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## State Government & Tribal Relations Committee

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### HB 1567

**Brief Description:** Commissioning a study on conservation district election costs under Title 29A RCW.

**Sponsors:** Representatives Gregerson, Lekanoff, Jacobsen, Doglio and Reed.

#### Brief Summary of Bill

- Directs the Washington State Institute of Public Policy to conduct a study of conservation district election costs, both under current law and if districts were to shift to general election ballots under Title 29A RCW.

**Hearing Date:** 2/7/23

**Staff:** Andrew Hatt (786-7296) and Jason Zolle (786-7124).

#### Background:

##### Conservation Districts.

Conservation districts are a type of special purpose district that promote the conservation of natural resources in local communities, providing a variety of voluntary, incentive-based programs in areas such as habitat restoration, stormwater management, urban agriculture, and environmental education. There are 45 conservation districts in Washington, all of which are overseen and supported by the State Conservation Commission (SCC). The SCC is comprised of a 10-member governing board, which includes:

- four commissioners appointed to represent state partners, including the Department of Ecology, Department of Agriculture, Department of Natural Resources, and Washington State University;
- two commissioners appointed by the Governor;

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- three commissioners who are current conservation district board supervisors, elected to serve by members of the Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD); and
- the President of the WACD.

As special purpose districts, conservation districts are local government entities separate from a county, city, or town government. Conservation districts may be formed when 20 percent of the voters in a proposed district area file a petition with the SCC. A public hearing is then called, and the SCC may call an election if it determines that creation of the conservation district is warranted in the interest of public health, safety, and welfare. If a majority of voters in the subsequent election support establishment of the conservation district, the district is then created if the SCC determines that the project is feasible.

#### Conservation District Elections.

The SCC may determine the qualifications necessary to vote in a conservation district election. By SCC rule, an individual may vote if they are registered to vote in the county where the district is located and reside within the conservation district boundaries.

Each conservation district is governed by a five-member board of supervisors, three of whom are elected to staggered three-year terms. Two of the three elected supervisors are required to be landowners or operators of a farm. The other two supervisors are appointed by the SCC, with one required to be a landowner or the operator of a farm.

The SCC designates polling places and sets the date for elections regarding the creation of a conservation district. For elections to the board of supervisors, the board of supervisors sets the date of the election during the first quarter of the calendar year. To appear on the ballot for a board of supervisor election, a person must file a petition signed by 25 electors.

#### Title 29A RCW Elections.

Most local government and special district elections are conducted under Title 29A RCW, except for some types of special districts. In Title 29A RCW elections:

- candidates file for office during a filing period in May;
- a primary is held in August to narrow the field to two candidates; and
- a general election is held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November.

General elections for local government candidates are conducted in odd-numbered years, except for counties in which the charter specifies even-year elections. Upon request by the legislative authority, special elections may be called by a county auditor on one of four days, with one in February, one in April, the date of the August primary, or the November general election.

Mail-in ballots are sent to voters by the county auditor, who largely conducts elections at the county level, and returned ballots are canvassed by a county canvassing board. Each registered voter is entitled to one vote in the local government races for the jurisdictions in which the voter resides. The Office of the Secretary of State oversees elections, and the Public Disclosure Commission oversees rules for elections and campaign finance laws.

The Legislature has considered bills in recent biennia that would provide for additional special purpose districts to have their elections conducted under Title 29A RCW, or to have the option to switch.

Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) is a nonpartisan public research group, established by the legislature in 1983. The WSIPP carries out research at the direction of the Legislature or its Board of Directors, conducting multi-disciplinary research and cost-benefit analysis in areas such as general government, education, criminal justice, and health.

**Summary of Bill:**

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) is directed to conduct a study on the costs associated with conservation district supervisor elections, both under current law and if districts were to shift to general election ballots under Title 29A RCW.

Specifically, the study must include:

- an analysis of the expenses each conservation district incurs to hold elections for its supervisors under current law;
- a description of funding sources that conservation districts utilize to fund their elections;
- data about voter turnout for conservation district supervisor elections over the past 20 years, and a calculation of the total cost per ballot cast in each election;
- a projection of election costs for each conservation district if supervisor elections were held on general election ballots per Title 29A RCW requirements, including:
  - switching all supervisor positions to elected positions; and
  - changing term lengths to four years, with terms staggered such that elections were held every two years, in alignment with other elections for local government officials;
- a projection of election costs for each conservation district if, in addition to the changes described above, conservation districts were divided into zones represented by a single supervisor, rather than electing each supervisor at-large throughout the entire district; and
- an assessment of the overall nonmonetary costs and benefits associated with switching conservation district supervisor elections to general election ballots under Title 29A RCW and the other changes described above.

The study is subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose. If funded, WSIPP is required to complete and submit the study to the relevant standing committees of the Legislature by December 1, 2023.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Available.

**Effective Date:** The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.