

# STATE NEWS

## If the courts take more time, so will Texas primaries

By Ross Ramsey  
Texas Tribune

It takes at least two months to put a primary election together once political maps are finally drawn, and if the federal courts don't spit out a final Texas map within the next three weeks, the state's primary elections probably can't be held on April 3.

During Monday's oral arguments in the Texas redistricting case, the justices on the high court asked about holding elections on time in April or as late as June. At one point, they were working backward from the general election date next November as they tried to sort out the complexities of reworking political maps in the face of election deadlines.

"Texas has a very early primary," Justice Samuel Alito Jr. said at one point during the hearing. "Some states have them for congressional races in — in the fall, and the latest presidential primary I think is at the end of June. So why can't this all be pushed back, and wouldn't that eliminate a lot of the problems that we are grappling with in this case?"

The problems can be sorted into two piles. The state doesn't have maps to use for congressional and legislative elections, and it will take the courts a couple of months, at best, to come up

with a set of maps that has jumped through all of the legal hoops, from trial courts to appeals. The U.S. Supreme Court and two separate panels of federal judges in Washington and in Texas are sorting out which maps to use.

That second stack of troubles is all about the calendar and the practicalities of holding elections. Once they have political maps, local election officials in the state's 254 counties have to break them down into voting precincts, sorting voters into the smaller groupings that show them everything from which races they'll be voting in to which places they'll be voting from.

That tedious process can take four to five weeks in large counties, election officials say, and then those lines have to be approved by federal officials under the Voting Rights Act. The courts haven't approved a map for the April 3 election date.

"We've got to have those maps by the end of the month or we're not going to make those deadlines," said Steve Raborn, Tarrant County's election administrator.

Once the precinct lines are drawn, election administrators can send Texans the voter registration cards they'll need when they vote. At the same time, those of-

ficials can mail ballots to military and civilian voters overseas. That has to happen 45 days before the election, and can't happen until the precinct lines are drawn. The process has scads of other deadlines within it, but those two — the tedious drawing of precinct lines and the 45-day lead time for overseas voters — establish the time it takes to put an election together once the maps are approved.

If that was the end of it, Texas could hold its primaries anytime before November, but these are party primaries and are meant to start a process that continues through precinct conventions held on primary day, county and senate district conventions usually held two or three weeks later, and state party conventions, which by state law are held in June or July.

This year, both the Democrats and the Republicans are having their state conventions on June 7-9. When they picked those dates and started booking convention space and blocks of hotel rooms in Houston and Fort Worth, respectively, the primaries were supposed to be held on March 6.

That would have given them almost three months to put together their convention delegations, and the runoffs on May 22 would have come before the con-

ventions, too.

Those bookings can't be easily changed. The GOP convention, for instance, involves 18,000 people; that party booked its space six years ago.

When it became clear the maps weren't going to be ready, one proposal would have split the primaries, with the presidential election remaining in March and some or all of the rest of the elections moving to a later date. That would have taken care of the political parties, but would have doubled the number — and the costs — of this year's primary elections. Moving all of the primaries to April 3 (and the runoffs to June 5) was the compromise.

Several county organizations — the Conference of Urban Counties, the County Judges and Commissioners Association of Texas, and the Texas Association of Counties — jumped into the fray last month, asking a panel of federal judges in San Antonio to keep the logistics in mind. That was an early warning that the April 3 date was in trouble.

"We are concerned with trying to do it in May, with all of the municipal elections in May," said Donald Lee, executive director of the Conference of Urban Counties. "The best thing would be to get a map this week, and get it in gear."

Delaying the primaries again could revive the idea of a split primary. Any delay puts the political parties in a bind. The Democrats initially proposed a May primary; the Republicans contended that was too close to the conventions. Talk of a later date has the chairman of the state GOP, Steve Munisteri, saying a split primary might be the only solution. "From my point of view, there is no choice but to have two primaries if you do not have the new Congressional, State House and State Senate lines in time to have an early April primary," he said in a Tuesday email to fellow Republicans.

Delays could be expensive. If the primaries are held in June, after the school year is over, election administrators would have to pay to open schools as polling places. During the school year, when those buildings are open, that's free, Raborn said. "There's the availability of people, too," he said. "We might have a hard time

finding election workers, or even voters. Everyone is on vacation. Their minds are on vacation."

The Supreme Court's hearing was Monday, and it hasn't ruled (nor was it expected to, that quickly). A panel of federal judges in Washington, D.C., will begin hearings next week on whether the maps satisfy preclearance requirements in the Voting Rights Act. Final arguments in that proceeding are set for Feb. 3 — well after the end-of-January deadline for getting a map in time for April 3 elections.

"I don't think the San Antonio court or even the Supreme Court understood the complexity of the election," said Harris County Clerk Stan Stanart. "Even voters — they show up to vote, and it just works. They have no idea what's going on behind the scenes."

