

August 2015
Volume 77 No. 4

TEXAS

VETERINARIAN

A PUBLICATION OF THE TEXAS VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

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THE TAHC 2015 LEGISLATIVE REPORT



By Dee Ellis, DVM, MPA,
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Director of the Texas Animal
Health Commission

The 84th Texas legislative session finally came to a close on June 20 when the Governor made his last decisions for either vetoing a bill or signing it into law. Luckily for the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC), the favorable budget that was initially passed out of both the House and Senate and sent to the Governor came through unscathed. There is always some stress as the state budget goes through the final scrutiny of the Governor, as he has line-item veto authority over that process if he chooses.

I say our portion of the budget was “luckily” signed when the truth is that many hours were spent over the last year by many people working with not only legislators but also stakeholder groups and partner organizations to ensure the process went as smoothly as possible. I want to take the opportunity now to thank the TVMA membership as a whole for all your support of the TAHC in the 84th session. I can’t tell you how many folks called or emailed from around the state to ask how they could help. TAHC owes a special debt of gratitude to the TVMA leadership of Chris Copeland and Elizabeth Choate for putting in countless hours down at the capitol during the actual session.

The TAHC continues to rebuild from the session of four years ago when almost half of our budget was cut during the fiscally hard times of 2011. Even though the agency is still going to be 10 percent smaller than we were back then, we are at a good starting point to move forward. Here is an overview of what happened politically related to the TAHC and where I believe we are headed.

The TAHC actually had two budget bills this session. Due to the overwhelming work and expense involved with the concurrent bovine tuberculosis (in the panhandle) and cattle fever tick (in Cameron and Willacy counties) outbreaks that are ongoing, for the first time ever TAHC submitted what is called a “supplemental” budget request as part of HB 2 for the

remainder of fiscal year 2015. With TVMA’s support, the agency received approximately \$780,000 in additional funds to keep us solvent through the first of September, when the next two-year budget cycle kicks in. As a result, TAHC did not have to borrow from federal dollars originally allocated for next year and paid all the bills on time.

The second budget bill (HB 1) passed covered all state agencies and was for fiscal years (FY) 2016-2017. The TAHC was granted an additional approximate \$4 million and 23 personnel under the border security banner. Another \$600,000 and four more staff were provided to the agency as a result of the growing feral swine population across the state. Add it all up, and the agency budget received about a 25-percent boost from FY 15 to FY 16. The total TAHC personnel (once hired) will be 184 folks, up from 123 in 2012 but still down from the 201 in 2010.

Now the hard work begins as we strategize with stakeholders such as Texas veterinarians and the Texas horse and cattle industries on the best use of the expanded resources. Along the Rio Grande, the effects of border violence and cartel activity continue to create havoc from Brownsville to El Paso. The Texas border states in Mexico are considered some of the most dangerous of all right now. Animal Health border issues specifically include continuous Mexican strays ranging along the Rio Grande, altered import processes where Mexican horses and cattle are inspected on the Texas side now, continued slaughter horse export issues, cattle fever ticks in far south Texas and equine piroplasmiasis (piro). Add it up, and we have two confirmed foreign disease situations in Texas, continued trade and marketability impediments and the potential every day for more diseases to enter Texas.

With the extra funding, TAHC plans on putting an office back in Laredo, where one was closed about 15 years ago. That office will be the focal point for a new border region of TAHC stretching from at least Val Verde to Cameron counties. This

will give us boots on the ground to assist the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) with ongoing fever tick issues, continue the county testing for piro, assist with all import/export issues as appropriate, help catch Mexican strays and provide an infrastructure for possibly enhanced nilgai tick surveillance.

TAHC also had two non-budget bills of interest this session, both of which were passed and signed by the Governor. The first bill (HB 3738) provides TAHC the authority to regulate the Equine Infectious Anemia (EIA) labs across the state. Although TAHC has authority over veterinarians and horses related to EIA programs, the lab component was previously under USDA control. TAHC has no plans for substantive rules at this time; however, the USDA has given indications that it would like to de-link itself from this program and allow states to take over. This bill simply gives us the authority to do so.

The second bill (SB 970) was first proposed in the 83rd session and simply ran out of time to get passed, as many bills do. The bill was reintroduced in the recent 84th session and passed this time. This bill created a criminal penalty for persons that knowingly violated hold order provisions. The agency already had this authority for the older programs like brucellosis but lacked the statutory authority over a number of new diseases such as chronic wasting disease (CWD), trichomoniasis or vesicular stomatitis.

In summary, TAHC has received the funding it needed to move forward and address emerging diseases and two bills it needed to address changing federal government involvement and disease programs. I cannot adequately express my gratitude for all who went to bat for the agency. It was truly heartwarming to see the veterinary community of Texas help ensure that the veterinary agency of Texas dealing with disease issues was adequately cared for during the political process of 2015. Thanks for all you did! [TV](#)