

# Brooks County will tally votes on optical scanner

FALFURRIAS (AP) — Texas' smallest county is following the trend of other small counties nationwide with the introduction of an electronic voting system.

For the first time ever, Brooks County will tally votes from the Nov. 8 general election with an optical scanning system, one of the latest electronic tabulation systems available.

Demelza Rodriguez, a vote counter from Falfurrias, the county seat, said, "It's about time. It was the stone age down here."

Brooks County is an impoverished South Texas farm county with 6,000 registered voters. As recently as the Super Tuesday primaries in March, voters had to wait until Friday to see which candidates they supported.

The county used precinct "callers," who unfold paper ballots one by one and call out names to be recorded in ledgers by "talliers."

Instead, there will be a central counting station at the courthouse.

Four assistant tabulators will feed paper ballots into the tabulating machines and push a button to get a printout of the tallies.

It will all cost a little more than \$4,000 to lease the four digital vote tabulators from Dallas-based Business Records Corp. County officials say they may try to raise funds to buy the machines — for slightly more than \$21,000 — after the election, if the system proves faster.

Business Records Corp., the largest national distributor of electronic voting equipment, has recorded increases of 10 percent to 15 percent annually in its customer base for the past decade.

Penelope Bonsall, director of the National Clearinghouse on Election Administration, which is part of the Federal Election Commission, said "There's been a fairly rapid conversion of small

counties to optical scan in the last three or four years."

During that time, it merged with several other companies, said Tom Eschberger, a regional vice president.

This year, revenues of \$45 million are expected.

Generally, experts say, the moderate price of many optical scan systems has made them attractive to smaller voting jurisdictions.

Besides the optical scan, other electronic tallying methods include punchcard and direct recording electronic, in which votes are recorded directly into a computer.

In Texas, approximately 80 of the state's 254 counties now use electronic voting systems, according to Sharon Hanks of the secretary of state's office.

In Brooks County, no one is sure how long the counting will take this time since write-ins and incorrectly marked ballots will have to be hand-counted.

Evelyn Solomon, who said she has been a precinct judge for at least 10 years, worried that the new ballots would be difficult for voters to use.

"This ballot's going to confuse everyone," she said. "At first my husband just said, 'I'm not going to vote,' when he saw it."

# Legislator calls for resignation

DALLAS (AP) — A state legislator has called for the resignation of Insurance Commissioner Doyce Lee in the wake of a report that National County Mutual Fire Insurance Co. was sinking for years but was placed under supervision only two weeks ago.

State Rep. Eddie Cavazos, D-Corpus Christi, who heads the budget and oversight panel of the House Committee on Insurance, said, "The insurance commissioner is hurting not only the consumer but the industry by letting all these things happen."

National County Mutual collapsed under a deficit of more than \$50 million and on Oct. 24 was declared insolvent, making it one of the biggest insurance failures in Texas history. National County Mutual has 125,000 policyholders, and the cost of their claims is likely to be passed on to taxpayers and other insurance companies in Texas.

Memorandums written by senior staffers at the State Board of Insurance and obtained by the Dallas Morning News indicate the company had been floundering, the newspaper reported in its Monday editions. Some of the memos urged top officials of the insurance department to take control of the company.

Cavazos said the problems within the agency are so severe that it could be dangerous if it is not addressed immediately. He added that he intends to hold a hearing on National County Mutual's demise.

"We're going to find out what the hell happened," Cavazos said.

Lee has defended the insurance department's action regarding National County Mutual. He has said that the department tried but failed to find another company to pump cash into the firm.

One memo, written last month by Deputy Commissioner Lee Powell and addressed to his superiors, stated that National County Mutual's "financial and operational deficiencies have been documented for several years." Powell declined to comment, saying such memos are private by law.

Dire warnings on National County Mutual's condition were outlined in a confidential report prepared in September 1987 by senior attorneys within the department's legal services.

The report said "there is sufficient reason to believe that the company is threatened with insolvency" and that an appropriate remedy would be to place the company under supervision.

Other concerns were mentioned in the report:

- National County Mutual had engaged in "fraudulent business practices," had unfairly handled policyholders' claims and was "a threat to the public interest," the report said. Among the offenses alleged in the report was the company failed to issue refunds to customers who canceled their policies.

- The company had removed from the state "books, papers, accounts or records necessary" for a financial examination.

The report was requested by Bogdan Rentea, who was director of the department's legal services division.

Rentea, now a lawyer in private practice, said that he became particularly concerned about National County Mutual in late 1986 and early 1987.

He said he held a meeting during that period with other senior managers in the insurance department, and "Everybody was in agreement that this company was out of control and something had to be done."

Rentea said he could not confirm whether he had ever formally recommended action against National County Mutual because it is privileged information.

Frustration within the insurance company continued to grow this year while top officials delayed taking control of the company, according to memos.

"I continue to be gravely concerned about the bad precedent we are setting by taking 'no action' regarding the financial condition of National County," began a memo written in July by Ron Sheaffer, the department's supervising fire and casualty analyst. Sheaffer's memo recommended that the company be placed in receivership.

