



The Senate of Texas

KEVIN SPARKS

DISTRICT 31

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STATE SENATOR SPARKS FILES SECOND 89th PRIORITY LEGISLATIVE PACKAGE ON PANHANDLE WILDFIRE RESPONSE

[Austin, TX] – Senator Kevin Sparks (R-Midland) announced his second legislative priority package, aimed at responding to the historic 2024 Panhandle Wildfires. Texas faces persistent threats from wildfires, particularly in the Panhandle, where expansive grasslands, dry conditions, and strong winds create a high-risk environment. Wildfires devastate local communities, destroy property, and strain emergency response systems. Senator Sparks’ legislative package on wildfire response addresses these challenges by enhancing preparedness, improving coordination among agencies, and securing resources for rapid response. Sen. Sparks’ 89th Legislative Priorities on ‘Panhandle Wildfire Response’ consist of the following pieces of legislation:

SB 1 (Huffman): State Budget Investments for Wildfire Mitigation: Appropriates historic funding for firefighting aircraft, funding the rural volunteer fire department backlog, and emergency regional offices.

SB 868: Rural Volunteer Fire Department Funding Reform: Removes the cap on the Rural Assistance VFD Grant and allocates 10% of funds to high-risk wildfire areas like the Panhandle.

SB 497: Emergency Vehicle Exemptions: Waives vehicle weight and fuel requirements during disasters to aid farmers and ranchers while reducing reliance on emergency orders.

SB 767: Statewide Equipment Database: Establishes a statewide firefighting equipment database through the Texas A&M Forest Service to enhance coordination and increase preparedness.

“Constant wildfire threats that require preparation, coordination, and resources is the most pressing issue for the Panhandle,” stated Senator Sparks. “My legislative package focuses on supporting rural volunteer fire departments, aiding farmers, and ranchers, and ensuring transparency in firefighting equipment. In addition, I will continue to prioritize funding for wildfire relief. As we move ahead, I look forward to working with the Panhandle Delegation to ensure our communities are safe and prepared as we work to protect the Panhandle at all costs.”

“The Panhandle's rural communities face unique challenges in combating wildfires, and ensuring they have the resources to protect lives and livelihoods is critical,” said Senator Charles Perry. “Senator Sparks’ legislative package is a vital step toward strengthening our preparedness and response efforts, especially for volunteer fire departments that are the backbone of our rural firefighting infrastructure. I look forward to working with him to ensure these communities receive the support they need to prevent future devastation.”

The following pages detail each bill regarding background, key provisions, and statements of supports.



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SB 1 (Huffman) – STATE BUDGET INVESTMENTS IN WILDFIRE MITIGATION

Background

On February 27, 2024, the Texas A&M Forest Service ordered federal fire suppression aircraft but faced over 24 hours of delays before federal air support arrived, worsening fire response efforts. Texas relies on U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management aircraft, as it does not own firefighting planes. However, timely aerial response requires pre-positioning, which remains a challenge. State leaders, including Texas Department of Emergency Management (TDEM) Chief Nim Kidd and Senators Perry and Sparks, have called for state aircraft funding. Texas has also reimbursed an estimated \$623 million in federal contracting costs from 2007 to 2023. Additionally, Texas VFDs face funding shortages, as they submit over 2,000 grant applications annually, requesting \$43.7 million, but only \$21.7 million is awarded, leaving a \$22 million annual shortfall. More than a thousand VFDs have almost \$200 million in pending applications from previous years.

Key Provisions

The Senate base budget legislation includes the following measures:

- **\$194,000,000 – Firefighting Aircraft:** This one-time funding item appropriates nearly two hundred million for the state's first ever firefighting aircraft fleet to mitigate wildfire through water and retardant utilization.
- **\$192,000,000 – VFD Grant Backlog:** This one-time funding item appropriates the entire rural VFD assistance grant backlog, meaning departments will no longer wait over a decade to obtain needed resources moving forward.
- **\$28,181,861 – Rural VFD Assistance Grant:** This annual funding item appropriates an increase from the previous grant assessment by more than \$5,000,000, which will assist our rural volunteer firefighters for better equipment such as fire trucks.
- **\$315,000,000 – New Emergency Operational Facilities:** This one-funding item appropriates significant investment towards seven new TDEM facilities to assist in disaster preparedness and emergency mitigation.



