

60th Legislature: How it affects you



Senator Phil Nicholas pauses while discussing a bill on the senate floor Thursday Feb. 5, 2009 in Cheyenne. (Tim Kupsick, Star-Tribune)

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CHEYENNE -- By the time the dust from the 60th general session of the Wyoming Legislature settled Thursday, state lawmakers had adopted a \$160 million supplemental budget and passed more than 200 new laws.

Some of the freshly minted statutes take aim at serious problems facing the state, including drunken driving, injured worker compensation and livestock disease.

Others focus on emerging issues such as underground carbon storage, the growing problem of prescription drug fraud and gun rights for those convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence.

Somewhere in the hustle to consider more than 330 bills and resolutions, legislators also found time to address lighter topics, including designating the state butterfly: Sheridan's green hairstreak, a bright green butterfly with white "streaks" across its wings.

Here's a glance at a number of the new laws passed by the 60th Wyoming Legislature, who they affect and what they'll cost:

Supplemental budget bill

* What it does: Appropriates money from the general fund to continue government operations through June 30, 2010. The bill allocates \$102 million in capital construction projects and adds 174 employees, including 158 for the new prison at Torrington, but no new programs.

* Who it affects: state residents

* What it costs: \$165 million

Property tax refund

* What the law does: Eases the income limits and amount of allowed household assets for the existing property tax refund program.

* Who it affects: Homeowners of limited income who have problems paying their property tax bills.

* What it costs: \$72,000 for the first year

Sage grouse farming

* What the law does: Requires the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to begin considering rules for captive farming of sage grouse, whose potential to become a federally protected species threatens the state's energy industry.

* Who it affects and when: The Wyoming Game and Fish Commission has until Aug. 31 to complete the work.

* What it costs: No cost identified.

Workers' compensation

* What the law does: Updates key provisions of the state workers' compensation system, including larger payments to spouses of workers killed on the job, and a 3 percent cost-of-living increase for some disabled workers.

* Who it affects and when: Injured workers and their families. Benefit changes will be effective on July 1.

* What it costs: About \$10 million per year from the workers' compensation fund, plus \$150,000 for a new employee and technology to speed the benefit appeals process.

Underground carbon storage

* What the law does: Further defines the rules for underground injection and storage of carbon dioxide, which is thought by most scientists to contribute to global warming.

* Who it affects and when: The state's coal producers and workers, who are at risk of major losses if coal consumers turn to other "greener" forms of energy instead of coal. The bill becomes effective on July 1.

* What it costs: No cost identified.

Sex crimes by jail workers

* What the law does: Makes sexual contact between a corrections worker and an inmate a third-degree sexual assault offense, even if the act is consensual.

* Who it affects and when: Corrections workers and inmates. The bill becomes effective on July 1.

* What it costs: The cost of prosecuting those charged with the crime.

Tobacco tax

* What the law does: Changes the tax on moist snuff tobacco from a cost-based system to a weight-based system, raising the price of lower-price brands while leaving the cost of higher-price brands about the same.

* Who it affects and when: Consumers and tobacco companies. The law becomes effective on July 1.

* What it costs: The change is expected to generate an additional \$800,000 a year in state tax revenue.

Film industry incentives

* What the law does: Makes it easier for film companies to qualify for state tax breaks when they make TV or movie productions in Wyoming.

* Who it affects and when: Film producers and the state economy. The law becomes effective immediately.

* What it costs: A small increase in state sales and use tax is expected.

Gun rights

* What the law does: Allows those convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence to regain their gun rights five years after completing their sentences.

* Who it affects and when: Those convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence. The law becomes effective immediately.

* What it costs: No cost identified.

Prescription drug fraud

* What the law does: Makes it a felony to alter or forge a drug prescription, with a maximum conviction for a first-time offense of 10 years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

* Who it affects and when: Addicts and those who forge drug prescription. The bill becomes effective on July 1.

* What it costs: The cost of prosecuting the accused.

Child support

* What the law does: Gives the state the ability to suspend the driver's licenses of those owing \$5,000 or more in back child support payments for at least 90 consecutive days.

* Who it affects and when: Parents and children. The bill becomes effective on July 1.

* What it costs: The cost of administering the suspensions, which is currently unknown.

Internet hunting

* What the law does: Makes it a crime to engage in hunting of live animals from a computer terminal.

* Who it affects and when: Those who would participate in "point and click" hunting, and Wyoming wildlife. The bill becomes effective on July 1.

