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Regarding: Congressional

Message:

Please see our comments on behalf of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club





SIERRA CLUB

LONE STAR CHAPTER

Senate Select Committee on Congressional Redistricting

The Honorable Phil King, Chair

The Honorable Brandon Creighton, Vice-Chair

Honorable Senators,

From: Cyrus Reed, Legislative and Conservation Director, Lone Star Chapter
Sierra Club, [REDACTED]

July 25th, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to offer some brief written comments on a new very unusual redistricting process in 2025, only a few years after new maps were adopted in 2021 and only two years after the legislature formally established new Texas Senate and House maps. In 2021, issues with the census and the advent of COVID impacted the process, and the congressional maps that were drawn were highly flawed. In essence, even though Texas has become a majority minority state, two-thirds of our congressional representatives are anglo, most of whom are male, and we have congressional representation that is not reflective of our state's residents. **The makeup of Texas' congressional delegation does not reflect the diversity of our state. Texas consists of 60% people of color, but only 34% of our congressional delegation is represented by people of color.**

This is not a fight about political parties. It is a fight about political power and who gets to wield it.

While we believe the current congressional maps are fundamentally unfair, we do not think it is a good idea to be having a redistricting discussion in a 30-day special session in 2025, five years after the Census was conducted, and while the current maps are still being legally challenged and going through the courts. The Governor added this issue

to a special session which we believe should be focussed on the recent flooding and disaster recovery and other issues of importance to all Texans, not on partisan politics, and potentially making unfair maps even more unfair. It is wrong – and unfair to all Texans – for the Legislature to take up mid-decade redistricting to further disenfranchise certain communities when the court has not even weighed in on the last round of discriminatory redistricting.

Instead, we would urge this committee to let that legal process play out and leave the maps alone until the legal process determines if they are fair. One thing this legislature could do is pass a law to appoint an independent redistricting committee to draw future maps, which would remove the partisan nature of drawing lines on a map and leave it to experts without partisan intentions.

However, given that the Governor has ordered this body to look at redistricting, we do recognize and thank the committee for holding these hearings, and allowing virtual testimony as well as written testimony. We would note, however, that even though some of the districts being considered are in the Rio Grande Valley you are not holding any hearings in the Valley, which seems fundamentally unfair.

We would also ask that during the special session – which is short and intense – that to the extent you do produce a proposed map with new congressional districts, that you go out of your way to provide at least 72-hour notice for any public hearings on actual proposed congressional maps, and that you have at least two public meetings. You should also allow a portal for written testimony and also allow virtual testimony.

The Sierra Club has approximately 25,000 members in the State of Texas. Our members are very involved in issues – particularly those involving clean air, clean water, land conservation – care deeply about our state and planet's future, and care about the impacts and solutions to our climate catastrophes. They live throughout the state, tend to vote in all elections – more than 95 percent in presidential elections, get involved in local races supporting candidates and are civically engaged. While on the whole they tend to vote Democratic, we have members that are fiercely Democratic, partisan Republicans and many independents. Sierra Club members care deeply about politics, policy and issues that are impacted by how you draw the lines.

Some obvious truths

The Lone Star Chapter – which is the Texas Chapter of the Sierra Club - has not often participated in discussions about redistricting maps. But these maps have the potential to impact both the special election for the late Sylvester Turner's seat in Congressional District 18, but also other congressional districts in at least the next three election cycles.. It is vitally important that to the extent you actually do produce new maps, that

the lines are drawn fairly, create communities of interest, and do not unfairly favor one demographic or another and do not lock in districts that will never be competitive for either of the main political parties. We believe that as is apparent in the recent elections, the maps have been drawn in a way that assures that certain districts are not competitive, and will assure the dominance of one party over the other.

The recent elections last November resulted in the election of 25 Republicans, and 13 Democrats in the Texas congressional delegation, which is not reflective of the split in Texas based on the elections for state or presidential office, and many of the districts are drawn in a way that is unfair to voters. Perhaps of more concern, however, is that because the majority of the districts have been drawn in a way that makes them extremely partisan, elections tend to be decided by primary voters, which then tends to invite more “extreme” candidates, and makes it harder for the major parties to work for bipartisan solutions.

