

The TexNet system was established to study an uptick in seismic activity in Texas and to help determine if it is naturally occurring or can be tied to oil and gas drilling activity. ThinkStock - Getty Images/Stockphoto

TEXAS

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Lawmakers, scientists seek millions to study Texas earthquake data

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FORT WORTH — Researchers studying what makes the earth move below our feet are seeking \$3.4 million from Texas lawmakers to continue operating a network of seismographs installed over the past two years.

In 2015, Texas lawmakers approved \$4.5 million for the comprehensive network known as TexNet following a string of temblors in North Texas, the largest being a 4.0 magnitude event near Venus and Mansfield that May. Of that, \$2.47 million was designated for equipment and \$2 million to study the results.

Scott Tinker, the state geologist and director of the Bureau of Economic Geology, says the bureau is now seeking about \$3.4 million for TexNet for the next biennium to continue its groundbreaking research. Lawmakers and scientists wanted to determine if the tremors are naturally occurring or can be linked to oil and gas production. "It is to operate and maintain (the system), which takes a lot of field time," Tinker said. A completed TexNet system will include 22 permanent seismographs and 33 devices out in the field at any time. Another three seismographs are going to be held back to respond as particular situations arise, he said.

Although Tinker and others say TexNet enjoys widespread support — a 12-company consortium called the Center for Integrated Seismic Research is prepared to spend \$1.8 million to support it — the geological bureau is based at the University of Texas at Austin, and higher education funding is a hot-button issue.

"Until the end of May, everything is worrisome," Tinker said, referring to the time when the Legislature adjourns.

So far, funding for TexNet exists in House and Senate budget language, but the budgets need to go to a conference committee where differences will be resolved. In the House budget plan, the bureau is a special line item, while in the Senate version, the money was plugged into the overall university funding formula.

State Rep. Drew Darby, chairman of the powerful House Energy Resources Committee, said it doesn't make sense to spend millions of dollars to gather data and then not fund the research. But he said there are folks he described as budget vultures who "look to pick apart what they consider to be nonessential services."

"We have to fund the BEG and fund the science in order to evaluate the data that the TexNet system gathers," Darby said. "I happen to think that this TexNet system is a very important service to the public and to our regulatory entities so we can protect public health and safety."

"We need to address this head on with an appropriation in the budget," the San Angelo Republican said.

By March, scientists had installed 14 of the 22 permanent seismographs and another 15 portable stations.

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State Rep. Drew Darby, R-San Angelo, is chairman of the powerful House Energy Resources Committee.

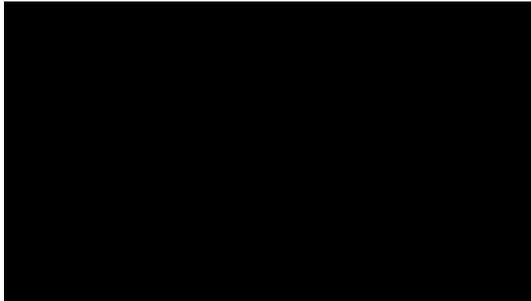
State Rep. Drew Darby, R-San Angelo, is chairman of the powerful House Energy Resources Committee. Eric Gay - AP archives

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