



Written Comments  
to the  
Senate State Government Committee  
Regarding House Bill 153 and Senate Bill 488  
(Reduction in Size of General Assembly)

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Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Offered by  
PENNSYLVANIA FARM BUREAU

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On behalf of Pennsylvania Farm Bureau and more than 61,000 families statewide who are members of Farm Bureau, we would like to thank the members of the Senate State Government Committee for opportunity to provide written comments, relative to the Committee's hearing to consider proposed legislation to reduce the number of state Senate and House districts in Pennsylvania.

Nearly five years ago, Farm Bureau offered testimony before the House State Government Committee on the same issue. At that time, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau acknowledged a political unrest that causes citizens to believe their government is no longer responsive to their needs and that sweeping reforms are needed, including eliminating those elements perceived to be "inefficient." We understand that belief has not diminished over the past five years.

From our perspective, however, the element of inefficiency within a representative form of government is a relative term. Farmers are a minority. And rural areas, by their nature, are less concentrated in population than their urban and suburban counterparts.

As we stated in 2011, members of Farm Bureau continue to believe that legislation to deal with inefficiency of state government through reduction in size of the legislature is worse than the problem such legislation is attempting to remedy. Reduction in the number of legislative districts seriously compromises existing opportunities for needs and concerns of local Pennsylvanians to be meaningfully heard and represented in the legislative process, particularly those in rural communities.

Reduction in the number of legislative districts will have the practical effect of increasing the population being represented by each district. And it further erodes opportunities for access of rural constituents with their representative and the political necessity for representatives to consider and advocate for special needs of rural constituents in the legislative process.

It is estimated that 92,790 farmers are operating 63,000 farms in Pennsylvania (*Source: U.S. Census of Agriculture – 2007*). Pennsylvania's farm population is only 0.77 percent of Pennsylvania's estimated total population of 12.7 million (*Source: U.S. Census – 2010*).

We reported to you in our 2008 testimony of the significant shift in population that occurred between 1990 and 2000. During the final decade of the twentieth century (1990-2000), Pennsylvania's rural population substantially decreased in number of residents (nearly 875 thousand fewer). And Pennsylvania's relative percentage of rural residents decreased from 31 percent to 23 percent (*Source: Pennsylvania Abstract*).

While the total number and relative percentage of rural people in 2010 slightly increased, Pennsylvania's percentage of rural people is still only 27 percent – well below that of 1990, and below percentages for any decade prior to 1990. For 25 of Pennsylvania's rural counties, total population in the county was lower in 2010 than in 2000.

Certainly changes in population make-up over the last two decades have significantly affected the demographic make-up of many legislative districts in the Commonwealth. Because of these demographic changes, there has already been a considerable geographic shift in legislative districts toward

urban areas and away from farming and rural areas. We anticipate this trend to continue.

The bills being considered today propose to reduce the number of House legislative districts by about 25 percent. And Senate Bill 488 proposes to reduce the number of Senate legislative districts by 10 percent. Using US Census figures for 2010, a 25 percent reduction in number of House legislative districts would cause each Representative to represent and serve the interests of an approximate additional 15,500 people. The ten percent reduction in the Senate would cause each Senator to represent and serve the interests of an approximate additional 25,000 people.

Especially in light of the changes in population demographics that have already occurred, reduction in number of House and Senate districts would further diminish the opportunity for those in rural areas to have a meaningful voice in our Commonwealth's business. Not only would a reduction in legislative districts increase the likelihood of shifting representation away from rural communities, the fewer districts remaining in rural areas will likely be larger in size, making it even more difficult and time-consuming for the elected representative in these districts to adequately serve his or her constituents.

Court interpretations of the United States Constitution essentially prohibit Pennsylvania and other states from establishing legislative districts on the basis of geographical regions. State legislative districts must be established on the basis of relative equality of populations in each district. Yet the forefathers of the federal Constitution recognized the wisdom in creating a bicameral legislature whose representation is based both on geography and

population to better ensure that needs and interests of citizens living in less populated regions will be expressed and considered in Congress.

Although Pennsylvania may not have the legal ability to structure legislative representation exclusively on geography, the bicameral system with more numerous districts representing smaller numbers of people, better ensures that the interests of less densely populated areas do not get left behind in the exercise of democracy, and that legislative action does not merely become a tyranny of the majority.

Rural Pennsylvanians should have the right to meaningful access to their elected representatives, and elected representatives should be given the practical capability to meet with the broadest spectrum of constituents and to listen, understand and address their concerns and problems. Reducing the number of legislative districts in Pennsylvania would substantially compromise these principles essential to our members.

We would also point out to the Committee the appeal currently pending before the United States Supreme Court (*Evenwel v. Abbot*), which is revisiting the principle of "one-person-one-vote" established under the Court's landmark decisions in the 1960's. Oral arguments were presented this past December on whether states must base constitutionally required equality of representation of districts strictly on census numbers of individuals who reside within each district or may base equality of representation within each district on relative numbers of eligible voters.

The Supreme Court's determination on this issue may provide the General Assembly greater opportunity for redistricting in type and number that can broaden the basis for representation and ensure the quality of representation and meaningful consideration of needs and interests of rural areas that we believe should be afforded rural citizens.

We would at least encourage the General Assembly to defer immediate changes in number or make-up of legislative districts until a decision by the Supreme Court in the *Evenwel* appeal has been made and the legislature has had adequate time to evaluate and consider appropriate changes in response to the Court's decision.

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau believes the number of legislative districts in the Pennsylvania General Assembly should remain at 50 in the Senate and 203 in the House of Representatives. We therefore would not support legislative proposals to reduce the size of the General Assembly contained in the seven bills being considered today, and would urge this Committee not to report these bills or similar legislation from committee.

Again, we thank you for the opportunity to share with you our views.