By:  Harrison, Thompson of Harris H.B. No. 2992

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED

AN ACT

relating to asset forfeiture under the Code of Criminal Procedure.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF TEXAS:

SECTION 1.  Chapter 59, Code of Criminal Procedure, is amended by adding Articles 59.0221 and 59.0222 to read as follows:

Art. 59.0221.  EXEMPT PROPERTY. Notwithstanding any other law, a motor vehicle valued at less than $10,000 is exempt from forfeiture under this chapter.

Art. 59.0222.  INNOCENT OWNER. Notwithstanding any other law, the property of an innocent owner may not be forfeited.

SECTION 2.  Article 59.06, Code of Criminal Procedure, is amended by amending Subsections (c-1) and (m) and adding Subsections (v), (w), and (x) to read as follows:

(c-1)  Notwithstanding Subsection (a), the attorney representing the state and special rangers of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association who meet the requirements of Article 2.125 may enter into a local agreement that allows the attorney representing the state to transfer proceeds from the sale of forfeited property described by Subsection (c), after the deduction of court costs as described by that subsection, to a special fund established for the special rangers. Proceeds transferred under this subsection must be used by the special rangers solely for law enforcement purposes. Any expenditures of the proceeds are subject to the audit provisions established under this chapter [~~article~~].

(m)  As a specific exception to Subdivisions (1)-(3) of Subsection (c), a law enforcement agency or attorney representing the state may use proceeds received under this chapter to contract with a person or entity to prepare an audit required by this chapter [~~as required by Subsection (g)~~].

(v)  As a specific exception to Subsection (c) that the funds described by that subsection be used only for the official purposes of the attorney representing the state or for law enforcement purposes, the attorney representing the state or the head of a law enforcement agency, as applicable, may use any portion of the gross amount credited to the attorney's or agency's special fund under Subsection (c) to pay:

(1)  the fee charged by the attorney general under Article 59.17; or

(2)  any costs incurred by the attorney representing the state or the law enforcement agency to compile information or submit reports to the attorney general as required by Articles 59.15 and 59.16.

(w)  Notwithstanding any other provision of this article, if a law enforcement agency does not comply with Article 59.16(c), the attorney representing the state may not disburse funds received under this chapter to the agency, and the agency may not expend any proceeds or use any property awarded under this article, until the agency submits the report required by that subsection.

(x)  Notwithstanding any other provision of this article, if the attorney representing the state does not comply with Article 59.16(c), the attorney may not expend any proceeds or use any property received under this chapter and awarded under this article until after the attorney submits the report required by that subsection.

SECTION 3.  Article 59.061, Code of Criminal Procedure, is amended by adding Subsections (a-1) and (e) to read as follows:

(a-1)  On request of a member of the legislature, the state auditor shall perform an audit described by Subsection (a). The state auditor is not required to perform more than one audit per year under this subsection.

(e)  Not later than the 90th day after the date that an audit under Subsection (a) or (a-1) is completed, the state auditor shall submit a copy of the audit to the attorney general. The attorney general shall promptly publish the audit on the publicly accessible Internet website established under Article 59.16.

SECTION 4.  Chapter 59, Code of Criminal Procedure, is amended by adding Articles 59.15, 59.16, 59.17, 59.18, and 59.19 to read as follows:

Art. 59.15.  CASE TRACKING SYSTEM. (a) The attorney general shall establish and maintain a case tracking system to collect and organize data regarding property seized or forfeited under this chapter or under an agreement with the federal government. The case tracking system must include the information described by Subsection (b).

