

A Waste of Food

Texas threatens to cut an example of good government spending

A program that feeds hungry Texans is on the chopping block in Austin. Legislators should rescue it.

The Surplus Agricultural Product Grant allocates money to 21 food banks across the state to buy Grade 2 produce from Texas farmers. Without this program, officials say, farmers would use the damaged produce for compost. But the grant allows farmers to avoid a total loss. It also helps food banks acquire fresh fruits and vegetables.

Since 2006, this program has provided 252 million pounds of food for hungry Texans, according to Mark Loeffler, communications director at the Texas Department of Agriculture. It's an example of good government spending that helps farmers as well as Texans in need.

Unless Austin acts, the program will wind up in its own compost pile.

Last summer, when Texas Comptroller Glenn Hegar was projecting a \$4.6 billion shortfall, Gov. Greg Abbott asked every state agency to trim its budget by 5%. The Department of Agriculture, which oversees the SAP Grant, requested an exemption, saying most of its revenue comes through user fees rather than state taxes, according to assistant commissioner Dan Hunter. The governor said no.

So the department requested permission to trim its budget by 5% of its general fund revenue, excluding revenue from user fees. The governor said no, again.

Finally, Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller wrote a letter to the governor asking if unused federal coronavirus relief funding could cover the cost of proposed cuts. The governor still hasn't answered that request, Hunter said. Abbott's office did not respond to requests for comment for this editorial.

All this is after the surplus agriculture grant was already cut dramatically last session. After the 2018-19 biennium, lawmakers cut the program by 40%, reducing it by \$1.9 million per year, or about 16 million meals, according to Julie Butner, president and CEO of the Tarrant Area Food Bank.

"Right now is a terrible time to be cutting funding for anything that's feeding people," Butner said. "There are lots of people out there now who are hungry who have never been hungry before."

We won't deny that lawmakers face a difficult task this session. Though Hegar has adjusted his projections, the state still faces a \$1 billion shortfall. But cutting a

relatively small program (roughly 0.00007% of the state's budget) that provides millions of meals during a pandemic seems like a hatchet-over-scalpel approach that lawmakers should reject.

This is one budget cut we hope lawmakers have no appetite for.