This article originally appeared in The Texas Tribune at <http://trib.it/yz4fiG>.

## OSU: Expect cattle prices to continue to climb in 2012

For Texas cattlemen, 2011 was a year of extremes and records.

The drought conditions that plagued them last year were only countered by both strong prices and a strong export market.

According to livestock economists at Oklahoma State University (OSU), ranchers could see another year of record cattle prices in 2012.

Experts point to the shrinking U.S. cattle herd leading to tighter supplies

as a major driver behind increasing prices.

Yet Dr. Derrell Peel, an OSU livestock economist, said that, while low supply is the main factor at the moment, it will be consumer demand that determines just how high prices will go.

As unemployment remains a concern, many are unsure about U.S. consumers' willingness to pay higher beef prices.

Some experts predict an increase in retail prices from 4-12 percent in 2012.

## Cost share assistance to restore agriculture fences FSA announces additional sign-up for Emergency Conservation Program

Houston/Leon/Madison — Anderson County USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) Executive Director Darvin L. Collins announces that an additional 30-day sign-up for the Emergency Conservation Program will be implemented, ending Feb. 15, for cost share assistance to restore agricultural fences that were destroyed or severely damaged by wildfire in Houston, Leon and Anderson counties.

Collins states that FSA will accept applications in eligible counties, but there is currently a backlog for

ECP funds.

Producers are still encouraged to submit an application and will be notified as funds become available, Collins said.

It is normal procedure for producers to submit their requests for ECP assistance prior to beginning reconstructive work.

Completing reconstructive work before submitting an ECP request and receiving FSA approval would usually result in forfeiture of program eligibility, but according to Collins, FSA has the authority to approve

ECP requests, on a case-by-case basis, for projects started or completed before receiving ECP funding approval.

"We realize that there are extenuating circumstances that must be addressed for public and livestock safety and health reasons and due to the backlog of ECP funds, FSA district directors have the authority to waive the start date for beginning reconstructive work," said Collins.

Approval to waive the start date would allow producers to begin repairing

fences before ECP funds are secured without jeopardizing program eligibility, he said.

ECP program participants can receive financial assistance for up to 75 percent of the cost to implement approved emergency conservation practices.

For more ECP information or to request a start date waiver, please contact the Houston/Leon/Madison-Anderson County FSA office at (936) 544-3857 ext. 2.

Information can also be obtained on line at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov>.

## As ongoing drought threatens rural water supplies, Staples announces relief funds

AUSTIN — With an historic drought threatening to deplete entire water supplies in some rural Texas communities, Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples Thursday, Jan. 12, announced the availability of funding to sustain and enhance water resources.

The funds, totaling approximately \$5 million and made available through the federal Texas Community Development Block Grant Program, will finance waterway infrastructure im-

provements, new drilling methods and other strategies for securing sufficient water reserves.

"The worst one-year drought in Texas history made its print in the record books last year, and the long-term effects of that devastating dry spell will challenge us for years to come," Staples said.

"Our rural communities have been some of the hardest hit areas of the state and many are in dire need of water source restoration,

repair and replenishment. With these funds, we hope to provide much-needed relief to communities that are dangerously close to running dry."

Upon transfer of the Texas Department of Rural Affairs to the Texas Department of Agriculture on Oct. 1, 2011, Staples recognized the underutilization of certain disaster-designated funds and immediately went to work to ensure those dollars would be more readily available to communities impacted by drought, flooding and other types of disasters.

Eligible counties and cities must be named in a state or presidential disaster declaration.

Counties must have

populations of fewer than 200,000 residents, and cities must have populations under 50,000.

Projects eligible for funding consideration include, but are not limited to debris clearance, road reconstruction, flood and drainage facilities, relocation of water intake facilities and the installation of water lines to access new water sources.

To request a copy of the funding application, contact Tom Entsminger at (512) 936-7891 or [Tom.Entsminger@TexasAgriculture.gov](mailto:Tom.Entsminger@TexasAgriculture.gov). Applications must be submitted within 12 months of the date of the disaster declaration. Funds will be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis.

## Dead horse, from Page A-1

missioner Pat Perry said the county does not have a place for disposing the horse, but he could dig a hole on his property and bury it.

## Signs, fence don't deter illegal dumping on CR 3033



Photos by Lynda Jones

Although this "No Dumping or Littering" sign clearly states the area is under surveillance and violators face a fine of up to \$1,000, illegal dumping continues to be a problem on CR 3300.



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Jesse L. Stephens  
and  
Todd, Hamaker & Johnson, LLP

Announce that effective January 1, 2012 the CPA firm of Jesse L. Stephens, CPA will merge with the Lufkin CPA firm of Todd, Hamaker & Johnson, LLP.

The Crockett office at 301 North Sixth Street will remain open full-time and all current employees and telephone numbers will remain the same.

We look forward to continuing to serve the Crockett Community.