

Senate Fiscal Agency
P. O. Box 30036
Lansing, Michigan 48909-7536

SFA



BILL ANALYSIS

Telephone: (517) 373-5383
Fax: (517) 373-1986
TDD: (517) 373-0543

House Bill 5792 (Substitute H-4 as passed by the House)
House Bill 5793 (Substitute H-3 as passed by the House)
Sponsor: Representative Howard Wetters (H.B. 5792)
Representative John Llewellyn (H.B. 5793)
House Committee: Agriculture
Senate Committee: Farming, Agribusiness and Food Systems

Date Completed: 9-22-98

CONTENT

House Bill 5792 (H-4) would amend Public Act 156 of 1851, which establishes the powers and duties of county boards of commissioners, to allow a county to levy a tax and remit the proceeds of that tax to a conservation district. **House Bill 5793 (H-3)** would amend Part 93 (Soil Conservation Districts) of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act to replace “soil conservation districts” with “conservation districts”; establish the membership of and additional powers for a conservation district board (including engaging in plant rescue operations); create the Conservation Species Advisory Panel, and require it to prepare an annual list of conservation species that could be propagated, harvested, sold, or rescued; and provide procedures for boundary revisions of conservation districts. In addition, the bill would eliminate the provisions concerning the State Soil Conservation Committee and petitions to organize soil conservation districts. The bills are tie-barred to each other.

House Bill 5792 (H-4)

A county, by resolution of the county board of commissioners, could place on the ballot at a regular or primary election in even numbered years, or at a special election in odd-numbered years, the question to levy upon all taxable property in the county a tax of up to one mill for up to 20 years and to remit the proceeds of that tax to a conservation district established in that county.

If a conservation district were established in more than one county and the counties in which it was established approved different millage rates, the lowest millage rate approved would have to be the millage rate levied in each county. If a county called a special election to approve a millage pursuant to the bill, the conservation district established in that county would have to reimburse the county for all expenses incurred as a result of the special election.

House Bill 5793 (H-3)

Conservation Districts

The bill would replace “soil conservation districts” with “conservation districts” throughout the Act and include the conservation of farmland and other natural resources along with soil and water resources. The bill would eliminate provisions concerning the formation of soil conservation districts. In addition, a conservation district would not be able to enforce State or Federal laws unless authorized by the county board of commissioners of each county in which a conservation district was located.

Conservation District Board

The bill would apply most of the current provisions concerning the board of directors of a soil conservation district to a conservation district board. In addition, the bill would require a conservation district board to consist of five elected or appointed directors serving four-year terms of office, would have to designate a chairperson annually. Currently, the term of office of each director must be three years except for varying years according to appointment and number of votes.

Under the bill, all directors would have to be elected at an annual meeting by residents of the district who were of legal voting age and could demonstrate residency in the district through identification. The election would have to be nonpartisan, and the directors would have to be elected by the residents of the district at large. Notice of the annual meeting, including the date, time, location, agenda, and list of candidates, would have to be published in the official newspaper of record for the area in which the district was located at least 45 days prior to the date of the meeting. A resident who was unable to attend the meeting could vote by absentee ballot prior to the annual meeting. A director could be paid a per diem for time spent undertaking his or her duties as a director in an amount not to exceed the per diem paid to a member of the Commission of Agriculture.

In addition to the directors' current powers, the bill provides that a conservation district board would have the power to do the following:

- Engage in plant rescue operations and propagate, plant, harvest, and sell only conservation species on the list established by the proposed Conservation Species Advisory Panel. (A conservation district in violation of this provision would be subject to a civil fine of up to \$100 per day of violation, and an action to enforce the provision could be brought by the State or a county.)
- Provide technical assistance to other conservation districts.
- Borrow money for facilities or equipment for conservation purposes and pledge the assets of the district as collateral against loans. Any money borrowed would be solely the obligation of the district and not the obligation of the State or any other public entity in the State.
- Act as a compliance assistance agent for other Federal, State, and county laws.

("Plant rescue" would mean to move physically native conservation species of plants from one location in Michigan to another location for the purpose of reestablishing the native conservation species. "Conservation species" would mean those plant species beneficial for conservation practices as authorized by the Conservation Species Advisory Panel.)

Currently, a district board may conduct surveys, investigations, and research related to the character of soil and the preventive and conservation measures needed, and may disseminate that information. Under the bill, a board would have to have the consent of the landowner or the necessary rights or interest in the land, before disseminating the information.

The bill also would replace soil-conservation, erosion-control, and erosion-prevention projects with farmland and natural resource conservation projects, and replace conservation of soil with conservation of farmlands and natural resources.

Conservation Species Advisory Panel

The Conservation Species Advisory Panel would be created within the Department of Agriculture and would consist of the following members selected by the Director of the Department, and approved by the Commission of Agriculture: two representatives of the Department, including one individual from the Pesticide and Plant Management Division and one from the Environmental Division; one

individual representing the Department of Natural Resources; one individual representing the Natural Resource Conservation Service; two representatives from Michigan State University, including one individual from the Department of Horticulture and one from the Department of Forestry; one individual representing conservation districts; one individual from a statewide organization representing nursery and landscaping interests in the State; and one individual from a statewide organization representing seedling growers' interests in the State.

The bill would require the Conservation Species Advisory Panel to establish, by December 1 of each year, a list of conservation species for the following calendar year that could be propagated, planted, harvested, sold, or rescued as part of a plant rescue operation. Conservation species on the list that were propagated, planted, or rescued during that calendar year, however, could be sold, removed, or reestablished in subsequent years even if the species were removed from the list in a subsequent year.

Boundary Revisions

The current Act permits two or more soil conservation districts to petition the Department for consolidation into a single district. The bill provides, instead, that one or more conservation districts could petition the Department for a revision in the boundaries. Within 30 days after receiving a petition, the Department would have to cause notice of hearing to be given to the residents in the area or areas affected by the proposed revision as identified by the directors of a district, and within 60 days hold a hearing to receive comments relative to the proposed change. If the Department found the petition desirable, it would be required to issue an order stating that the boundaries of the districts were to be moved, merged, consolidated, or separated at a specified date.

Repeals

The bill would repeal sections of the Act that provide for the election of three directors for each district (MCL 324.9306), and allow land occupiers to petition for the discontinuance of a district (MCL 324.9311).

Proposed MCL 46.22 (H.B. 5792)
MCL 324.9301 et al. (H.B. 5793)

Legislative Analyst: N. Nagata

FISCAL IMPACT

House Bill 5792 (H-4)

The bill would have no fiscal impact on State government. The bill could have an indeterminate fiscal impact on local government depending on the number and amount of millages levied to fund conservation districts.

House Bill 5793 (H-3)

The bill would have no fiscal impact on State or local government.

Fiscal Analyst: G. Cutler
R. Ross

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This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan Senate staff for use by the Senate in its deliberations and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.