

Wyoming may not request all of stimulus

Governor expects about \$515M will be available to the Cowboy State

By The Associated Press

CHEYENNE - Gov. Dave Freudenthal's office said Wednesday that the federal economic stimulus bill that President Barack Obama signed into law this month sets aside about \$515 million for Wyoming.

However, Freudenthal said it's still unclear how much of the money the state will apply for. He said the state won't seek federal money that doesn't fit with the state's own spending plans.

"There will be funds that we will not take," Freudenthal said. "Not because I'm making some grand statement about the stimulus, but because it doesn't track with what would be a sustainable policy for Wyoming over a period of years."

Lynne Boomgaarden, director of Wyoming's Office of State Lands and Investments, has been leading a state team analyzing the \$787 billion stimulus bill to determine Wyoming's share. She said it could be months before the state decides how much it wants to apply for.

The stimulus bill contains \$157 million for Wyoming highway projects that should be available soon enough for this summer's construction season, Boomgaarden said. She said the state highway department has been working to identify projects that are ready to begin.

The federal bill contains roughly \$200 million in education funding, but much of that will require the state to apply in a competitive grant process against other states. Boomgaarden said that money may not be available for months.

The bill contains \$59 million for Wyoming to fund Medicaid and several million more dollars for other health programs. Much of that money has strings attached, requiring state matching funds and other requirements that might slow down state participation, Boomgaarden said.

Freudenthal said the state is especially interested in seeking a share of billions more federal stimulus dollars designated for energy infrastructure and coal research.

Boomgaarden's analysis found that nationwide, there is \$11 billion available for energy infrastructure grants, \$6.8 billion for renewable energy grants, \$1.8 billion for coal conversion grants and \$1.5 billion for carbon capture and storage grants.

Freudenthal said Rob Hurless, his energy policy adviser, is researching the federal requirements for the energy funding programs to see how they would fit with Wyoming's existing programs.

Wyoming, the largest coal-producing state, is already working with General Electric to develop a clean-coal research project. The state was the first in the nation last year to enact laws governing the underground storage of carbon dioxide gas produced by coal-burning power plants.

"Clearly, we're looking for targets of opportunity," Freudenthal said. "But they have to be opportunities that are viewed as that, not just because there's money, but because it fits with what we're trying to do."

Freudenthal said the state doesn't know enough specifics about its stimulus allocation to include any figures in the supplemental budget bill the Legislature is hammering out this week. Lawmakers have discussed the possibility of calling themselves back into special session later this year to oversee allocation of money from the stimulus law if necessary.

Rep. Rosie Berger, R-Big Horn, is chairwoman of the House Appropriations Committee. She said Wednesday that the House and Senate delayed conferring over differences in the respective budget bills to see if firm details from the stimulus bill would emerge.

"We delayed the conference just to see if there are opportunities that we could take advantage of before

we left Cheyenne," Berger said. "But it's unlikely that we would have a clear enough picture of what the stimulus would really offer to Wyoming. Today, at least, I don't see how we can incorporate that into this budget bill."

Boomgaarden described the stimulus bill to reporters Wednesday as a several-hundred-page "monstrous" document. Rather than being self-contained, she said the bill refers to other pieces of federal legislation and requires painstaking research to decipher.

Freudenthal said he believes Congress did a pretty good job drafting the stimulus bill. He said it had to leave considerable discretion to the states because each state has different procedures to follow in deciding what aspects of the bill to participate in.

"The big question is can the administrative agencies move fast enough to do it? Because Congress did the best they could," Freudenthal said.