

Administrative Update

2017 Legislative Update (FY18-19 biennium):

All state agencies recently received a letter from Texas' top elected officials requesting that the 2018-19 budgets be submitted at a 96% level, meaning a 4% reduction in current state general fund support. This is a REAL reduction, and for Extension equates to \$1.8m per year of the next biennium. While this has been termed a "starting point for budget deliberations," we are moving forward with plans that this will be a permanent reduction in our budget.

This request was supplemented by several quotes that included: "Limited government, pro-growth economic policies and sound financial planning are the key budget principles responsible for Texas' economic success," and "It is imperative that every state agency engage in a thorough review of each program and budget strategy and determine the value of each dollar spent." "Due to the slowdown in parts of our economy, some difficult decisions will be required to balance the next state budget, and the process of making those decisions begins now,"

We are extremely proud of the work being done by Extension and the difference we are making across the state. We consistently meet our state identified goals and measurements for contact hours and educational outreach. As we work to address the potential decrease in state funding support our primary goal is to minimize impact on employees and positions. We are hopeful that current state support for healthy South Texas may become part of our base funding for the next biennium. We have also prepared three Exceptional Items for funding consideration: Healthy Texas, Agriculture Surveillance and Safety, and Urban Youth STEM. Our intent is to continue to communicate the value of a network of county Extension offices and research/extension centers across the state in addressing current, critical and emerging needs for the state.

FLSA:

Effective December 1, 2016 there are changes being implemented to the minimum salary for an exempt or salaried employee, moving to \$47,476. While it is our goal to continue to improve our compensation for employees over time, there is not adequate funding to accomplish this level of salary immediately. There is a provision in the FLSA that allows Educators to remain exempt employees, even if the salary is below the minimum level. We believe we have always been exempt, and will continue to be exempt when the changes go into effect. Our belief is supported by legal opinion, and will allow us to continue to compensate our Agents as we do today, while making every effort to move salaries up over time.

Educational Requirements for Agents:

Effective September 1, County Extension Agents will no longer be required to have a master's degree to maintain employment with Extension. Agents will continue to be encouraged to obtain a master's degree, and will continue to be rewarded with a \$4000 salary increase for masters. In addition, the CEA Career Ladder Guidelines will remain constant, so that agents cannot advance beyond Level II without a master's degree. There will be an application process that is required for Agents to complete prior to beginning a master's degree, those guidelines and materials will be shared soon. In addition, there is a policy in place

for completion of a doctoral degree, which states that any agent who desires to complete a doctoral degree and receive a pay increase MUST complete an application and be approved by the Director prior to admission and enrollment in a doctoral program. The Director and Administrative team will consider all applications, and may approve up to a maximum of 5 doctoral students per year to begin work on the degree and be approved for a \$6000 salary increase upon completion.

Programmatic Update

E-Learning Initiative:

To maintain relevance into the future, it is critical that we provide employees with new e-learning strategies which will help us reach more people and improve agency visibility. Currently, we have some great things happening with online courses and other web based education, however, it is time for us to make a strategic investment which will make e-learning more advanced and robust than we have ever had within the agency. We have recently concluded several interviews and workshop sessions to chart the course for the future of web based courses in our agency. The individuals that worked with AgriLife IT to help us determine the needs of our agents and specialists have supplied a report that outlines the specifications of a system to meet the needs of our educators and our clientele. Now we are taking the next step to put out a request for more information so we can begin looking at e-learning platforms that will meet the diverse needs we have identified.

2016 Employee Engagement Survey:

This survey is encouraged by the state and consists of a series of 48 primary items used to assess essential and fundamental aspects of how the agency functions. It was sent to all employees in the agency, and Extension had a response rate of 55.7%, which is considered high for an agency our size. Most important for Extension Administration is the level at which employees feel “engaged” in the agency mission and objectives. Engagement is defined as: focus on building trust, encouraging the expression of ideas, and providing employees with the resources, guidance and training they need to do their best work. While 58% felt highly engaged, there were 10% of our employees who felt disengaged. We hope to continue to reinforce our commitment to our employees, transparency in communication, investments in professional development and recognition of accomplishments as we strive to maintain an environment that is supportive of our employees and our mission.

New Strategic Plan, Vision, Mission:

The Central Leadership Team has participated in a series of meetings during the last year, with the goal of re-writing our agency’s strategic plan. The new plan will be ready for distribution this fall and shared during program planning meetings. Our challenge was to streamline the document and ensure that it accurately reflects priorities of the agency and our clientele. We chose to use the AgriLife Grand Challenges as a tool to organize our priorities (Feeding our World, Protecting our Environment, Improving our Health, Enriching our Youth, Growing our Economy). After reviewing data from the Texas Community Futures Forums that were conducted at the county level, we believe the Grand Challenge areas align with the local needs that have been expressed in communities. We look forward to sharing the new strategic

plan this fall and believe it outlines educational needs that are relevant and will position the agency for the future as we address critical needs across the state.