

SUBJECT: Adding a USDA mediation representative to rural workgroup meeting

COMMITTEE: Agriculture and Livestock — favorable without amendment

VOTE: 5 ayes — Hardcastle, Anderson, B. Brown, Herrero, Olivo
0 nays
2 absent — Burnam, Farrar

SENATE VOTE: On final passage, April 28 — 31-0, on Local and Uncontested Calendar

WITNESSES: For — None
Against — None
On — Eric Beverly, Office of Rural Community Affairs

BACKGROUND: Government Code, sec. 487.054 requires the heads of several state agencies to meet in Austin annually to discuss rural issues and to provide information showing the impact each agency has on rural communities. This information is used in developing rural policy and compiling the annual report of the Office of Rural Community Affairs (ORCA).

DIGEST: SB 1686 would require the governor to designate a representative from the entity that under federal law provides mediation services to Texas for U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)-related issues, and other issues, to attend the annual meeting hosted by ORCA.

The bill also would update the names of the agencies required to attend the meeting.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2005.

SUPPORTERS SAY: SB 1686 would ensure that participants in the rural issues interagency workgroup received as broad and complete a picture of rural issues as possible. Including a representative from the entity that provides mediation services for USDA-related issues under federal law would

include in the meeting input from a person involved in mediating rural issues. These issues can include wetlands determinations, compliance with farm programs, agricultural credit, rural water loan programs, pesticides, and more.

Although current law allows a person described by SB 1686 to attend the annual meeting, the bill would ensure that the governor designated a specific person by placing the requirement in statute. Naming the person in statute also would give the mediation representative equal standing with other attendees and could help ensure that the representative's comments and participation were taken seriously.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

SB 1686 is unnecessary because current law specifies that the head of any other agency interested in rural issues but not listed specifically in the code can attend the meeting. This is broad enough to include the head of the agency handling dispute resolution in Texas for the USDA. It would be better not to limit the statute by listing every possible attendee to the meeting.