

In the shadow of the economic recession, the fiscal situation for livestock producers was the top issue for Nebraska agriculture in 2009 said Keith Olsen, president of Nebraska Farm Bureau, on Dec. 28.

"There is no big surprise at what is number one—the struggles in the livestock industry," Olsen said.

"Pork producers across the state have lost money 24 out of the last 28 months and mislabeling H1N1 as the 'swine flu' definitely hurt the industry. Bovine tuberculosis (TB) was found in a cattle herd in Nebraska, and dairy producers struggled with prices. 2009 was a year most livestock farmers would like to forget," he said.

Number two on the list: the late harvest. Federal forecasters have said that this year's harvest is at the slowest pace since 1972.

"Despite relatively good harvesting weather in November and much bigger harvesting equipment than was available in 1972, this year's crop is high in moisture and it is hard for the grain elevators to keep up with drying down the crop," Olsen said.

Third on the list is water issues, including Republican River Compact compliance issues with Kansas; the Lower Platte Basin being fully appropriated and then having that status reversed; development of integrated management plans; and implementation of the program on the Platte River to address threatened or endangered species issues.

"Agriculture has a lot of issues related to water that are being dealt with," said Olsen. "Nebraska Farm Bureau is working with state and local officials to try to make the best decisions for irrigators, local communities and citizens in the state."

The fourth issue is the increasing number of attacks on agriculture, including efforts to ban certain animal management practices, use of production tools and even the existence of animal

agriculture itself. Animal rights groups have been successful in getting accepted animal husbandry practices banned in other states through legislation or constitutional amendments, Olsen said, and Nebraska farmers and ranchers are keeping on top of the issue.

"Many farm and livestock groups are now working together to protect the livestock industry in our state," he said.

With the state budget in the red, number five on the list was the suggestion to use commodity check-off funds to help balance the state's budget deficit.

"Farm organizations and commodity groups unified during the legislature's special session to protect the use of checkoff funds as intended," said Olsen. "Checkoffs are Nebraska farmers' investments in their own commodities. Use of checkoff funds to balance the state's budget would have set a bad precedent." Ultimately the legislature agreed and removed any checkoff transfers from the budget package.

"Farm Bureau Picks" of the top agriculture issues for 2009:

1. Livestock producers struggle (pork, cattle and dairy)
2. Late harvest
3. Water issue (Republican Compact, Lower Platte Basin and Platte River)
4. Increasing attacks on agriculture

5. Check-off dollars targeted to help balance the state budget.