(b)  When property is seized or forfeited under this chapter or under an agreement with the federal government, the law enforcement agency that seized the property or the attorney representing the state in the forfeiture proceeding, as assigned by the attorney general for reporting purposes under Subsection (d), shall submit the following information to the attorney general, to the extent the information is available or applicable:

(1)  the name of the law enforcement agency that seized the property, or the name of the law enforcement agency with primary responsibility for seizing the property, if more than one agency was involved in the seizure;

(2)  the date of the seizure;

(3)  a description of the property seized;

(4)  the location of the seizure;

(5)  if the seizure occurred on a highway, the direction of the traffic flow;

(6)  an estimated value of the property seized;

(7)  the alleged offense that gave rise to the seizure;

(8)  if charges were filed in relation to the seizure:

(A)  the offense charged;

(B)  the criminal case number;

(C)  the court in which the charges were filed; and

(D)  the disposition of the charges;

(9)  whether forfeiture is sought under federal law, and if so:

(A)  whether a joint task force consisting of state or local law enforcement officers and federal law enforcement officers collaborated on the seizure; and

(B)  whether a federal law enforcement agency asserted jurisdiction over a seizure made by a state or local law enforcement agency without involvement in the seizure by the federal law enforcement agency;

(10)  the civil case number of the forfeiture proceeding and the court in which the forfeiture proceeding was filed;

(11)  whether an owner or interest holder of the seized property filed a claim or counterclaim in the forfeiture proceeding, and if so, whether the owner or interest holder was the person from whom the property was seized, an innocent owner, a creditor, or another party;

(12)  whether an owner or interest holder of the seized property defaulted in the forfeiture proceeding;

(13)  whether there was a settlement agreement in the forfeiture proceeding;

(14)  the date of the forfeiture order;

(15)  whether the seized property:

(A)  was fully or partially returned to the person from whom the property was seized;

(B)  was sold or donated;

(C)  was destroyed;

(D)  was retained by a law enforcement agency or attorney representing the state; or

(E)  is pending disposition;

(16)  the date of final disposition of the seized property;

(17)  the amount of attorney's fees awarded to an owner or interest holder of the seized property;

(18)  an estimate of the total costs to:

(A)  store the seized or forfeited property;

(B)  pay for law enforcement officers' and personnel salaries for work performed in relation to the forfeiture proceeding;

(C)  pay the attorney representing the state for work performed in relation to the forfeiture proceeding; and

(D)  sell or dispose of the forfeited property;

(19)  if property was retained by a law enforcement agency or attorney representing the state, the purpose for which the property was used;

(20)  the total market value of the forfeited property, including currency, proceeds from the sale of property, and distributions received from the federal government; and

(21)  the total market value of the forfeited property that was retained by the state, destroyed, sold, or donated.

(c)  If the property seized or forfeited was alcohol or a controlled substance or drug paraphernalia as defined by Section 481.002, Health and Safety Code, a law enforcement agency or attorney representing the state may not submit information required by Subsections (b)(3), (20), and (21) to the case tracking system.

(d)  The attorney general shall assign the responsibility for submitting the information required under Subsection (b) to appropriate state or local law enforcement agencies or attorneys representing the state.

(e)  If property was seized from a confidential informant, the law enforcement agency or attorney representing the state may delay submitting the information required under Subsection (b) for any period in which the informant continues to cooperate with the agency or attorney.

(f)  If a law enforcement agency or an attorney representing the state responsible for submitting information to the attorney general under Subsection (b) has not seized any property during the period specified by the attorney general, the agency or attorney shall file a report stating that no property was seized.

(g)  The attorney general shall adopt rules as necessary to implement this section, including rules regarding how frequently law enforcement agencies and attorneys representing the state must submit information required by Subsection (b).

Art. 59.16.  SEARCHABLE INTERNET DATABASE; REPORTS OF EXPENDITURES. (a) The attorney general shall establish and make available to the public an Internet website with a searchable database that includes the following information, subject to Subsection (b):

(1)  the information submitted to the attorney general for inclusion in the case tracking system under Article 59.15(b);

(2)  the total amount of funds expended from the proceeds of property seized or forfeited under this chapter or under an agreement with the federal government in the following categories:

(A)  drug abuse, crime, and gang prevention or other community programs;

(B)  compensation, reparations, or other similar types of funds paid to or in behalf of victims;

(C)  investigation costs, including controlled buys, forensics, informant fees, and witness protection;

(D)  expenses related to the storage, maintenance, repair, or return of seized property;

(E)  expenses related to forfeiture proceedings under this chapter, including court costs, attorney's fees, and costs related to auditing, discovery, court reporters, printing, postage, and witnesses;