Texas is growing. Even with the difficulty of conducting a Census during a time of COVID that may have impacted our totals, the Census shows an exploding population where virtually every demographic is growing. The state has become more ethnically diverse as both in-state growth among particularly Latino and Asian communities, but also due to immigration from many nations. Our cities and suburban areas are growing, while there has been some loss of population in certain parts of rural and West Texas.

The three areas of the state that have seen particularly high levels of pronounced growth have been in the DFW, Houston-Fort Bend areas and in the areas surrounding Austin, such as Williamson and Hays Counties. We believe that the maps approved by the legislature do not provide fair maps in particular for the Central Texas, Dallas and Houston areas that better represent communities of interest.

We should not have continued Texas traditions of gerrymandering and map manipulation, where districts are either cracked in such a way that no congressperson, state representative or state senator is representing that community, or packed to unfairly tip the balance toward one political party. No one has been harmed more by map manipulation and voter suppression than Black and Latino communities whose voices have been minimized at the ballot box and in Congress.

We ask that you work to end map manipulation and gerrymandering.

The Current Congressional Districts are Unfair

While the Sierra Club has opposed the currently drawn congressional districts, we do believe it would be better to not rush during a special session to approve new maps while court cases are still ongoing. The DOJ letter that seems to have spurred the

Governor to act is not legally defensible, and we believe the courts will ultimately disagree with its arguments. In fact, the new Department of Justice letter contradicts the sworn testimony of Texas's lead map drawers and its elected officials, and is wrong. The Constitution and Voting Rights Act do not *require* destroying existing coalition districts. Claiming that districts are racial gerrymanders simply because they contain two or more distinct racial groups turns the Constitution and Voting Rights Act upside down and is not worthy of any response by the Texas Legislature.

In terms of particular concerns on the current maps, we were upset by the way that the congressional maps split up or watered down communities of interest in the Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston areas (such as in Fort Bend County for example). In essence, the legislature in the previous sessions made the districts less competitive and have drawn them in a way that will dilute the power of minority voices, and make it easier frankly for one political party to win. To the extent that new districts are drawn, one factor that might assist you in redrawing lines would be to consider environmental factors, including industrial areas, flood or hurricane zones, watersheds or similar topographies (i.e. hill country or blackland prairies). We do not believe the present maps -- including in Dallas Fort Worth and Houston - meet these environmental "communities of interest."

A few particular egregious cases

We remain concerned by the splitting up of growing communities like Harris and Fort Bend Counties, and would note that these districts contorts in very strange ways, covering very different parts of the state. Examples include Districts 22 and 38 which go from urban parts of Houston into many different communities. Again we would support keeping communities together, particularly those that share watersheds and flood zones.

We are also very concerned, however, by the maps in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, which seems purposefully designed to dilute the voting power of the growing urbanized and suburban core by creating tentacles into the community from the North and South. Again, we believe the Special Committee should reconsider the Dallas-Fort Worth area, better define communities of interest, and consider factors such as watersheds, and industrial concentration when drawing these districts.

Moreover the Austin area districts also seem unfair. We have one largely democratic district that is currently held by Greg Casar that stretches from San Antonio to east Austin that does not make much sense while we have another Republican district held by Chip Roy that stretches from south Austin through areas south of Austin like Hays and Comal counties and then incorporates most but not all of the hill country. This is not a community of interest but really three very different areas clumped into one district with very different needs.

Finally we would note that the districts in the Valley also seem to stretch long distances, often including parts of the Valley near the border, with far off counties and communities 100s of miles to the north. Most egregious is Congressional District 15, which is a small strip of land between 28 and 34, and seems designed to reduce the power of one particular set of voters.

Texas will be best served where we have districts that can truly represent the interests of the people. That will also tend to lead to fairer less partisan districts that will lead to better bi-partisan policy that would be supported by most Texans.

Government works best to solve the real problems of ordinary people when our politics are less polarized and representatives represent communities of interest. Issues like keeping the lights on, reducing pollution, a fair and just immigration system, flood response and disaster recovery, water infrastructure, affordable housing, a living wage, good public schools and accessible quality health care should be the focus of our legislature in Texas and our congressional representatives in Washington for our country. Our elections should ensure that the voices of all citizens are heard, not just special interests, wealthy donors, and racially polarized extreme partisans.

Again we would ask you to allow the court system to play out and consider taking up a bill to establish an independent redistricting committee and participatory process going forward.