

By: Wilson

H.B. No. 5339

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED

AN ACT

relating to the establishment by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board of a grant program to support the study of regenerative agriculture at public institutions of higher education.

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

SECTION 1. Chapter 61, Education Code, is amended by adding Subchapter LL to read as follows:

SUBCHAPTER LL. HIGHER EDUCATION REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE GRANT PROGRAM

Sec. 61.9851. DEFINITIONS. In this subchapter:

(1) "Nonprofit organization" means an organization exempt from federal income taxation under Section 501(a), Internal Revenue Code of 1986.

(2) "Program" means the Higher Education Regenerative Agriculture Grant Program established under this subchapter.

(3) "Regenerative agriculture" means a holistic system of agricultural practices and techniques that enhance overall soil health, increase soil organic matter, improve water infiltration and retention, increase resilience to droughts and flooding, enrich biological diversity, and proliferate beneficial soil microbes through a combination of practices based on the following principles:

(A) ensuring the presence of living roots in the

1 soil throughout the year to nourish the ecosystem;

2 (B) minimal disturbance to limit disruption to
3 the soil structure and its living organisms, while actively
4 protecting and promoting soil microbial diversity;

5 (C) the encouragement of biological diversity
6 through varied crop rotations, cover crops, and intercropping
7 strategies;

8 (D) soil armor to maintain soil coverage with
9 living plants, crop residues, or mulch to prevent exposure of bare
10 soil, reduce risks of wind and water erosion, and protect soil
11 biology from harmful temperature extremes;

12 (E) animal integration, including incorporating
13 livestock and poultry to recycle nutrients and stimulate soil
14 biological activity without overwhelming the soil ecosystem; and

15 (F) context-based practices to tailor the
16 regenerative agricultural practices to the characteristics of a
17 particular piece of land, climate conditions, and any cropping or
18 livestock systems present on that land.

19 Sec. 61.9852. PROGRAM ESTABLISHMENT AND ADMINISTRATION.

20 (a) The board shall establish and administer the Higher Education
21 Regenerative Agriculture Grant Program under which the board may
22 award grants to eligible institutions of higher education to:

23 (1) study successful regenerative agriculture
24 operations and identify practices and methods to support persons in
25 this state seeking to implement regenerative agriculture on their
26 land;

27 (2) develop innovative, evidence-based methods to

support agricultural producers in bioremediation and other scientifically supported techniques that promote beneficial soil bacteria and microorganisms and increase crop yields; and

(3) provide students, agricultural producers, and rural communities with regenerative agriculture-focused education and technical assistance programs founded upon transparent and objective research protocols.

(b) In administering the program, the board shall:

(1) collaborate with the State Soil and Water Conservation Board to:

(A) align research funded under the program with existing soil and water conservation programs;

(B) ensure projects funded under the program complement statewide efforts to improve soil health and reduce the use of synthetic inputs; and

(C) facilitate partnerships between institutions of higher education that are awarded grants under the program and local soil and water conservation districts;

(2) identify opportunities to align the program with federal initiatives or grants to maximize program funding and impact;

(3) ensure that research funded under the program:

(A) is conducted independently using the proper scientific method;

(B) is not compromised by external factors or parties; and

(C) complies with any requirements imposed by

1 state or federal law;

2 (4) establish a framework for monitoring and
3 evaluating the outcomes of research and other activities funded
4 under the program;

5 (5) ensure that findings, research, data, and
6 recommendations resulting from research funded under the program
7 are made publicly accessible;

8 (6) provide technical assistance to institutions of
9 higher education that apply for a grant under the program;

10 (7) conduct periodic reviews and site visits to ensure
11 proper use of grant funds and compliance with grant agreements;

12 (8) oversee the creation and maintenance of a
13 statewide online resource hub to share educational materials,
14 research findings, and best practices developed through the
15 program;

16 (9) require program grant recipients to submit to the
17 board annual progress reports that include:

18 (A) research and education achievements related
19 to agricultural sustainability;

20 (B) measurable outcomes, such as the adoption of
21 regenerative agriculture farming practices or reductions in the use
22 of synthetic inputs by producers; and

23 (C) financial documentation detailing the use of
24 grant funds; and

25 (10) ensure that institutions of higher education that
26 misuse grant funds or fail to meet program requirements are subject
27 to the following consequences:

- (A) suspension or termination of grant funding;
- (B) disqualification from future grant cycles;
- and
- (C) repayment of misused grant funds.

