

SUBJECT: Creating programs to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables

COMMITTEE: Agriculture and Livestock — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 9 ayes — Gonzalez Toureilles, Anderson, B. Brown, Crabb, Hardcastle, Heflin, Kleinschmidt, Rios Ybarra, Swinford

0 nays

WITNESSES: For — JC Dwyer, Texas Food Bank Network; Celia Hagert, Center for Public Policy Priorities; Ronda Rutledge, Sustainable Food Center; (*Registered but did not testify*, Karen Hadden, Sustainable Energy and Economic Development (SEED), Carlos Higgins, Texas Silver-Haired Legislature; Lisa Lewis-Nourzad, Texas PTA; Andy Wilson, Public Citizen; Katherine Zackel, Texans Care for Children)

Against — None.

On — (*Registered, but did not testify*: Kathy Golson, Texas Department of Agriculture)

DIGEST: HB 482 would direct Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) to set up a small retailers competitive grant pilot program and a senior farmers' market nutrition program. The small retailers competitive grant pilot program would award grants to small retailers in low-income areas to stock more fresh fruits and vegetables. The senior farmers' market nutrition program would provide coupons to low-income seniors to be used to buy fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets. TDA would apply for federal funding for both programs.

Small retailers competitive grant pilot program. Grants through the small retailers competitive grant pilot program would be restricted to the purchase of refrigerators, promotional materials, and employee training related to storing fresh produce. The bill would require TDA to launch the program in at least four counties with sizable impoverished populations. At least two of the counties would have to be urban and the other two rural. TDA would publicize the program on its website and distribute literature to interested parties before accepting grant applications.

In order to qualify for the small retailers competitive grant program, a retailer would have to be the only fresh produce store within a one-mile radius. Grant recipients would be required periodically to give TDA a detailed report on how grant money was spent. TDA would perform evaluations of how effectively grant recipients were meeting the goal of increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

The small retailers competitive grant pilot program would begin by January 1, 2010, and continue through September 1, 2011. By December 2010, TDA would be required to submit a report to the Legislature evaluating the program and recommending whether or not to continue it.

Senior farmers' market nutrition program. HB 482 also would establish the senior farmers' market nutrition program in accordance with 7 U.S.C., sec. 3007, the part of the U.S. agricultural code that outlines the program. The program would be funded by the federal government and administered by TDA. Federal funding would be used to issue coupons to low-income senior citizens to buy fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs at farmers' markets, roadside stands, and community-supported agriculture programs.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2009.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

The small retailers competitive grant pilot program established by HB 482 would make it easier for poor families who live in neighborhoods without grocery stores to gain access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Supermarkets that stock a wide variety of fresh produce are concentrated largely in higher-income areas where profits are guaranteed. Low-income families, many of whom cannot afford cars, often end up buying groceries at convenience stores that stock mostly junk food. HB 482 would help to end the disparity in access to healthy foods by providing convenience stores in poor neighborhoods with grants to buy refrigerators and provide employee training on how to store fresh fruits and vegetables.

Senior citizens are especially vulnerable to the health consequences of eating poorly. Some studies indicate that a third of American seniors are not eating the recommended amount of fresh fruits and vegetables daily. This is in part because many seniors are on fixed incomes and cannot afford to buy fresh produce. The coupons provided through the seniors farmers' market nutrition program would enable seniors to buy fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets.

The senior farmers' market nutrition program would support the state's agricultural industry and promote farmers' markets. Farmers' markets often feature locally grown produce, eliminating costs and pollution associated with the transport of goods over long distances. Farmers' markets also provide a place for small family farmers to sell their surplus food directly to consumers.

HB 482 would lead to tremendous savings in health care costs associated with the obesity epidemic in Texas. Consuming a diet high in fresh fruits and vegetables has been shown to decrease the incidence of diet-related diseases, such as type-2 diabetes, heart disease, strokes, and certain cancers. Making healthy food options available to more Texans would reduce the price tag associated with treating diet-related diseases through Medicare and Medicaid.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

Unlike the seniors' program, which corresponds to an existing federal program, the small retailers competitive grant pilot program would not have a clear funding source. The bill would require TDA to request federal funding, but there is no existing federal stream of revenue that would apply to this program.