

State senators return to Lincoln for 60-day session

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Friday, 06 January 2012 21:11 - Last Updated Friday, 06 January 2012 21:12

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Nebraska's state senators return to Lincoln this week to begin the 60-day short session of the 102nd Legislature.

Senator Mark Christensen of Imperial, who represents the 44th District in southwest Nebraska, joined his colleagues when the gavel fell Wednesday, Jan 4.

Not only will the senators deal with a pile of bills left over from last year's 90-day session but they will be introducing more this session.

In Nebraska's two-year legislative cycle, bills not acted on in the 90-day session automatically rollover into the 60 day-session. Any bill from either session that does not pass by the end of the 60-day session is dead and must be reintroduced in the next two-year cycle.

Christensen's bills

Christensen said he has about 20 bills that have carried over from the 90-day session. He also plans to introduce several bills this week, including a water-related bill.

State senators return to Lincoln for 60-day session

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Friday, 06 January 2012 21:11 - Last Updated Friday, 06 January 2012 21:12

Christensen has built a reputation around water issues, dating back to his passage of LB 701, which created a mechanism of funding compliance actions in the Republican River Basin. While a 10-cent levy in the bill was struck down by the Nebraska Supreme Court, the occupation tax in LB 701 withstood a constitutional test by the high court.

Christensen said this year's water bill will address conservation acres relating to the collection of occupation tax. His bill will seek an exemption of the occupation tax for any ground enrolled in state or federal conservation programs aimed at curtailing water usage, such as CREP.

The senator said property owners who have enrolled land in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) are already doing their part to reduce water usage.

In CREP, landowners agree to stop growing crops and irrigating in return for a per-acre payment. Christensen said Upper and Middle Republican Natural Resources Districts do not assess an occupation tax on CREP acres, while the Lower Republican NRD does. He still believes the occupation tax could be more fairly defined by basing it on usage with charges based on pumping.

Christensen will also propose that public hunting be allowed on school sections owned by the state.

When a new lease comes up, Christensen wants to see the lease include an agreement that requires the lessee to open the state-owned ground to public hunting.

He said some exceptions will have to be made when livestock is on the land, as well as prohibiting driving on the land. It's public land, Christensen said, so it only make sense to allow public hunting.

Christensen also plans to introduce a bill which would allow Chase County to take over operation of Champion Mill.

State senators return to Lincoln for 60-day session

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Friday, 06 January 2012 21:11 - Last Updated Friday, 06 January 2012 21:12

One bill Christensen expects to draw some opposition on centers on the crop damage done by deer. Christensen said the problem is more prevalent along the rivers and streams in the district. He said one farmer estimated the damage to his corn fields upwards of \$100,000.

Christensen said the problem appears more prevalent in areas where lands are leased for hunting, providing a haven of such for the deer.

Presently, the Nebraska Game & Parks allows the thinning of local deer population by a landowner. However, that permit comes at the discretion of Game & Parks and requires landowners to have a place to go with the meat before thinning can occur. Christensen doesn't believe it should be up to the farmer to find a place for the meat before thinning is allowed.

As a result, he's proposing that farmers can thin local herds and notify Game & Parks of the availability of meat. If they can't place the meat, Christensen has taken the bold stand to let the animal lay and let nature take its course.

He expects this stand to draw some opposition but he said it's time for farmers to be able to support the deer population without any compensation or adequate methods to controlling it.

Other issues to address

The senator said Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege will introduce a change to the state constitution on term limits for state senators. Carlson wants to increase it from two terms to three terms.

Christensen said the present limit of two four-year terms provides for less continuity in the Legislature, with a 50 percent turnover every four years. He also believes the change would

State senators return to Lincoln for 60-day session

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Friday, 06 January 2012 21:11 - Last Updated Friday, 06 January 2012 21:12

make more senators accountable for a longer period of time. Under the proposed system of three terms, Christensen believes it makes the senators more accountable to their district. Under the present scenario of two terms, once elected for a final term, a senator can go unaccountable for four years because they know they won't be running again.

He also expects to see several more pipeline bills introduced this session. The senators met in special session November to work out a compromise on the Keystone XL pipeline route.

And as always, passage of a balanced budget will be a big part of the legislative duties this session. While Nebraska doesn't face the fiscal crisis of many states, he said the state must continue to budget and spend wisely.