

Locally sponsored agricultural bill sent to governor

By J.R. Logan

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A bill that would clarify whether agricultural producers should get a tax break during times of drought has passed the state Legislature and is awaiting the governor's signature.

Senate Bill 112, sponsored by Sen. Carlos Cisneros, D-Questa, would allow county assessors to grant ag status to land that is not in production if the county is experiencing moderate drought as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Rep. Roberto "Bobby" Gonzales, D-Taos, sponsored a mirror bill in this year's legislative session.

The Taos County Assessor's Office is in the midst of a county-wide reassessment with a special focus on land designated as agricultural, which enjoys a substantial discount on property taxes.

But the assessor's office has found that most of the property deemed agricultural was inactive, and the status was yanked. As a result, taxes for these properties were skyrocketing. In one example, taxes for 10 acres in Los Crdovas would go from \$37 a year to over \$2,600.

While it's clear some ag land enjoying the tax break had been abandoned or left fallow, many people complained the assessor's office was reviewing properties in the midst of a devastating drought that made productive agricultural difficult.

The bills filed by Gonzales and Cisneros this session tackled several issues related to the reassessment, including defining horses as livestock. However, nearly all of those provisions were pulled during the committee process where they met fierce resistance. The language related to drought, however, enjoyed enormous support from across New Mexico.

In fact, SB 112 passed both the Senate and the House unanimously, and its backers are optimistic that bodes well for the bill's chances in front of the governor.

With the success of the drought bill, activists hoping to protect Taos County's centuries-old agricultural tradition are refocusing on efforts to put fallow land back into production and identify resources for those who want to revitalize their properties.

Information on this and other subjects will be presented at an agricultural resource fair Friday, April 10 at the Juan I. Gonzales Memorial Agricultural Center in Taos.

Two roundtable discussion are scheduled for 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. to discuss ways to keep the farming tradition alive.

For more information, contact Taos County extension agent Tony Valdez at (575) 758-3982.