

SUBJECT: Using \$5 million in volunteer fire fighter funds to finance a TFS program

COMMITTEE: Agriculture and Livestock — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 8 ayes — Gonzalez Toureilles, Anderson, B. Brown, Crabb, Hardcastle, Kleinschmidt, Rios Ybarra, Swinford

0 nays

1 absent — Heflin

WITNESSES: For — *(Registered, but did not testify, Jim Allison, County Judges and Commissioners Association of Texas; Trey Blocker, State Firemen's and Fire Marshals' Association; Tommy Engelke; Charles Gee, Texas Logging Council; Billy Howe, Texas Farm Bureau; Ronald Hufford, Texas Forestry Association; Jason Skaggs, Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association; John Thompson, Polk County; Bob Turner, Texas Sheep and Goat Raisers Association)*

Against — None

On — Tom Boggus, Texas Forest Service

BACKGROUND: The 77th Legislature in 2001 enacted HB 2604 by McReynolds, which created the Rural Volunteer Fire Department Assistance Program, administered by the Texas Forest Service (TFS) and funded by an assessment on insurance companies.

DIGEST: CSHB 4002 would amend Government Code, sec. 614.104 to allow the Texas Forest Service to spend up to \$5 million from the volunteer firefighter department assistance fund on staffing and operating costs for its statewide wildfire protection plan.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2009.

SUPPORTERS SAY: CSHB 4002 would enable the Texas Forest Service (TFS) to implement the Texas Wildfire Protection Plan, which would help save lives and reduce property damage from wildfires. The plan consists of a number of

components designed to make the state less vulnerable to wildfire devastation, including fire risk assessment and fire behavior modeling, fire prevention and hazard mitigation, response planning and preparedness, local capacity-building and rapid response to wild land fires. This comprehensive approach would prepare Texas for the most unruly of wildfires.

The bill would devote a small portion of the volunteer fire department assistance fund to TFS. Volunteer fire departments depend on TFS for back-up when fires cannot be locally controlled. The balance of the volunteer fire department assistance recently has doubled from \$15 million to \$30 million, and CSHB 4002 would take only one-sixth of this fund to enhance TFS operations.

CSHB 4002 ultimately would save the state money by decreasing reliance on out-of-state firefighters. Currently, TFS has to request assistance and resources from other states in the event of a serious wildfire, such as one that ravaged Bastrop County on April 9 of this year. When out-of-state firefighters are called to Texas, TFS is responsible for funding their travel expenses, including housing and room and board. TFS also pays to rent firefighting equipment that is not in its inventory. The bill would decrease the costs over the long term by allowing Texas to build a stronger firefighting capacity within the state.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

Volunteer firefighters need access to the entire balance of their fund to buy equipment and train firefighters. Volunteer fire departments often rely on used equipment donated by other fire departments. Much of their equipment is old and unreliable. Already low on funds, volunteer fire departments must spend money on repairs and training. CSHB 4002 would authorize taking up to \$5 million from volunteer firefighters, who easily could make use of the funds.