

SUBJECT: Fire ant research advisory committee

COMMITTEE: Agriculture and Livestock — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 6 ayes — Patterson, Hawley, King, Rusling, Swinford, Walker

0 nays

3 absent — R. Cuellar, Finnell, Rabuck

WITNESSES: For — Dick White, Texas Utilities; Christi Craddick, Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association; Durwood Tucker, Texas Farm Bureau; Donald M. Ward, Texas Veterinary Medical Association; Jimmie R. Dozier

Against — None

On — James G. Butler, Texas A&M System Agriculture Program; Johnnie B. Rogers, Texas Veterinary Association of General Practitioners; Don Wilson, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department; John Sneed, Texas Department of Agriculture; Robert Merrifield, Ray Frisbie,

BACKGROUND: The Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, part of the Texas A&M University System, conducts research on the food and fiber industries in Texas. The mission of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, also part of A&M, is to apply the research generated by the experiment station and other entities and convey information to affected industries and the general public.

The Fire Ant Basic Research Program was created by the Legislature in 1987 to finance research of scientific merit that offered promise of long-term solutions to fire ant infestations. Awards were to be offered for two-year periods for individual and group projects. The program can accept federal gifts and grants, private money and legislative appropriations. A Fire Ant Advisory Board was created in the Texas Department of Agriculture, but was not funded.

DIGEST: CSHB 2341 would abolish the Fire Ant Advisory Board on September 1, 1995, and establish a nine-member Fire Ant Research and Management Account Advisory Committee within the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station. The powers, obligations, property and funds of the board would be transferred to the committee.

The committee would be made up of representatives from Texas A&M, Texas Tech, the University of Texas, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Parks and Wildlife, the Public Utility Commission and three gubernatorial appointees representing agribusiness, the general public and municipal governments.

The committee would oversee the Fire Ant Basic Research Program. The Texas Agricultural Experiment Station could accept money under the program, would be required to make an annual accounting of the money received and awarded and adopt rules to implement the award program.

The Texas Agricultural Experiment Station would administer the Fire Ant Basic Research Program, solicit, distribute and create competitive grant and funding programs for fire ant research, maximize federal funding for fire ant research, and with the help of the committee, plan a research program on fire ants. The committee would assist and direct the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station to conduct fire ant research, communicate with other states infested with fire ants and establish a framework for more efficient management of fire ant infestation problems,

The Texas Agricultural Extension service would provide educational programs and public awareness programs about fire ant infestation and treatment.

Committee members would serve staggered two-year terms, meet at least twice a year, elect one member as presiding officer for two years and adopt rules for internal procedures. Advisory expenses could not exceed 20 percent of the total amount of funds available to the committee. Committee members would not be compensated, and only university or agency members could be reimbursed for travel expenses.

The Texas Agricultural Experiment Station would have to prepare a report with the help of the advisory committee on fire ant research. The station would, before December 31, 1996, present the report to the lieutenant governor, the speaker and the chairs of the committees responsible for agricultural matters in each house.

The report would include an estimate of the cost of damage caused by fire ants, recommendations for future research and management of fire ants in Texas and an estimate of the amount the Legislature should appropriate to support the research and management necessary to address the fire ant problem in Texas.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

CSHB 2341 would help focus and coordinate fire ant research in Texas. Fire ant infestation is a very serious problem that results in millions of dollars of damage to crops, electrical equipment, people and animals. Texas has 60 million acres infested by fire ants, and 150 counties report infestations. Fire ant research and management was, at one time, a priority in Texas and should be so again.

Three universities in Texas concentrate on fire ant research, and each of these institutions would be represented on the advisory committee created by CSHB 2341. Texas A&M University research has focused on chemical control of fire ants, the University of Texas has focused on biological and genetic studies and Texas Tech University has concentrated on fire ants' impact on wildlife.

CSHB 2341 would allow these research institutions and state agencies to pool their resources, share information and concentrate on finding funding sources for fire ant research. A successful campaign to eradicate fire ants would save millions of dollars and would more than justify any cost.

Texas A&M has money targeted for research on integrated pest management, a portion of which could be used for fire ant research. Money that the committee raised could be awarded for promising research, like that of Dr. Larry Gilbert at the University of Texas who is doing research on a fly found in Brazil that lays its eggs near the head of the fire ant, eventually causing the ant's head to fall off when the larvae hatches.

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OPPONENTS
SAY:

If the Legislature is really serious about attacking the fire ant problem in Texas, it should appropriate money for research on fire ants, rather than creating yet another unfunded entity to administer a fire ant research program.

NOTES:

The original version of HB 2341 would have created a 13-member advisory committee, provided that the presiding officer of the committee would be a university appointee and required the committee to meet at least three times a year. It would not have required the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station to submit the report required by the committee substitute.