

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5936

As of February 1, 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: Senators Sefzik, Lovelett, Dozier, Holy and Schoesler.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks: 2/01/22.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires the Conservation Commission to develop a short-term disaster recovery financial assistance program (Program) for farmers and ranchers.
- Appropriates \$600,000 from the State General Fund for the Program.

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

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- other districts, and facilitate an exchange of advice and experience between districts;
- 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: The bill contains an appropriation totaling \$600,000 from General Fund-State in fiscal year 2022.

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: There are people who suffered from recent flooding events in Whatcom County in November 2021. This bill provides a financial relief to the agricultural community that has been so negatively impacted by the recent severe weather events. Conservation districts play key roles following natural disasters, such as paying for re-seeding and re-fencing after wildfires, organizing emergency hay deliveries for livestock, and providing cost share for the disposal of livestock carcasses. Creating a disaster recovery financial assistance program within the Conservation Commission will help the commission better support the districts as they assist their local agricultural communities to help them recover from these natural disasters and these funds would be available for the conservation districts as quickly as possible.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Simon Sefzik, Prime Sponsor; Alison Halpern, Washington State Conservation Commission.

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