* What it costs: The cost of prosecuting offenders.

Bullying prevention

* What the law does: Prohibits bullying in schools and requires school districts to adopt rules prohibiting bullying.

* Who it affects and when: School administrators, teachers and the victims and perpetrators of bullying. The law becomes effective immediately.

* What it costs: Unknown increases in administrative expenses.

'Very rare and uncommon' areas

* What the law does: Eliminates the power of the Environmental Quality Council to designate "very rare and uncommon" areas, which are used to protect special areas from some forms of mining. Adobe Town in south-central Wyoming is one of the few recent additions.

* Who it affects and when: The State Loan and Investment Board, which will now be required to approve any new "very rare and uncommon" area designations. The law becomes effective on July 1.

* What it costs: Unknown at this time.

Helium tax

* What the law does: Creates a system for taxing helium production in Wyoming.

* Who it affects and when: Helium producers and the state general fund. The law becomes effective immediately.

* What it costs: Unknown at this time.

Shed antler collection

* What the law does: Directs the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission to regulate shed antler collection on public lands west of the Continental Divide between Jan. 1 and May 1.

* Who it affects and when: Antler collectors and big game animals. The law becomes effective on July 1.

* What it costs: No cost identified.

Intentional feeding of elk

* What the law does: Makes it a misdemeanor crime to intentionally attract or feed elk, with exceptions for accepted agricultural practices, state-sanctioned programs and some other instances.

* Who it affects and when: The law is aimed at protecting livestock producers whose animals may become infected by brucellosis, a disease carried by elk that can cause cattle to abort their calves.

* What it costs: Unknown administrative costs.

Organ donor rules

* What the law does: Overhauls state laws regulating organ donation. Modeled after laws in other states, the revised Uniform Anatomical Gift Act specifies the terms of donation, including who can donate and how family members make those decisions for deceased relatives.

* Who it affects and when: Organ donors, recipients and their families. The law becomes effective on July 1.

* What it costs: No cost identified.

Drunken driving

* What the law does: Requires drunken drivers with high blood alcohol contents to use ignition interlocks -- a kind of in-car alcohol breath test. It also requires interlocks for those who refused sobriety tests.

* Who it affects and when: Drunken drivers and the driving public.

* What it costs: \$150,000 from the state general fund and some administrative costs, both offset by revenue from restricted drivers' license fees.

Juvenile justice

* What the law does: Creates a "single point of entry" into the criminal justice system for all juveniles accused of a crime. Under the law, all cases will flow through the district or county attorney's office into the appropriate court.

* Who it affects and when: Juvenile offenders, their families, prosecutors and the court system. The law becomes effective on July 1.

* What it costs: Unknown.

NCAR supercomputing center

* What the law does: Provides financial assurances so that planning and construction of the National Center for Atmospheric Research supercomputing center can proceed in Cheyenne.

* Who it affects and when: The University of Wyoming, which will have access to 20 percent of the computing capacity, and local businesses and the economy, which is expected to benefit from the \$60 million center.

* What it costs: It may cost nothing, but it could cost millions if the federal government decides not to continue funding the project in the future, a scenario that state officials say is unlikely.

Property tax deferral

* What the law does: Raises the allowable income for the existing, little-used property tax deferral program.

* Who it affects: Homeowners of limited income who are 62 years old, or disabled, or who have lived in their homes for 10 years and have problems paying their property taxes.

* What it costs: Not determined.

Property tax appeals

* What the law does: Gives taxpayers a better break during appeals. It allows homeowners to present any credible evidence including expert testimony during property tax appeals to the county or state boards of equalization to rebut the presumption in favor of the valuation set by the county assessor.

* Who it affects: All taxpayers.

* What it costs: No cost identified.

Transparency in government

* What the law does: Creates a Wyoming public finance Web site so taxpayers can track state government spending.

* Who it affects: All interested taxpayers.

* What it costs: \$28,000

Community colleges

* What the law does: Gives the state more oversight of education and construction at the seven community colleges.

* Who it affects: Community colleges, students and taxpayers.

* What it costs: \$1.3 million.

Property tax assessments

* What the bill does: Requires the Department of Revenue to adopt rules for the county assessors to insure fairness of the assessed values of residential property. Information regarding the basis for a property tax assessment is to be open to the public.

* Who it affects: All residential property owners.

* What its costs: No cost identified.