

Overview of 83rd Legislative Session, and Food Policy Issues

Background: The 83rd Legislative Session begins on Tuesday, January 8, 2013. The session lasts for 140 days, per the Texas Constitution. Prefiling of bills began on November 12, 2012, and will continue on a regular basis until March 8, 2013. There is no limit on how many bills each member of the Legislature can file. Last session, almost 6,000 bills were filed, but only about a fifth of those filed passed into law.

General Issues for the 83rd Session:

- There will likely be a Speaker's race, between current Speaker of the House Joe Straus, R-San Antonio and Rep. David Simpson, R- Longview.
- There are many new members of the Legislature. Almost 1/3 of the House is freshmen, and six members of the Texas Senate are new (although several have served previously in the House).
- The most recent budget estimate is that the state's Rainy Day Fund has \$9 billion in it, although the State Comptroller will not release her official estimate until January. Regardless of this, lawmakers have committed the revenue to current expenses, such as Medicaid, public education, transportation, and other issues.
- "Big" issues on the horizon include water issues, education, and health care.

Issues Related to Food Policy

- Rep. Eddie Rodriguez, D-Austin, has created a Farm-to-Table Caucus, with the purpose of focusing attention on local and sustainable agriculture issues. The caucus is co-chaired by Rep. Lois Kolkhorst, R-Brenham. Currently, the caucus has 22 members.
- Food policy bills filed to date include legislation by Senator Jane Nelson, R- Flower Mound, (SB 133) related to state property being used for community gardens; HB 254 by Rep. Boris Miles, D-Houston, related to exempting farms and community gardens for wastewater charges in excess of actual use; and HB 46 by Dan Flynn, R-Van, on sales of raw milk products.
- There will likely be other food policy-related bills filed over the next few months.
- There may be efforts to restrict what people can purchase with their SNAP benefits, or require drug testing for people receiving certain public benefits. (Nothing filed to date on SNAP, but a bill was filed related to TANF.)
- Congress still has not settled the Farm Bill, and the outcome of that legislation at the federal level may have a significant impact on agriculture policy at the state level. One issue that has recently been brought to attention is the effect of the lack of a Farm Bill on milk prices. This in turn can affect school lunch and

summer food program costs – or any program where milk is a required component of a meal.

- The recent drought plays into water issues, and how to compensate for higher food prices, including the price of beef.