



Other Viewpoints

Cost-cutting starts at legislator's door

Well, the men and women who toil under the Capitol dome appear to be taking a serious look into the mirror as they search for ways to snip away here and there at state spending.

We must say their latest offering to the bottom line — limiting the number of days those in leadership positions can draw pay for work when the Legislature isn't in session — is unexpected, but welcome indeed.

A bill being drafted by the Senate Ways and Means Committee would authorize a maximum of 30 days of leadership pay for the House speaker and Senate president. Legislators in lesser leadership roles would be authorized fewer paid days in the off-session, depending on their job. The range runs from 20 days for the House and Senate majority and minority leaders down to five days for assistant majority and minority leaders.

Pay for leadership days is the same as for a day of the regular session — salary and per diem — and mileage for driving to and from the Capitol. Legislators cut their own pay by 5 percent earlier in the session but still draw close to \$200 a day in salary and per diem, or “per-day” expense money.

The money to be saved under the bill, if it is passed, won't make a noticeable dent in the \$400 million gap between the state's revenues and expenditures for the 2011 fiscal year. Compared with the looming deficit, the savings will be smaller than very small, especially as the bill targets a small group of people.

But in this case, small is important.

Legislators have been devoting much of their time during the last few sessions trying to control and trim state spending to keep pace with declining tax revenues. They have cut spending on programs that serve some of the state's neediest residents, reduced the number of employees on the state's payroll and dropped plans to raise employees' salaries. Everything legislators can do to reduce their own draw on the state checkbook shows they aren't holding themselves immune from the financial reality they impose on others.

That's important. And that being said, it's time to note some legislators in leadership roles haven't been shy about the number of days for which they have been claiming leadership pay. One legislator claimed 172 days over a three-year period, and another claimed 82 days in one year.

We aren't saying anyone abused the system, but certainly some legislators could be more efficient about scheduling and performing their off-session duties to spend fewer days in Topeka. Some legislators agree, and think the Senate bill offers a reasonable number of days in which to get the work done.

Now, if only legislators will look at that annual 90-day regular session and ask themselves why they need to be in Topeka drawing pay all that time when they pack all the work into the last 45 days.

— The Topeka Capital-Journal, via The Associated Press

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Spring comes in as a fragile season

Spring officially arrived Saturday.

For a week or two, I've been telling everybody who heads out of the office with a camera to take some spring pictures — trees in bud, crocuses sprouting or just anything they could find.

Wednesday, our editor Kevin Bottrell succeeded with some nice cheery iris plants, three or four inches tall. He took a dozen shots, loaded them into the photo computer, and got them ready for Friday's front page.

Friday, on my way into the office, I was reminded of how fragile life is in the spring.

My heavy winter coat had been replaced by a lighter jacket, but Friday I went back to the heavy one in preparation for the snow that was forecast. As a human, I have the option to do that.

The tiny dog shivering in the snow outside the newsroom window that afternoon did not have that option. It's fortunate the poor little thing has people to provide a bright red sweater.

Anyone who raises livestock can tell you, though, that spring is the time when animals



Marian Ballard

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are most vulnerable to bad weather. Winter fat has mostly been burned off, winter coats are being shed and the entire herd is vulnerable to a sudden cold snap in ways that simply do not happen in the fall. In the fall, after all, an animal's metabolism is busy gearing up for cold weather. An early cold snap hurts, but not so much.

In the spring, a new calf or a baby lamb is vulnerable — more vulnerable than at any other time of life.

In the spring, the young are very young, indeed. Seedlings can be frozen by a cold snap. Baby animals, not only livestock but wild animals as well, are fragile new creatures, dependent on ideal conditions. Fields and trees need

the right temperatures in the right order, to enter a new growing season. An unseasonably warm spell is almost as bad as a cold snap, especially when the cold follows. Lured into behaving as though winter is over, fruit trees and perennials can be hurt by a freeze.

