



A JOINT RESOLUTION OF THE SENATE AND THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE STATE OF MONTANA REQUESTING AN INTERIM STUDY ON FUNDING OPTIONS FOR MONTANA'S CONSERVATION DISTRICTS; AND REQUIRING THAT THE FINAL RESULTS OF THE STUDY BE REPORTED TO THE 68TH LEGISLATURE.

WHEREAS, Montana has 58 conservation districts collectively operated by a locally elected and appointed group of more than 450 Montanans, and for more than 80 years, conservation district supervisors have served the people of our state and our natural resources without pay, essentially donating tens of millions of dollars of their time to help make Montana the Last Best Place; and

WHEREAS, for decades, the Legislature has linked conservation district funding to the extraction of natural resources, particularly coal, with the intent that the care and conservation of natural resources should be funded using nonrenewable natural resources; and

WHEREAS, the Coal Severance Tax is the primary funding mechanism for the operation of conservation districts; and

WHEREAS, revenue from the Coal Severance Tax has declined over the past several years and continues to show a significant decline that may not abate; and

WHEREAS, the increasing gap in the amount of dollars annually appropriated by the Legislature and the actual, lesser, dollars that are received by the conservation districts impacts the districts' abilities to fulfill their purpose of providing for conservation, including natural resource projects that take considerable planning and preparation; and

WHEREAS, proposed solutions to the funding decline must be identified to inform the next Legislature.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE AND THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF

THE STATE OF MONTANA:

That the Legislative Council be requested to designate an appropriate interim committee or statutory committee, pursuant to section 5-5-217, MCA, or direct sufficient staff resources to:

- (1) review statutory authority and guidance related to conservation district funding mechanisms and funding sources;
- (2) explore and identify other sources of revenue that may link to the services that conservation districts provide;
- (3) examine the feasibility of equitably expanding the local tax base; and
- (4) examine the practicality and viability of establishing a trust fund managed by the state for the benefit of the operation of conservation districts.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the committee:

- (1) include input from appropriate stakeholders, including but not limited to conservation district supervisors, conservation district administrators, the Montana Association of Conservation Districts, partner state agencies, including the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Environmental Quality, the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, and the Department of Agriculture, and members of the interested public; and
- (2) invite to all meetings and solicit input from personnel representing federal natural resource partner agencies, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, the Bureau of Reclamation, the United States Army Corps of Engineers, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and other interested and pertinent federal agencies.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that if the study is assigned to staff, any findings or conclusions be presented to and reviewed by an appropriate committee designated by the Legislative Council.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that all aspects of the study, including presentation and review requirements, be concluded prior to September 15, 2022.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the final results of the study, including any findings, conclusions, comments, or recommendations of the appropriate committee, be reported to the 68th Legislature.

- END -

I hereby certify that the within bill,
HJ 27, originated in the House.

Chief Clerk of the House

Speaker of the House

Signed this _____ day
of _____, 2021.

President of the Senate

Signed this _____ day
of _____, 2021.

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 27

INTRODUCED BY K. HOLMLUND, M. CAFERRO, W. CURDY, L. JONES, V. RICCI, J. SCHILLINGER, R.

OSMUNDSON, D. SALOMON

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