

- SUBJECT:** Creating the On-The-Ground Conservation Program
- COMMITTEE:** Agriculture and Livestock — favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 9 ayes — Burns, Anderson, Bailes, Cole, Cyrier, Guillen, Herrero, Rosenthal, Toth
- 0 nays
- WITNESSES:** For — Richard L. Schilling, Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts; Colin Mitchell, National Center for Appropriate Technology; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Judith McGeary, Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance; John Pitts Jr., Farm&City; Cyrus Reed, Lone Star Chapter Sierra Club; Sarah Floerke Gouak, Lower Colorado River Authority; Simone Benz, Sustainable Food Center; Peyton Schumann, Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association; Darren Turley, Texas Association of Dairymen; Todd Kercheval, Texas Conservation Association for Water and Soil; Harold Stone, Texas Farm Bureau)
- Against — None
- On — John Foster and Rex Isom, State Soil and Water Conservation Board
- BACKGROUND:** Interested parties have suggested that greater support could be provided to the State Soil and Water Conservation Board to promote on-the-ground conservation methods, which in turn would help support farmers and landowners and improve the state's soil and water resources.
- DIGEST:** HB 2619 would require the State Soil and Water Conservation Board to develop and administer the On-The-Ground Conservation Program to facilitate conservation measures and other conservation land improvement measures by landowners and operators in the state.

Functions, administration. Through the program, the state board would have to provide technical assistance, cost-share assistance, direct grants,

and help in obtaining such assistance from other public or private sources.

The board would have to create rules, forms, and procedures necessary for the program's administration, and could:

- obtain grants, cost-sharing assistance, or other forms of funding from other governmental entities;
- coordinate, receive, and use gifts, grants, and donations from private sources;
- work with qualified nonprofit organizations and universities to provide technical assistance; and
- designate one or more conservation districts to administer the program locally.

The board would be required to establish cost-share rates for eligible soil and water land improvement measures under the program.

Priority conservation measures. The board would be required to designate and give priority under the On-The-Ground Conservation Program to conservation measures that maximized public benefits to the state. Priority conservation measures would include measures that:

- improved soil health characteristics;
- conserved and managed water resources;
- prevented and managed flooding;
- controlled invasive and nuisance species;
- improved resilience to weather extremes, climate variability, and natural disasters;
- protected and enhanced native habitats, including the protection of endangered species;
- mitigated and reduced soil erosion;
- restored land damaged by development; and
- sequestered carbon to provide environmental benefits.

The board would have to establish standards and specifications for each

priority conservation measure designated under the bill and could consider local priorities and needs when designating a priority measure.

Other provisions. Information regarding the program's activities would have to be included in the board's annual report to the governor, lieutenant governor, and House speaker.

The State Soil and Water Conservation Board would be required to implement the On-The-Ground Conservation Program under the bill only if the Legislature appropriated money for that purpose. If money was not appropriated for this purpose, the board could, but would not be required to, create and implement the program.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2021.