

Gov says state economy 'thinner' but still solid

By Dennis E. Curran

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CHEYENNE – Gov. Dave Freudenthal says that if anyone is down in the dumps about Wyoming's economy, just visit most any neighboring state except North Dakota.

"All things relative to what else is going on in the country, we are in remarkably good shape," he told Greater Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce members last Friday. "What we do have, though, is a much thinner economy."

For example, he noted, Yellowstone National Park had record visitation last summer, but visitors are spending less. Although the state's unemployment rate is up, the jobless rate is nowhere the level of many states, and most people have jobs in Wyoming. And while housing values have declined, in most areas they haven't plunged as far as in other states, because Wyoming banks "didn't do a lot of the funny mortgages."

The governor said Wyoming residents should take a lesson from California, which is mired in debt and has become "fundamentally ungovernable," to see how much better Wyoming's economy is.

"Is it what we want it to be? No. Well, is it better than most places? Yes. Is it what we hope it will be in the future? Not quite. But I think it confirms the notion that we ought to complain less and focus more on how we can make things better," he said.

Still, Freudenthal said he will continue to admonish legislators to dip into savings and budget reserves to pay for more than is in his budget, because there are still uncertainties about the national economy and recovery and their impact on Wyoming.

He noted that legislators will return in 2011, just six months into the new two-year budget period and can make changes then if the economy and state revenues warrant.

The governor spoke to the chamber as natural gas prices had topped \$6 per thousand cubic foot for the first time in more than a year, but he warned that a warm spring and a cool summer could cause prices "to drop like a rock again."

"We have reason to be confident about the future," he said. "We don't have reason to be ebullient."