

SENATE BILL REPORT

SHB 2051

As of February 22, 2022

Title: An act relating to providing short-term disaster recovery financial assistance to agricultural producers.

Brief Description: Providing short-term disaster recovery financial assistance to agricultural producers.

Sponsors: House Committee on Appropriations (originally sponsored by Representatives Rule, Shewmake, Ormsby and Ramel).

Brief History: Passed House: 2/9/22, 94-0.

Committee Activity: Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks: 2/22/22.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires the Conservation Commission to develop a short-term disaster recovery financial assistance program (Program) for farmers and ranchers.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, WATER, NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS

Staff: Karen Epps (786-7424)

Background: Conservation Commission. The Conservation Commission was created by the Legislature in 1939 to support conservation districts through financial and technical assistance, administrative and operational oversight, program coordination, and promotion of district activities and services. Specifically, the Conservation Commission has several duties, including to:

- assist the supervisors of districts;
- keep the supervisors of each district informed of the activities and experiences of other districts, and facilitate an exchange of advice and experience between districts;

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- review and advise on agreements by districts;
- secure cooperation with and assistance from federal, state, and local agencies in the work of districts;
- administer and distribute allocated funds;
- partner with local governments to facilitate activities dealing with the conservation of renewable natural resources;
- disseminate information throughout Washington about the activities and programs of districts;
- review and comment on state and local plans, programs, and activities affecting conservation of renewable natural resources;
- compile information and make studies, summaries, and analyses of district programs and resource conservation programs statewide;
- assist districts in obtaining legal services from state and local legal officers;
- require annual reports from districts; and
- establish uniform accounting and auditing procedures.

Conservation Districts. A conservation district is a governmental subdivision of the state, which exercises public powers. Conservation districts work with landowners on a voluntary basis, providing incentive-based conservation help on private lands. The board of supervisors of a conservation district is composed of five members, three of whom are elected and two appointed by the Conservation Commission. There are 45 conservation districts in Washington, and at least one in each county.

Summary of Bill: Subject to amounts appropriated, and in cooperation with conservation districts, the Conservation Commission must develop and implement a short-term disaster recovery financial assistance program (Program) for farmers and ranchers. The Program must initially address providing short-term funding to farmers and ranchers that sustained physical damage or economic losses caused by flooding in Whatcom County during November 2021.

To be eligible for grant funds, farmers or ranchers must provide documentation of lost agricultural income or activity as a result of a natural disaster. Grants may be used for:

- payroll;
- utilities and rent;
- marketing and advertising;
- building improvements or repairs;
- replacing damaged or lost crops, livestock, and equipment; and
- other operations and business expenses.

The Conservation Commission must coordinate with the Department of Agriculture and Conservation Districts to increase awareness of the Program and other state and federal disaster relief assistance. The Conservation Commission may adopt rules to implement the Program.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect immediately.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: This bill is about bringing relief for farmers and ranchers. This bill will provide relief to farmers and ranchers in situations where others are not able to provide relief. Conservation districts immediately reached out to farmers to assess damage and needs after the flooding events in Whatcom County. The Conservation Commission responded with the limited funding that was available. The Conservation Commission has responded after wildfires, droughts, hard freezes, heat events, and flooding, and creating a financial assistance program at the Commission will help them support districts as they recover from natural disasters. 2021 was an especially difficult year for agriculture in Whatcom County, with the heat dome in June and July that destroyed up to 40 percent of the berry crops, and then flooding in November. The program established in this bill is important in the Nooksack basin now and into the future.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Representative Alicia Rule, Prime Sponsor; Ron Shultz, WA State Conservation Commission; Bill Clarke, Whatcom Ag Water Board.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.