(F)  government personnel costs, including salaries, overtime, and benefits;

(G)  government travel and training, including conferences, continuing education, entertainment, and meals;

(H)  government administrative and operating expenses, including office supplies, postage, printing, utilities, and repairs and maintenance of vehicles or other equipment; and

(I)  government capital expenditures, including appliances, canines, computers, equipment, firearms, furniture, and vehicles;

(3)  an itemized list of any other expenditure of proceeds that was received from a forfeiture under this chapter or under an agreement with the federal government and that was reported under Subsection (c), other than expenditures described by Subdivision (2) and including payments to trade associations, lobbyists, and other agencies; and

(4)  the total value of seized and forfeited property held by the law enforcement agency or attorney representing the state at the end of the state fiscal year.

(b)  The attorney general may not require a law enforcement agency or attorney representing the state to disclose, and the Internet website may not include:

(1)  the name, address, contact information, or other personally identifying information of an owner or interest holder of the seized property, business entity, or other individual involved in the forfeiture proceeding; or

(2)  the address, vehicle identification number, or serial number of any seized or forfeited property.

(c)  A law enforcement agency or attorney representing the state that expends funds from the proceeds of property seized or forfeited under this chapter or under an agreement with the federal government shall submit a report with the information required by Subsections (a)(2) and (3) to the attorney general not later than the 30th day after the end of the state fiscal year. The commander of a multijurisdictional task force may appoint one law enforcement agency to report the relevant expenditures.

(d)  The attorney general may extend the 30-day period under Subsection (c) for a period determined by the attorney general if the attorney general finds good cause for the extension.

(e)  A law enforcement agency or attorney representing the state in violation of Subsection (c) is subject to a civil penalty for each violation:

(1)  in an amount equal to $500, or 25 percent of the forfeiture proceeds received by the law enforcement agency or attorney representing the state, whichever is greater; or

(2)  in a reasonable amount determined by the office of the attorney general.

(f)  Sovereign immunity of this state and governmental immunity of a political subdivision to suit and from liability is waived to the extent of liability created by Subsection (e).

(g)  The office of the attorney general shall deposit a civil penalty collected under this article in the general revenue fund.

(h)  The attorney general may adopt rules as necessary to implement this article.

Art. 59.17.  ATTORNEY GENERAL MAY CHARGE FEE. The attorney general may charge a reasonable fee to a law enforcement agency or attorney representing the state that submits information under Article 59.15 or 59.16 to cover the costs associated with maintaining the case tracking system and Internet website established under Articles 59.15 and 59.16.

Art. 59.18.  ATTORNEY GENERAL REPORT. (a) Not later than the 120th day after the end of the state fiscal year, the attorney general shall compile and submit to the governor, the lieutenant governor, and the speaker of the house of representatives a report summarizing activity related to property seized or forfeited under this chapter. The report must include:

(1)  the type, approximate value, and disposition of property seized or forfeited under this chapter; and

(2)  the total amount of funds received or expended from the proceeds of property seized or forfeited under this chapter.

(b)  The information included in the report must be:

(1)  disaggregated by agency; and

(2)  for information required by Articles 59.16(a)(2) and (3), organized by the categories described under those subdivisions.

(c)  The attorney general may include in the report required by Subsection (a) legislative recommendations to ensure expenditures related to the seizure or forfeiture of property under this chapter are expended and reported in a manner that is fair to victims, owners or interest holders of seized property, residents of this state, law enforcement agencies and attorneys representing the state, and taxpayers.

(d)  The attorney general shall post a copy of the report required by Subsection (a) on the publicly accessible Internet website established under Article 59.16.

Art. 59.19.  PUBLIC DISCLOSURE. All information and reports submitted to the attorney general or published by the attorney general under Articles 59.15, 59.16, and 59.18, other than Article 59.16(b), are public information subject to disclosure under Chapter 552, Government Code.

SECTION 5.  Articles 59.06(l) and (s), Code of Criminal Procedure, are repealed.

SECTION 6.  The change in law made by this Act applies only to a state fiscal year beginning on or after January 1, 2024.

SECTION 7.  This Act takes effect September 1, 2023.