

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center
89R20791 CS-D

C.S.S.B. 868
By: Sparks
Finance
3/31/2025
Committee Report (Substituted)

AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

In 2001, the Texas Legislature passed H.B. 2604, creating the Rural Volunteer Firefighter Department (VFD) Assistance Program, administered by the Texas Forest Service, to provide grants to rural volunteer fire departments for firefighting vehicles, fire and rescue equipment, protective clothing, and firefighter training. The program is funded by an annual assessment of property and casualty insurers authorized to do business in Texas. After the House Investigative Committee on the Panhandle Wildfires met in the aftermath of the fires, to investigate factors that contributed to the Panhandle wildfires, the committee recommended various reforms and funding appropriations to the legislature.

Annually, Texas VFDs have submitted more than 2,000 grant applications totaling \$43.7 million per year but only \$21.7 million in grants have been distributed, resulting in a shortfall of \$22 million. Furthermore, 1,250 VFDs currently have thousands of pending applications for unfunded grants from years past totaling \$172 million.

S.B. 868 removes the \$30 million cap for the Rural VFD Assistance Program. Additionally, this bill mandates that at least 10 percent of the appropriated funds for each fiscal year be allocated to assist VFDs in areas identified as high-risk for large wildfires. If the allocated funds for these high-risk areas are not fully used, any remaining funds can be redirected for other types of assistance for VFDs. The provisions of the bill will take effect on September 1, 2025.

(Original Author's/Sponsor's Statement of Intent)

C.S.S.B. 868 amends current law relating to the allocation of money appropriated to the rural volunteer fire department assistance program.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

This bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, institution, or agency.

SECTION BY SECTION ANALYSIS

SECTION 1. Amends Section 614.102, Government Code, by adding Subsection (i), as follows:

(i) Provides that, except as otherwise provided by this subsection, at least 10 percent of appropriations for a state fiscal year from the volunteer fire department assistance fund for the purpose of providing assistance to volunteer fire departments under the rural volunteer firefighter assistance program is allocated to departments in areas of the state classified as being at high risk for large wildfires by the Texas Forest Service of The Texas A&M University System. Authorizes the remaining amount of assistance, if the amount requested by departments described by this subsection in a state fiscal year is less than the amount allocated under this subsection, to be used for other types of requests for assistance.

SECTION 2. Makes application of Section 614.102(i), Government Code, as added by this Act, prospective.

SECTION 3. Effective date: September 1, 2025.