

Lawmakers face tough budget talks

By PAULA MOHR

WITH the session that began Feb. 4, Minnesota lawmakers and the governor are chipping away at a \$1.2 billion deficit, and once again every state program is on the table for further cuts or total elimination.

As one farm insider soberly stated, "The state is broke."

Gov. Tim Pawlenty reportedly asked state agencies to hold back 3% of their unspent biennial funds and 6% of their grants that have not yet been awarded.

"All we're doing is holding that money back in the treasury until the Legislature and the governor decide on a budget," says Gene Hugoson, commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. "They may agree to 3% or

change the amounts [to cut]. Until then, everything is still up in the air."

Hugoson acknowledges that cuts will have to be made to some programs and, possibly, some programs totally eliminated. At most concern is adequate funding for food safety programs that MDA oversees.

"We're all trying to be cognizant of food safety issues and to make sure that

food is safe for consumers," he says.

And the writing is on the wall for some programs to come to a close.

"We're at the point where we have to eliminate some programs instead of having them take a 3% cut," he says. "We're down to bare bones, and we jeopardize a program's ability to do what it supposed to do [if further cuts are made]." At that point, it would be prudent to end the program. Hugoson says the administration's budget recommendations for MDA would be ready the first week of February.

MDA already took an 8% cut for the 2010-11 biennium and saw some programs later unallotted by the governor. The tough economic climate makes the road even rougher for some farmers, especially hog producers who have been dealing with low prices, low exports and H1N1.

"At a time when we should be doing something for hog farmers, we cut [international] marketing funds," Hugoson says. "We won't feel comfortable doing it again."

While the budget deficit claims most of the media headlines, these are other issues that the state Legislature will discuss, according to Minnesota Farm Bureau and Minnesota Farmers Union:

- property tax concerns and the Green Acres Property Tax program
- credit availability for farmers and an emergency lien program
- non-exemption for public service corporations from state eminent domain laws
- wind power easement leases terminating after seven years if a project is not under development
- continued funding to eradicate bovine tuberculosis and regain the state's TB-free status

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How to communicate with state lawmaker

FROM the Minnesota Legislature Web site at www.leg.state.mn.us, here are some tips on how to contact your legislator.

Call, e-mail or write your legislator's office. E-mail is most effective when it is a specific e-mail to your representative or senator, not a blanket mailing to all members. When e-mailing, remember to include your name, postal address and phone number.

Immediately identify the issue and cover only one issue per letter. If you have more than one issue that needs to be addressed, write separate letters.

Give reasons for supporting or opposing the measure. Explain how the bill would help or hurt you, your children, your business or your community.

Use terms they will understand and avoid using abbreviations.

Offer to be of assistance. Offer to testify if there is a hearing regarding the issue with which you're concerned.

Find out the House or Senate file number and status before you contact your legislator. For help, call House InBox at 651-296-6646.

Be polite and reasonable. And finally, be sure to say "thanks."