Sheaffer said he could not comment on the memo.

A three-member board of gubernatorial appointees oversees the insurance department. Edwin J. Smith, the chairman of the board, said Sunday that the board "wants to know, more than anyone, what happened in the case of National County Mutual and the manner in which it was handled."

# Sears sells tallest facility to up earnings

CHICAGO (AP) — Sears, Roebuck and Co. said Monday it is selling the world's tallest building and revamping its merchandising approach in a sweeping bid to strengthen the lackluster earnings record of the nation's largest retailer.

Sears also said it would buy back up to 10 percent of its stock, divest its Coldwell Banker commercial real estate subsidiary and take \$425 million in after-tax fourth-quarter charges.

Edward Brennan, chairman and chief executive officer of the 102-year-old Chicago-based company, stressed the restructuring plan is designed to enhance Sears' value to shareholders immediately and at the same time concentrate its resources over the longer term on consumer-oriented businesses — retailing, insurance, real estate and financial services.

He conceded, however, that the timing of the announcement may have been affected by the recent wave of takeover activity.

Brennan declined to say how much Sears hoped to get for its landmark Sears Tower, which rises 110 stories — 1,450 feet — in the downtown Loop business district. It was built in 1974 and has been valued at \$1.8 billion.

Sears' share of the retail market has eroded steadily despite attempts to update the company's image.

The company has test-marketed stores devoted to a single product area, such as apparel or appliances, and offering a wide range of national brands. It also is scrapping frequent sales in favor of "everyday low pricing."

Sears had been expected to take some action to improve the value of its stock after announcing last week that third-quarter profits fell 16 percent — the third consecutive period Sears' income has declined.

# Experts try pitting bug against bug to end pests

SOUTH KINGSTOWN, R.I. (AP) — A Mexican mite is being tested against the Colorado potato beetle that also devastates tomatoes and eggplants. A Chinese wasp may stop a butterfly that eats broccoli, cabbage and Brussels sprouts.

Humans increasingly have allies in the enemy camp in the war on insects.

Biological controls like these and others using insects against problem plants have been used commercially for more than 100 years, racking up hundreds of successes. In the last 10 years, though, interest has grown.

Last year, for example, the federal government spent more than \$85 million on nearly 800 biological control projects, four times the number in existence a decade ago, said Jim Cate of the U.S. Agriculture Department.

"We are now just getting back into an era where entomologists are realizing you can't solve the problem with pesticides alone," said Robert Metcalf, who has worked more than 50 years on pest controls. "For a long time there were advocates of the sole use of each one. Now I think you'll find almost everybody agrees you need a little of each."

"There are many different crop pests that have been serious and are not serious because they have been able to find biological controls," said Patrick Logan, a University of Rhode Island entomologist working on potato beetles.

The mites live on adult beetles and suck fluid from them. Up to 2,000 can infest each beetle. They can shorten the

beetles' lifespans up to 50 percent, reducing the number of eggs laid, and they hinder the beetles' flying ability, reducing migration, Logan said.

University of Massachusetts researchers are studying a wasp from northwest China, *Apanteles rubecula*, which inserts its tiny needle into a cabbage butterfly larva and lays eggs. The wasp larvae eat the pest.

Most insects became pests after their natural environments were upset, letting them run rampant. Others were accidentally imported on vegetables and plants to areas where they had no natural predators.

Biological controls seek to restore nature's balance.

"It's a totally natural way to regulate (pest) populations," said Metcalf, 72, a professor at the University of Illinois in Urbana and a member of the National Academy of Science. "It doesn't pollute, it doesn't cost anything if it works, it's self-regulating and self-correcting."

Still, biological controls aren't always successful, and can be virtually ineffective, as with the gypsy moth, which escaped in 1882. From 1905 to 1911, researchers brought 2 million species of its natural enemies from Europe. But the effort failed because in Europe there are a large number of natural enemies, each of which controls a small number of the moths, Logan said.

Of the 127 species introduced against the moth, only eight have survived.

"It's not like some of the other pests where we've been able to find a single natural enemy that regulates it," Logan said.

One of 225 successful uses of biological controls was against the Cottony Cushion Scale, which almost wiped out the California citrus industry after it was inadvertently brought to the United States in the 1880s, said Cate.

An Agriculture Department entomologist brought the Vandalia beetle, a type of ladybug and a natural enemy of the scale, from Australia, said Metcalf. That worked until after World War II, when DDT killed off the beetle.

In fact, many pests became a problem when pesticides killed their natural enemies, Logan said. But pesticides can also be ineffective because the harmful insects develop a tolerance to the chemicals, and development can't keep up.

The introduction of biological controls also is slow. Despite the growth in the number of projects over the past decade, the level of federal funding has stayed relatively stable when adjusted for inflation, Cates said.

Also, scientists face delays while they work to show the government that their controls are harmless to all but the pest.

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