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## **HB 1437: No net loss municipal interbasin transfer through agricultural water conservation**

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### Abstract Text:

The HB 1437 Agriculture Water Conservation Program is an innovative way to meet rising municipal demands in Williamson County (located in the Colorado River Basin of Texas), conserve river water used for irrigation, and maintain agriculture productivity. Through a cooperative program between municipal and agricultural water users, the program provides grants to irrigation districts and agriculture producers in Matagorda, Wharton, and Colorado counties to implement water conservation projects on farms and in irrigation districts.

High population growth rates and limited water supplies within Williamson County encouraged water utilities to look outside of their river basin to meet projected demands for water. In 1999, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 1437 (HB 1437) authorizing LCRA to transfer up to 25,000 acre-feet of water per year to Williamson County under certain conditions including 1) The transfer results in “no net loss” of water to the lower Colorado River basin, and 2) A conservation surcharge on the transferred water is collected from customers in Williamson County to help pay for the conservation projects. The current surcharge is 25 percent, which is deposited into an Agriculture Conservation Fund that is administered by the LCRA Board.

The grant program began its first season in 2006 and from 2006-2007 has funded a 30% cost share of precision leveling 6,439 acres of farm land already participating in the 50% cost share federal Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQUIP) program. A total of 4,830 acre-feet of water has been conserved from these precision leveling grants. A water savings verification program will be implemented in 2008.

Based on Williamson County water demands, a 7-year plan was developed through engineering studies and public meetings to conserve approximately 3,500 ac-ft/yr of agriculture water, representing a combination of conservation projects including precision leveling and rehabilitation and automation of canal gates in irrigation districts.

### Impact Statement:

This project provides a funding mechanism to increase the incentive for rice farmers to implement conservation practices utilizing USDA EQUIP funds and to provide limited funding for modernization of irrigation districts in the rice farming counties of the lower Colorado river basin. This innovative approach to water resource management exchanges agricultural conservation savings for municipal use to result in no net loss of water to the basin. Precision leveling reduces field tailwater (runoff), which improves water quality.