

**Questionnaire for Candidates for Texas Agriculture Commissioner
From the Texas Local Food and Farms Coalition**

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1) What is your position on the transfer of water, whether through groundwater or surface water transfers, from rural communities to urban centers? What steps do you think should be taken to ensure sufficient water for agriculture and other rural needs?

My position statement on water is entitled The Ripple Effect and can be found in its entirety here: <https://votekimolson.org/land-%26-water-1>. We consulted with FARFA in the development of our policy. Here are our specific steps to address water use, transfer, and conservation:

- Ensure that Texas farmers and ranchers are connected with grant and cost-share programs that help agriculture producers implement common-sense conservation measures.
- Work to protect property rights of farmers and others from water marketing practices that abuse the “right of capture” rule for groundwater.
- Emphasize conservation in rapidly growing urban areas.
- Ensure that any water sale or transfer policy includes an in-depth review of long-term impact, including economic impacts to agricultural communities, if water transfer threatens businesses and farms.
- Assign a designated TDA staff person to specialize in water issues and to participate when water rights rules are being negotiated.
- Fulfill the role of certifying agent for agricultural chemical applicators, to make certain that applicators have the tools, training, and resources to comply with regulations intended to protect our surface and ground water.

2) TDA has authority to implement the produce safety rule of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). What specific steps would you take in implementing these new regulations to help Texas farmers continue and expand produce operations? Would you require registration of farms, including exempt or qualifiedly exempt farms?

The Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) has a state-level administrative responsibility to support compliance with the new FSMA regulation among farmers. The federal rule addresses a critical issue, but is not without complexities, exceptions, and conditional enforcement. FSMA requires funding and other resources for implementation and monitoring and could impact the cost of production for the farmer and the price of food for the consumer. Our commitment is to transparent regulations and right-sized rules. Our strategy will begin with ensuring TDA staff are

completely familiar with the regulations — we must be the experts in every aspect of the rule as it's written. We will also seek out opportunity to meet with farmers where they are — that is, seeking partner organizations that can host information sessions with farmers, rather than summoning farmers to a meeting at an inconvenient location or during an impossible time of year. We will create a risk assessment to determine which farmers to prioritize as we begin outreach, with the purpose of demystifying the regulations, answering questions, and addressing concerns. Although TDA will be the state-level regulator, a more supportive approach will be employed. Other strategies we may put in place, pending funding and timeline, include cost-sharing for compliance, removing duplicative reporting requirements with GAP and Organic certification, supporting group inspections, and exploring the use of technology to efficiently deliver training or even conduct inspections. A corollary to our need to implement FSMA is the opportunity that it can represent — we will dedicate resources to expanding school meal programs as viable sales outlets for farmers who step up to the new legislation.

3) Texas leads the nation in [agriculture land loss](#). With the projected increase in population growth, how will we be able to support farming and ranching professions?

Laws that protect our valuable farmland and open spaces, incentives for farmers and landholders to preserve lands, and well-planned growth that acknowledges the importance of farms are some of the solutions that Texans can turn to, in order to stop the loss. Our position statements addressing New and Beginning Farmers and Economic Viability of Farms available at <https://votekimolson.org/economy-%26-jobs-1> feature many of the approaches that The Department of Agriculture (TDA) will take in keeping farmers on their farms and bringing a new generation of farmers to the land. Other focused efforts include:

- Advocate for funding for the Texas Farm & Ranch Lands Conservation Program that provides incentives to landowners to conserve farmland and wildlife habitat.
- Promote participation in USDA conservation programs, such as the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program and the Grasslands Reserve Program.
- Convene a task force to evaluate the impacts of the loss of rural lands and make recommendations for further state policies to address this loss.
- Engage with local and regional planning authorities to emphasize the importance of farmland preservation when planning for growth and development.

4) The average age of [Texas farmers](#) is 58 years old. Is that a problem? And if it is, what do you plan to do to bring more young people into the farming industry?

All food comes from farms, so without a new generation of farmers, we put our food security at risk. TDA can serve as a voice for Texas farmers in Washington and will advocate for policies that support new and beginning farmers. Negotiations on the federal Farm Bill are upon us, and TDA should step up and speak up in favor of start-up farmers. Among our priorities for the 2018 Farm Bill are:

- Preserve and build on the new farmer programs established in the previous Farm Bill, such as the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development grant program.
- Advocate for the farmer safety net, and ensure that crop insurance and disaster relief are accessible to new and beginning farmers.

- Support continued funding for the Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Loans and savings accounts plus dedicated local funding and a simplified application process for federally-backed loan programs.

In addition to federal farm loans and grants, the TDA offers project-specific funding through the Young Farmer Grant Program, with grants ranging from \$5,000 up to \$20,000. Just like TDA can be a voice for Texas farmers in Washington, the agency will also speak up in support of farmers at the state level. In particular, property tax rules should be amended to reduce the tax liability and remove barriers to entry for new farmers.