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SB 868 – RURAL VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT FUNDING REFORM

Background

The 2024 Panhandle Wildfires, the largest in Texas history, burned over a million acres, destroying ranches, livestock, and homes. Over the past two decades, the magnitude and intensity of wildfires have been growing statewide, with longer fire seasons and increasingly destructive events. Since 2006, the Panhandle has seen a rise in wildfire occurrences, partly due to changes in land use. Incentivized by the federal Conservation Reserve Program, cultivated farmland has steadily decreased, leading to higher fuel loads and the loss of fire breaks once provided by cultivated fields. Additionally, the Texas Panhandle communities are heavily reliant on rural VFDs, given there are only a handful of professional firefighting units for the state's northern most region.

Key Provisions

This bill would remove the statutory cap on the Rural VFD Assistance Grant issued and overseen by the Texas A&M Forest Service. The VFD grant backlog has ballooned to almost \$200 million resulting in many departments waiting for than a decade to receive assistance. Additionally, the bill authorized ten percent of these funds to be used in high-risk wildfire areas, much of which are in West Texas/Panhandle, to ensure areas with historical wildfire issues receive necessary assistance annually.

Statements of Support

“After sitting through hours of testimony following the devastating Panhandle Wildfires, it became apparent that the biggest hurdle our volunteer fire departments face is a lack of funding. I look forward to working with Senator Sparks on this important legislation to ensure that every volunteer fire department has the resources needed to safely protect Texas communities. It is our responsibility to take all steps necessary to protect our land, our lives and the future of our great state that depends on it, which is my priority this legislative session.” - **State Representative Ken King, Texas House District 88**

“We are extremely grateful for the legislators’ support of volunteer first responders throughout the state. The Rural Volunteer Fire Department Assistants Fund is the lifeline for our thousands of first responders and departments throughout the state, providing funding for training, protective gear, and equipment. Having just experienced the largest wildfire in the history of the state and with a nearly \$200 million backlog, some department’s waiting years, the need has never been greater. While not directly addressing the backlog, an annual increase would help address the annual requests that come in each year. We look forward to working with Senator Sparks, Representative King, those who served on the Wildfire Investigative Committee that looked at the need for the increase in funding and the entire legislature to address the needs of our departments” - **Billy Tidwell, President - Texas State Association of Fire Fighters & Fire Marshals**

“Being a volunteer fire chief in the Texas Panhandle and on the front lines of the largest wildfire in our state’s history, I know how important it is that our volunteers have the resources needed to protect our communities. Providing much-needed additional funding for The Rural Volunteer Fire Department Assistants Fund will help provide for training and equipment to keep our volunteers and our communities safe.” - **Phillip Clark, Fire Chief - Miami-Roberts County VFD**



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SB 497 – EMERGENCY VEHICLE EXEMPTIONS

Background

During the 2024 Panhandle Wildfires, farmers and ranchers were working with minutes to spare as they sought to save property, land, and livestock with surrounding wildfires surrounding the area. Exemptions from state officials were announced for state and federal temporary waivers in response to the Panhandle Wildfires, but response lags can create for issues for agricultural professionals. In the 88th Legislature, Rep. Burns filed HB 2683 & HB 2684 to provide emergency fuel and weight exemptions, but these measures failed to pass.

Key Provisions

This bill seeks to remedy natural disaster situations by waiving weight and fuel requirements for vehicles being used during or following a disaster. Emergency exemptions seek to mitigate the impact of disasters on essential workers such as farmers and ranchers by authorizing on-highway use. However, due to current vehicle weight and fuel requirements, commercial motor vehicle operators must make difficult decisions when impacted by these weather events.

