

Texas Forest Service

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Summary

Created in 1915 as part of the Texas A&M University System, the Texas Forest Service assists landowners and communities with the management and protection of forests and trees. Originally focusing on the forests of East Texas, the Forest Service has established a statewide presence over the last 20 years, especially in its wildfire prevention and suppression role. To accomplish its mission, the Forest Service provides personnel and grant funding to help volunteer firefighters suppress wildfires; responds to other incidents such as hurricanes and floods and trains teams of local emergency response staff; and helps landowners and communities with sustainable forestry practices.

Senate Bill 646 continues the Texas Forest Service for 12 years and contains all of the Sunset Commission's recommendations to improve the agency's wildfire planning, protection, and response roles. A discussion of the bill's major provisions follows.

Sunset Provisions

1. Continue the Texas Forest Service for 12 years.

The bill continues the Forest Service as an agency at Texas A&M University System for the standard 12-year period. The bill also authorizes the agency's all-hazard emergency management functions of training regional response teams and maintaining a response team composed of its own staff.

2. Grant the Texas Forest Service clear authority for its wildfire response and planning role.

Senate Bill 646 clarifies the agency's authority to take all needed actions to respond to wildfires statewide as it currently does for forest fires that occur in East Texas. The bill also authorizes the Forest Service to develop a method for allowing volunteer firefighters to assist the agency with wildfire response when demands on local resources are exceeded, as determined by the agency. To the extent that resources are available, the agency may compensate volunteer firefighters or fire departments for labor, expenses, and equipment. The agency may also establish minimum qualifications a volunteer firefighter must meet to be compensated. In determining the appropriate wildfire response, the Forest Service must use the most cost-effective combination of volunteer firefighters, temporary employees, and out-of-state personnel and equipment.

Finally, the bill requires the Forest Service to develop its existing conceptual wildfire protection plan into a more robust plan with a sufficient level of detail to guide the State's approach towards managing wildfires. Among the elements that must be included, the plan must detail the respective roles of the Forest Service and volunteer fire departments in wildfire response matters; describe the expected revenue, expenditures, and staffing needs to implement the plan; and estimate savings resulting from the plan.

3. Update the Volunteer Fire Department Assistance Program to better serve the Texas Forest Service’s strategic wildfire protection goals.

The bill requires the Forest Service to add criteria that account for risk factors such as wildfire occurrence, size, severity, and potential for property loss when awarding Volunteer Fire Department Assistance Program grants to eligible departments. Senate Bill 646 also authorizes the Forest Service to make a small portion of grant funding available to volunteer fire departments to meet Federal Emergency Management Agency and any other federal cost-share requirements. Finally, the bill requires the Forest Service to develop and adopt a set of grant program policies and procedures through the rulemaking process and hold public meetings when making program decisions.

Provision Added by the Legislature _____

4. Update Texas Forest Service statute to be gender-neutral.

The Legislature added a provision to the bill that removes references to “his,” “he,” and “men” to make the Forest Service statute gender-neutral.

Fiscal Implication Summary _____

Senate Bill 646 will not have a significant fiscal impact to the State.