Sec. 61.9853. GRANT ELIGIBILITY. To be eligible to receive a grant under the program for a state fiscal year, an institution of higher education must:

- (1) apply to the board in the manner prescribed by board rule; and
- (2) satisfy any other criteria prescribed by board rule in accordance with this subchapter.

Sec. 61.9854. GRANT ALLOCATION. (a) The board may not award more than 30 percent of the total amount of grant funds allocated under this program for a state fiscal year to any one institution of higher education.

(b) In awarding grants under the program, the board shall give first and equal priority to institutions of higher education that:

(1) conduct research in partnership with one or more nonprofit organizations; or

(2) both:

(A) conduct research in partnership with a nonprofit organization described by Section 501(c)(3), Internal Revenue Code of 1986; and

(B) do not derive more than 25 percent of the institution's agricultural grant program funding from an entity that manufactures, markets, or sells synthetic inputs for use in

1 farming.

2 (c) In its application review and funding allocation
3 process for the program for a state fiscal year, the board shall
4 ensure a reasonable distribution of funds across institutions of
5 higher education statewide that do not qualify for a priority grant
6 award under Subsection (b).

7 Sec. 61.9855. GRANT USE. Grant money awarded under the
8 program may be used only for the following purposes:

9 (1) multiyear research projects focused on
10 transitioning agricultural producers to regenerative agriculture
11 farming systems through evidence-based techniques, peer-reviewed
12 studies, and event coordination;

13 (2) research on healthy soil practices, including
14 identifying practical and beneficial techniques for achieving and
15 maintaining soil health, such as bioremediation and other
16 innovative methods to increase crop yields and enhance beneficial
17 soil microbiology;

18 (3) institution of higher education-led education and
19 training programs to support agricultural producers in this state
20 in implementing regenerative agriculture methods on their land,
21 with priority given to programs that provide resources for small
22 and mid-sized farms;

23 (4) support for student-led projects, internships,
24 and research initiatives focused on regenerative agriculture;

25 (5) development and distribution of digital and
26 physical educational resources for rural agricultural communities
27 and farming regions;

1 (6) collaborative research initiatives between
2 institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations, and
3 agricultural organizations to pilot and test regenerative
4 agriculture farming solutions; and

5 (7) any additional purposes approved by board rule
6 following a thorough and systematic review.

7 Sec. 61.9856. FUNDING. In addition to any money
8 appropriated for the program, the board may solicit and accept
9 gifts, grants, and donations from any public or private source for
10 the program.

11 Sec. 61.9857. RULES. The board shall adopt rules as
12 necessary for the administration of the program, including rules
13 prescribing program guidelines, application forms, and report
14 templates for institutions of higher education under the program.

15 Sec. 61.9858. ANNUAL REPORT. The board, in collaboration
16 with the State Soil and Water Conservation Board, annually shall
17 prepare and submit to the legislature a report summarizing:

18 (1) the outcomes, benefits, and challenges of the
19 program, including any unintended consequences; and

20 (2) legislative recommendations to further advance
21 regenerative agriculture research, education, and outreach in this
22 state, including data and independent evaluations to support those
23 recommendations.

24 SECTION 2. Subchapter LL, Chapter 61, Education Code, as
25 added by this Act, applies beginning with the 2026-2027 academic
26 year.

27 SECTION 3. Not later than January 1, 2026, the Texas Higher

1 Education Coordinating Board shall develop and make available on
2 the coordinating board's Internet website an application form for
3 the Higher Education Regenerative Agriculture Grant Program
4 established under Subchapter LL, Chapter 61, Education Code, as
5 added by this Act, as well as report templates and guidelines for
6 public institutions of higher education under the grant program.

7 SECTION 4. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board is
8 required to implement the Higher Education Regenerative
9 Agriculture Grant Program established under Subchapter LL, Chapter
10 61, Education Code, as added by this Act, only if the legislature
11 appropriates money specifically for that purpose. If the
12 legislature does not appropriate money specifically for that
13 purpose, the board may, but is not required to, implement the Higher
14 Education Regenerative Agriculture Grant Program established under
15 Subchapter LL, Chapter 61, Education Code, as added by this Act,
16 using other appropriations available for that purpose.

17 SECTION 5. This Act takes effect immediately if it receives
18 a vote of two-thirds of all the members elected to each house, as
19 provided by Section 39, Article III, Texas Constitution. If this
20 Act does not receive the vote necessary for immediate effect, this
21 Act takes effect September 1, 2025.