Draft Legislative Recommendation:
TWDB's Ag Water Conservation Grant Program
WCAC Report 2022

Continue funding for TWDB's Agricultural Water Conservation Grant Program.

It is estimated that with its current grant and loan activities, the Agricultural Water Conservation Fund, created by the 69th Legislature, will not be able to sustain its current level of use after 2025.

Since the fund's initial bonding authority of $200 million in 1985, the fund has provided over $113,100,100 in agricultural grants and low interest loans. It is estimated that since 2004 the program has funded projects that have resulted in over 923,019 acre-feet of water saved. In 2019, the annual funding capacity was increased by the 86th Texas Legislature to allow more funds to be awarded. While this expanded capacity provided more opportunity for more capital-intensive projects, it also accelerated the rate of drawdown of available funds.

Without these funds, irrigation districts, GCDs, and agricultural producers will not have access to cost-efficient funds and training about new irrigation technology. Texas irrigators will have to find alternative sources of funding for their conservation efforts, and there may be a potential reduction in adoption of these irrigation water management strategies and technologies, which are an important component in the state water plan.

Approximately 73 percent of all groundwater and 29 percent of surface water is used for agricultural irrigation making it the largest water use category. (TWDB, 2019). As the largest use of water, agricultural irrigation presents the state's best opportunity to achieve significant water use savings through conservation.

Based on TWDB water use estimates for 2019, a 1.5 percent reduction in irrigation water use through conservation would save more acre feet of water than the estimated annual municipal use in Lubbock, Potter and Randall counties combined. If conservation produced a 2.5 percent reduction in irrigation, the savings would exceed the estimated annual municipal use in Travis County with more than 1.3 million population. And a 5 percent reduction would far exceed the annual municipal use of Bexar County.

Such reductions in agricultural water use as these are clearly realistic and achievable. Recent research in Texas has found that irrigation scheduling, which allows for the efficient allocation of irrigation water according to crop requirements based on meteorological demands and field conditions, can produce water savings of 10 percent.

And drought-resistant varieties for corn, cotton, and soybeans currently available reduce water use by 15 percent and new varieties available by 2030 that will reduce water use an additional 15 percent compared to current varieties. (Analyzing potential water conservation strategies in the Texas Panhandle, Crouch, MariKate; Guerrero, Bridget; Amosson, Steve; Marek, Thomas; Almas, Lal, Irrigation Science, Volume 38 (5-6): 9 – Jul 31, 2020)

For 37 years, the TWDB Agricultural Water Conservation Fund has provided a vital source of funding for agricultural research, demonstration projects and educational programs to conserve water by increasing agricultural water use efficiency and promoting adoption of best management practices. Legislative action to renew the funding in the Agricultural Water Conservation Fund would be an investment to help ensure Texas has adequate water supplies in the future for agricultural production and to serve the needs of the state's rapidly growing population.

The Council recommends that the Texas Legislature replenish funding in the Agricultural Water Conservation Fund to maintain the current level of $1,200,000 per year for Texas Water Development Board's Agricultural Water Conservation Grant Program.