

Star-Telegram

Agency can't ensure conservation grants are effective, report says

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A state agency set to dole out \$23.7 million in grants in fiscal 2010 has trouble accounting for how well its program benefits conservation efforts and should improve its follow-up on projects after payments are made, according to a staff report by the Sunset Advisory Commission.

The Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board lacks standard practices, such as establishment of clear program goals, measurement of grant performance, evaluation of outcomes, and routine program adjustments to improve performance, the report found. As a result, the board cannot ensure that its state-funded grant programs are effective and accountable to the state, the report found.

Accounting for grant dollars isn't a problem, a board official said.

"There is absolutely no program at this agency where we don't know where the funds went ... or what they went for," said John Foster, statewide programs officer for the board. "We need better goals and practices so we can ... evaluate effectiveness of the program" after money is spent.

The findings come after the board's budget doubled from the previous biennium to \$28.6 million for fiscal 2010 and 2011.

The "agency's riskiest state-funded grant programs prevent the state from evaluating overall agency performance," the commission staff found.

Its report focuses on two programs:

Water Quality Management Plans, which provide financial and technical assistance to landowners to plan and implement conservation practices.

Water Supply Enhancement grants, which give funding to landowners in identified priority watersheds for brush removal.

The board has its work cut out for it: Among other recommendations, commission staff advised establishing clear goals to ensure that grants have the desired outcome. Without such goals, the agency has no way of measuring grant money's effectiveness, the report found.

While the board initially reviews landowner receipts to ensure that money in both the Water Supply Enhancement and water quality programs is spent appropriately, it doesn't consistently verify that grantees continue to comply with the terms of the grant, according to the report.

In fact, the agency does not routinely use "any form of monitoring, outcome modeling, or more readily available ... methods to evaluate long-term impacts from individual grants or grant programs as a whole," the report found.

The result: It has difficulty determining, for example, whether a Water Supply Enhancement program yields water and, if so, for whom.

Foster said the board hopes to implement a computer model for the water quality program that will allow "predictions" of whether pollutants reach water.

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