Well, our chilly start to spring is past, and this week is at least starting out on a warmer note. I'm not sure I'm happy about that. This is also the kind of weather that seems to make colds and flu welcome, with temperatures up and down, damp days alternating with dry days until it's hard for a person's system to adjust to the environment. Maybe you could say that adults are just as fragile as the young in spring, trying to find a footing in the new territory of a new season.

Here's hoping your roots grow deep, and the sun shines fair on your face this spring.

Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.

Flint Hills burning not an air-quality issue

Farmers, ranchers and landowners must continue to have the opportunity to use fire as a range management tool while maintaining the economic viability of the Flint Hills.

Discussions are ongoing which will impact the future of pasture burning in this region and adjacent land. In past years, smoke generated from Flint Hills burning has created temporary air quality issues in local areas and some downwind metropolitan areas. These air quality violations primarily occur during years with heavy fuel loads (abundant growth from last year's grass and plants) and a shortened burn season due to climatic conditions, like 2009.

This has raised the eyes of regulators. Farmers, ranchers and landowners understand the importance of this issue. They're working toward possible solutions and alternatives.

At stake is the ability for ranchers to burn their land in the spring, which rids the pasture of old-growth thatch and young woody growth from the landscape. By conducting such annual burns, the pastures produce re-growth of the native prairie grasses that provide nutritious forage for livestock as well as benefits for birds, plants and other animals that inhabit the prairie.

"Grass is the economic engine that drives the Flint Hills," says Steve Swaffar, Kansas Farm Bureau Director of Natural Resources. "Revenue generated by stocker cattle shipped to the Flint Hills each year amounts to millions of dollars. Suspension of burning as a management tool would be economically devastating to the region and the state."

It is vital these cattle eat the nutritious, tender grass to put weight on each spring and summer. Without this annual pasture burning, new grass growth is more difficult as it tries to emerge from the previous year's thatch. When that thatch is removed with fire, new growth emerges more easily and has greater nutritional value for grazing animals.

Ongoing research at Kansas State University confirms cattle grazing on this lush, new-growth grass can, on average, add an additional 32 pounds per head during the first 90 days of grazing. Most of that additional weight is added in the first 30 days following a burn.



John Schlageck

• Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

when the grass has the greatest protein and nutrient content.

Do the math. If the average sale price for cattle is \$1 per pound and Kansas brings in approximately 500,000 head of stocker cattle (that spend the spring and summer on this Flint Hills grass), that adds an additional \$16 million to the regional and state economy.

Burning of the Flint Hills region is also vital to maintain the prairie ecosystem. Burning promotes a diversity of grass and other broadleaf species, but more importantly prevents the invasion of woody plants and tree species from encroaching on the grass landscape.

In turn, maintaining these acres in a prairie ecosystem supports the many grassland dependent species, like greater prairie chickens and Henslow's sparrow. Ranchers also understand the importance of allowing the grasses to grow at the end of the season so there is adequate cover and refuge for wildlife during winter but also to maintain the health of the native ecosystem.

While agriculture remains the number one contributor to the Flint Hills economy, tourism and recreation also bolster the local and state coffers.

A healthy Flint Hills region provides additional benefits including soil erosion control, carbon sequestration, water quality, recreation opportunities and wildlife diversity.

"Farmers and ranchers understand and use these fires wisely," Swaffar says. "They have a long history of managing the prairie for economic and ecological purposes. They also understand the health issues associated with pollutants produced from range burning and they're committed to look for solutions to alleviate as many of these concerns as possible."

Livestock producers hope for a workable

plan for mitigating smoke during future burn periods. It is essential any form of smoke management plan should not reduce the number of acres already preserved by fire management and cannot create a system unworkable for ranchers.

For generations, farmers and ranchers have lived in harmony with the prairie ecosystem within the Flint Hills. These livestock producers have been good to the Flint Hills and in turn the grassland has returned the favor. They look forward to working in harmony with their urban neighbors who may be impacted by this proven land management tool.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

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