

- SUBJECT:** Use of Operation Game Thief funds
- COMMITTEE:** State Recreational Resources — favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 7 ayes — Kuempel, Siebert, Black, Horn, Rabuck, B. Turner, Woolley
0 nays
2 absent — Hightower, Oakley
- WITNESSES:** For — Gib Lewis
Against — None
On — Jack King
- BACKGROUND:** The Operation Game Thief (OGT) Program of the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife, created by statute in 1981, allows concerned citizens to report game and fish violations and receive rewards for information that leads to arrest and conviction of poachers. Rewards are paid from the OGT fund in the State Treasury, which accrues from private donations to the program.
- The law specifies that money in the fund may be used only for maintenance of the fund. Funds are disbursed upon approval by a nine-member OGT committee named by the TPWD director, if at least five members are present.
- In 1993 the 73rd Legislature created a program to pay from the OGT fund death benefits to families of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) peace officers killed in the line of duty.
- DIGEST:** HB 2182 would expand the authorized uses of funds on deposit in the Operation Game Thief Fund to include promotion of the OGT program through advertising and marketing and the payment of rewards and death benefits to TPWD peace officers killed in the line of duty.

The bill also would authorize TPWD's director to appoint as chairman emeritus of the OGT committee a previous committee member. The chairman emeritus could serve a six-year term, with the same rights and duties as a committee member.

Committee meetings would be required at least annually, rather than twice a year. In event of a tie vote on disbursements from the OGT fund, action would have to be deferred until the next meeting. The chairman could vote if the full membership, including the chairman emeritus, voted and a tie resulted. Four members, rather than five, would constitute a quorum for a disbursement.

The bill would take effect September 1, 1995.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

HB 2182 would allow TPWD to advertise and market the OGT program, enhancing the size of the fund to provide more generous awards. Through OGT's 12 years of operation, 5,974 criminal cases have been filed against game and fish violators. About 98 percent of the cases resulted in convictions, and the courts assessed over \$783,865 in fines.

In 12 years the OGT committee has approved over \$100,000 in rewards for information about violations called in on a toll-free telephone line. The OGT funds provide a financial incentive to individuals who might otherwise be reluctant to report gaming violations. Operation Game Thief is an important element in the department's overall strategy to curb fish and game violations. Thousands of pounds of illegally taken game and fish, several thousand feet of illegal nets and trotlines, and numerous traps have been confiscated as a result of the OGT program.

HB 2182 would expand the use of funds in the OGT fund to cover payment of death benefits to TPWD peace officers killed in the line of duty. This would make various sections of the law conform and allow the department to carry out a program authorized by the previous legislature. Use of these funds to supplement death benefits received would be an honorable way for the funds to be expended. Twelve department peace officers have been killed in the line of duty in the department's history, none since the benefit program was authorized.

This legislation would allow the director of TPWD to appoint a chairman emeritus of the OGT committee to serve with the same rights and duties as other committee members. The legislation would also allow the committee to meet only once a year, outside Austin if necessary, and take action if only four members are present.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

No apparent opposition