5) 33% of [Texan children](#) between the ages of 10-17 are overweight or obese. At the same time, 23.8% of children in Texas are hungry. What would you do to improve the school and breakfast and lunch program in Texas to mitigate health and hunger issues?

One of the greatest responsibilities that TDA has is administering the National School Lunch Program and related nutrition programs for our state's children. I support strategies that encourage school meal providers to step up to meaningful nutrition standards rather than stepping back. We will employ evidence-based strategies to reach high standards, directly address challenges faced by food service professionals with training and support, recognize schools that meet or exceed standards, and will seek opportunities to simplify administrative processes, such as promoting community eligibility. We also believe that the lunchroom is a classroom. Kids should have the opportunity to interact with one another and enjoy their meals, but TDA can also assist schools with marketing and promotions of healthy meals, conduct outreach to generate parent engagement and support for school meals, and support "two-way education" with student-led recipe and message testing. We will seek out partnerships between the academic public health sector, health and medical professionals, and educators to bolster these efforts. Lessons in healthy eating will be transferred from the student to the parents, as well -- parents and caregivers will receive information about healthy food access options and engaging them in producing and purchasing healthy foods. Finally, we will identify and address challenges to expanded Farm to School programs, seek out resources to overcome the challenges, promote local food educational programs, and advocate for an additional reimbursement allotment to schools and districts that participate in Farm to School purchasing.

6) Texas receives \$2B from the USDA for the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs. How would you leverage reimbursements to support small to mid-sized, beginning and/or historically disadvantaged producers?

The funding received for the National School Lunch Program and other nutrition programs provides for the state's administrative duties and the food, labor, and other costs that each local school food authority incurs. Slim margins are a challenge, and spending regulations are strict, but practice-proven strategies for making local food purchases are in place and easily duplicated. Additionally, we are interested in securing funding at the state level to incentivize schools and districts to purchase local foods directly from farmers and ranchers. We will also make sure that TDA is a strong and supportive partner in community-based and regional efforts such as "food hubs" and cooperatives that can enable more disadvantaged farmers to participate more fully in Farm to School.

7) Total consumer demand for organic foods in Texas is likely more than \$1B per year. However, only one in every 1,400 Texas farms is certified organic, a far lower percentage than in any other state. What will you do to grow the organic industry in Texas and help conventional farmers transition to organic production methods to meet consumer demand?

I refer to this scenario that consumer demand is far outweighing local supply, as “the Organic Opportunity.” Several steps should be taken to prevent Texas farmers from continuing to miss out on this opportunity. We support a simplified application process utilizing online submissions, digital record-keeping tools, and auto-filling prior data for renewal applications. We will also review the fee structure to ensure fairness to farmers. And, we will seek to continue and expand the USDA partnership that provides for cost-sharing of administrative fees. We can also use existing marketing resources to promote Texas organics, both domestically and in international markets, including schools. Another step to maximize benefit to Texas farmers who choose organic production is working with public institutions and other organizations to build and share a base of knowledge.

8) While some sectors saw benefits, NAFTA was disastrous for Texas specialty crop growers. How would you work with Secretary Perdue and President Trump to renegotiate NAFTA in a way that stops undercutting and instead benefits Texas fruit and vegetable growers?"

Texas agriculture must help inform NAFTA negotiators in a manner that does not undermine the benefits that grain farmers and beef producers have gained under the agreement while improving the situation for specialty crop producers. Among the strategies is first holding neighboring producers to the north and south of our borders to the same environmental regulations, labor standards, and food safety rules to ensure a level playing field. Current trade law allows a nationwide industry that can prove harmful from trade practices to file anti-dumping complaints, triggering further action to verify and stop those practices. There has been discussion around reducing the “industry-wide” requirement to an industry within a particular region, although that opens the door for other targeted retaliation. We will urge caution and tact in the renegotiation process, and seek to address production issues and work to avoid overly protectionist strategies.

9) In January 2019, TDA will need to submit a budget to the Texas Legislature. In your opinion, what programs need more funding, less funding or should stay at their same funding level?

Both revenue and expenses in the TDA budget are largely dependent on federal funding — the National School Lunch Program budget is expected to increase as the state’s population grows. We will also seek out funding through federal grant programs and public-private partnerships to offset any required reductions in state funding. We see some other priorities emerging, including funding to support trade and market development, backing for disaster relief, rural health, and economic development in support of localized food systems. Among the reductions that could potentially be absorbed without loss of service are administrative expenses, such as salaries of top-tier employees. We will also seek reductions in certain licensing and permitting, as compared to actual expenses and service offered, following the recent drastic and unwarranted increases.