little discussion or opposition from council members, who had been effusive in their support of the bill at previous hearings. However, the bill did attract some testimony from members of the public, all of it in strong support.

The bill now heads to Mayor Harry Kim for his signature.

Source: <https://www.westhawaii.com/2020/08/06/hawaii-news/tax-bill-passes-for-forest-conservation/>