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H.B. 568
135th General Assembly

Bill Analysis

Version: As Introduced

Primary Sponsors: Reps. Brent and Dean

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SUMMARY

- States that the General Assembly finds that healthy soils are a limited natural resource and fundamental for healthy and sustainable food production.
- Creates the Healthy Soils Task Force and requires the Task Force to complete certain duties, including:
 - Developing a comprehensive healthy soils initiative for Ohio; and
 - Developing a comprehensive action plan to coordinate efforts to carry out the healthy soils initiative using standards for organic matter, biological activity, biological diversity, and soil structure as measures to assess improved soil health.
- Requires the Task Force, on or before December 31, 2023, to submit the comprehensive action plan and report its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the committees of the House of Representatives and Senate responsible for agricultural issues.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

Healthy soils

The bill declares that the General Assembly finds that healthy soils are a limited natural resource and fundamental for healthy and sustainable food production. Improving soil health means increasing soil's organic matter and diversifying its microbial activity to enhance agricultural productivity and environmental resilience.

The bill further states that as Ohio is a leading agricultural state with productive soils and abundant water supplies, a commitment to healthy and productive soils and clean water is critical as population and food production demands rise. However, Ohio's soil has been depleted of organic matter and trace minerals, making the soil less fertile, requiring more

inputs, and resulting in a degradation of the soil structure that builds resilience and helps to maintain clean water.

As stated in the bill, there is a real and pressing opportunity for Ohio's farmers to capitalize on the economic and production benefits of improved soil health, while simultaneously improving surface and ground water quality. Improving the health of Ohio's soil is the most effective way for agricultural producers to increase crop and forage productivity and profitability while also protecting the environment.

The General Assembly also finds that appropriate planning and coordination is needed to accelerate and coordinate the adoption of conservation practices that:

1. Rebuild and protect soil carbon to increase water holding capacity and enhance the vitality of the subsurface microbiome for landowners to capitalize on the economic and production benefits of soil health;
2. Enhance water quality;
3. Capture carbon;
4. Build resilience to drought and pests;
5. Reduce greenhouse gas emissions;
6. Expand pollinator and other wildlife habitats; and
7. Protect fragile ecosystems for a more sustainable future.¹

Healthy Soils Task Force

Duties of the Task Force

The bill creates the Healthy Soils Task Force. The Task Force must do all of the following:

1. Develop a comprehensive healthy soils initiative for Ohio;
2. Develop recommendations for testing for chemicals such as dioxin in the soil;
3. Develop recommendations for the use of plants for soil remediation, including alfalfa, sunflower, date palms, and mustards. The recommendations must include disposal methods for such plants.
4. Identify realistic and achievable goals and timelines for improvement of soil health in Ohio through voluntary partnerships among agricultural producers and relevant state and local agencies and other public and private entities; and
5. Review provisions of the federal "Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018," and any implementing rules, regulations, and guidelines of the U.S.D.A. and identify opportunities to leverage state, local, or private funds under the U.S.D.A.'s Regional

¹ Section 1.

Conservation Partnership Program and other conservation programs for the purposes of the healthy soils initiative. The Task Force must include information obtained from the review in the report issued by the Task Force (see below).²

Comprehensive action plan

In addition to the duties discussed above, the Task Force must develop a comprehensive action plan to coordinate efforts to carry out the healthy soils initiative using standards for organic matter, biological activity, biological diversity, and soil structure as measures to assess improved soil health. The action plan must establish goals, formulate timelines for task completion, and determine resources required and resource availability.

In developing the action plan, the Task Force must examine:

1. Issues related to providing farmers and ranchers with research, education, technical assistance, and demonstration projects;
2. Options for financial incentives to improve soil health; and
3. The contribution of livestock to soil health.³

Consultation

The bill authorizes the Task Force, in carrying out its duties, to consult with other agencies or organizations, including all of the following:

1. The College of Engineering, Science, Technology and Agriculture at Central State University and the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences at The Ohio State University;
2. The Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Farm Service Agency, and the Agricultural Research Service of the U.S.D.A.;
3. The Soil Health Institute;
4. The Soil Health Partnership; and
5. Any other state and federal agencies or public or private entities with responsibility or expertise in research, demonstration, education, advising, funding, or promotion relating to agronomic and other agricultural land management practices consistent with the purpose of the Task Force.⁴

² Section 2(D)(1) and (3) through (6).

³ Section 2(D)(2).

⁴ Section 2(E).

Task Force membership

The bill requires the Task Force to consist of the Director of Agriculture or the Director's designee, who must be a voting member of the Task Force, and the following voting members appointed by the Governor, with the advice and consent of the Senate:

1. Two representatives of soil and water conservation districts;
2. One academic expert in agriculture and soil health from The Ohio State University and Central State University;
3. Three representatives who are farmers who do not grow commodity crops, including at least two farmers who are using healthy soil practices;
4. Two representatives who are farmers who grow commodity crops;
5. One representative of an Ohio-based environmental organization;
6. Two representatives of national farm or conservation organizations. Each representative must be from a different organization;
7. One representative of a sustainable agriculture organization; and
8. Two representatives of Ohio farm organizations.

In addition, the Task Force must consist of the following nonvoting members:

1. The chairperson of the committee of the House of Representatives responsible for agricultural issues or the chairperson's designee; and
2. The chairperson of the committee of the Senate responsible for agricultural issues or the chairperson's designee.⁵

In selecting membership for appointment to the Task Force, the Governor must seek to appoint members with expertise in methods for incorporating systems of healthy soil stewardship into working agricultural operations and for optimizing environmental services provided through such practices. The Governor must make appointments to the Task Force not later than 60 days after the bill's effective date. Appointed members must begin serving immediately following the Senate's consent to the appointments. Members must be reimbursed for their actual and necessary expenses incurred in carrying out their duties as members. The Ohio Department of Agriculture must provide administrative and fiscal assistance to the Task Force. The Task Force may request additional assistance from appropriate federal and state agencies.⁶

⁵ Section 2(A).

⁶ Section 2(A) and (C).

Report and Task Force termination

The bill requires the Task Force, on or before December 31, 2023, to submit the comprehensive action plan and report its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the committees of the House of Representatives and Senate responsible for agricultural issues. The Task Force ceases to exist on January 1, 2024.⁷

HISTORY

Action	Date
Introduced	05-15-24

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⁷ Section 2(F). The bill was introduced after the dates specified and those dates will need to be adjusted.