Statements of Support

“Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association and its members depend on local and regional disaster response efforts, especially those of our brave volunteer fire departments. We applaud Sen. Sparks’ efforts to remove barriers that unnecessarily hinder the ability of these Texans to respond to wildfires in their communities. We look forward to working with Sen. Sparks and other legislators this session to improve wildfire prevention, mitigation, and response in Texas.” - **Carl Ray Polk Jr., President - Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association**

“Texas Farm Bureau is proud to support SB 497. When disaster hits our communities, it is critical that our producers move agricultural commodities across our state swiftly, safely and without disruption. This legislation will help support relief efforts by ensuring essential goods continue to flow during times of crisis. We applaud Senator Sparks for filing this vital legislation that supports the farmers and ranchers in our state. Whether it’s a hurricane on the coast, or a wildfire in the Panhandle, SB 497 will help ag producers safely deliver the food, fiber, and fuel that we all depend on before, during and after an emergency or major disaster.” - **Russell Boening, President - Texas Farm Bureau**

“During a wildfire, snowstorm, flood, or another declared disaster cattle feeders and other livestock producers need to be able to react and respond quickly to ensure the safety of their employees and animals. Texas Cattle Feeders Association fully supports and appreciates Sen. Sparks’ efforts through SB 497 to allow the use of dyed diesel and to permit heavier truck weights for livestock and feed haulers during and after a declared disaster.” - **Robby Kirkland, Chairman - Texas Cattle Feeders Association**



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SB 767 – STATEWIDE EQUIPMENT DATABASE

Background

On May 1st, 2024, the Texas House Investigative Committee on Panhandle Wildfires recommended improved wildfire mitigation through better information-sharing and a centralized database of firefighting equipment. While the Texas A&M Forest Service (TAMFS) currently tracks response assets by office location, testimony highlighted the need for statewide, updatable database information that is accessible to fire departments. This would allow departments to share and locate equipment more effectively during emergencies, improving coordination and planning. The committee urged TAMFS, with legislative support, to develop a county-by-county database to create a comprehensive, real-time inventory for wildfire response.

Key Provisions

This bill directs the Texas A&M Forest Service to create and maintain a real-time, statewide database of firefighting equipment available for wildfire response. The database must include equipment descriptions, fire department contact information, and allow searches by location and equipment type. It must also be accessible to all fire departments, enabling them to update their information. Volunteer fire departments and emergency services districts are included, and the forest service may assist with annual updates or changes in equipment availability.

Statements of Support

“I am proud to join the dedicated Panhandle delegation in our relentless efforts to support the communities affected by the largest wildfire in Texas history. The 89th Legislature will be defined by historic actions to ensure our heroes on the front lines are fully funded and better equipped. This session, it is a privilege to fulfill my commitment to supporting our firefighters and taking proactive steps to prevent further devastation.” - **State Representative Caroline Fairley, Texas House District 87**

“Knowing what assets are available and who to call in times of need is essential in responding to all kinds of incidents.” - **Phillip Clark, Fire Chief - Miami-Roberts County VFD**

“As Texas continues to face longer and more intense wildfire seasons, the importance of this legislation cannot be overstated. The ability to quickly access critical resources will save lives, protect property, and preserve the safety of our firefighters and communities. I commend Senator Sparks for championing this initiative and urge the Texas Legislature to pass S.B. 767. My department and I stand ready to assist in the implementation of this critical tool and will actively support efforts to ensure its success. Thank you for your leadership and dedication to the safety and well-being of Texans.” - **Nick Perkins, Fire Chief - Travis County ESD No. 2**

“Knowing what assets are available could help provide quicker local, regional, and statewide responses. Whether it’s a wildfire, hurricane, flood, hazmat, or any other all-risk incident, knowing who to call and what is available can make a huge difference.” - **Billy Tidwell, President - State Firefighters’ & Fire Marshals’ Association**