

SUBJECT: Establishing a program to reduce border agricultural inspection wait times

COMMITTEE: Agriculture and Livestock — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 7 ayes — Springer, Anderson, Beckley, Buckley, Burns, Fierro, Raymond

0 nays

2 absent — Meza, Zwiener

WITNESSES: For — Luis Bazan and Tony Martinez, Pharr International Bridge; Bret Erickson, Texas International Produce Association; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Michael Vargas, City of Pharr; Shayne Woodard, Wonderful Citrus; and six individuals)

Against — None

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

BACKGROUND: Some have suggested that wait times for agricultural inspections of vehicles at ports of entry along Texas' border with Mexico are too long due to a lack of federal inspectors, causing congestion at the ports and negatively affecting the state's economy.

DIGEST: HB 2155 would establish the Trade Agricultural Inspection Grant Program, which would be administered by the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) and provide grants to nonprofit organizations in order to reduce wait times for agricultural inspections of vehicles at ports of entry along the Texas-Mexico border.

TDA would have to establish procedures to administer the grant program, including for the submission and evaluation of proposals. The department would request and evaluate proposals and award grants based on a proposed program's quantifiable effectiveness and potentially positive impact on Texas' agricultural processing industry. Grants could be made

only to organizations that had demonstrated experience working with border inspection authorities to reduce border crossing wait times.

TDA would be required to enter into a contract that included performance requirements with each grant recipient, and the department would have to monitor and enforce the contract's terms. Contracts would have to authorize TDA to recoup grant money from a recipient if the recipient failed to comply with the contract's terms.

To be eligible to receive a grant under the program, a nonprofit organization would have to provide matching funds, and TDA would have to certify such funds were available before awarding a grant. A grant issued under the program could not exceed the amount of matching funds available.

Grant recipients could use grant money received under the program only to pay for activities directly related to the grant program's purpose. Grant money could be used to reimburse a federal governmental agency that provided additional border agricultural inspectors or paid overtime to inspectors at ports of entry along the border at the request of the grant recipient.

The total amount of grants awarded under the bill could not exceed \$725,000 for the duration of the program, which would expire on September 1, 2021, unless continued by the Legislature. TDA could solicit and accept gifts, grants, and donations from any source for the purpose of awarding grants under the program.

By January 15, 2021, TDA would have to submit a report to the Legislature that included an evaluation of agricultural inspections affected by the program and the extent to which the program had reduced wait times for agricultural inspections at the border.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2019.

NOTES: According to the Legislative Budget Board, the bill would have a positive

impact of \$725,000 to general revenue related funds through fiscal 2020-21.