



FY 2014 & FY 2015 Exceptional Item



Appropriated Amount (biennial):
\$10 Million

TEXAS WILDFIRE PROTECTION PLAN: VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT (VFD) GRANTS

Benefit to Texans

Population growth combined with changes in land use and intensifying drought conditions have led to increasingly severe wildfire seasons in recent years. And these trends are expected to continue.

The state population has doubled since 1970, which carries significant impact since 95 percent of wildfires are caused by people. Add to that the increasing number of Texans who are moving into previously wild areas, most of whom are unaware of the dangers or how to protect themselves. Previously considered a rural problem, 80 percent of all wildfires now burn within two miles of a community. Making matters worse are the devastating drought conditions that have affected Texas in recent years. This request strives to make sure firefighters across the state are prepared.

Currently, the Rural Fire Department Assistance Program has \$131 million worth of requests still awaiting funding. Restoring program funding to its previous level would allow the state to provide more volunteer fire departments with the equipment, gear and training they need to keep Texans safe. The same holds true with reinstating funding to the Rural Fire Department Insurance Program. Restoring the funding for that program to previous levels would provide workers compensation coverage for roughly 700 more firefighters each year.

Restoring full spending authority of these funds will enable the agency to meet more of the volunteer fire departments' needs. Doing so strengthens Texas' ability to protect itself and the residents that call this great state home.

Description and Justification

In Texas, local — often volunteer — fire departments are considered the first line of defense. They respond to 80 percent of the wildfires that break out across Texas every year. And they often do it with battle worn equipment and limited budgets.

OBJECTIVE

Restore spending authority for the Rural Volunteer Fire Department Assistance Program and the Rural Volunteer Fire Department Insurance Program.

Volunteer firefighters make up two-thirds of the firefighting forces in Texas. More than three-quarters of the almost 2,000 fire departments scattered across the state are staffed by volunteer firefighters. That's why the Rural Volunteer Fire Department Assistance and Rural Volunteer Fire Department Insurance programs are so important.

Established by the 77th Legislature in 2001 and administered by TFS, the programs provide grants for engines, fire and rescue equipment, protective gear, training and workers compensation and disability insurance. Since its inception, the Rural Volunteer Fire Department Assistance Program has funded more than 1,400 fire trucks, 58,000 sets of protective gear and 41,645 training opportunities, awarding more than \$167 million in total grants.

The program previously received \$46.5 million per biennium for grants. And even at that level of funding, fire department requests continually exceed available funds. During the 82nd Legislative Session, state appropriations for the Rural Volunteer Fire Department Assistance Program grants were reduced by more than \$16 million per year, leaving \$7 million per year available for distribution.

Trying to make the most efficient use of grant funds, The Texas A&M Forest Service placed a priority on firefighter safety, focusing on grants for training and protective gear. Unfortunately, grants for engines and other large equipment had to be put on hold for the most part until funding could be restored.

The companion Rural Volunteer Fire Department Insurance Program, which is funded by a 2 percent tax on fireworks sales, was also reduced during the last legislative session. The insurance program provides workers compensation and disability insurance for roughly 10,000 volunteer firefighters each year. But during the 82nd Legislative Session, the program lost \$100,000 in biennium appropriations — a decrease that equated to fewer volunteer firefighters being covered by insurance.

Texas A&M Forest Service requests that funding for both programs be fully restored.



For more information, contact:

Tom Boggus, State Forester and Director
200 Technology Way, Suite 1281
College Station TX 77845
P: (979) 458-6606 E: tboggus@tfs.tamu.edu
W: tfsweb.tamu.edu



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