Odom unveils plan to cut agency spending

By JOHN LaPLANTE
Capitol news bureau

Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odom said on Monday he might not be forced to cut his and his employees' salaries another 5 percent if the state would stop wasting money on unnecessary bureaucracy.

Starting Tuesday, the Agriculture Department "will close all facilities every Friday," and employees will work nine hours the other four weekdays, Odom told news reporters.

The department's approximately 1,000 employees already had been working 5 percent fewer hours, with a corresponding cut in pay, to accommodate a smaller budget approved by the Legislature last summer.

The new 36-hour-a-week work schedule, prompted by a new round of budget cuts ordered by Gov. Edwin Edwards, will cut pay and work hours another 5 percent — 10 percent in all.

The department will maintain services, such as meat inspection, forest firefighting and storing surplus food donated by the federal government to schools, other institutions and poor people.

But those services might be less convenient for consumers, business and local government, Odom said.

Odom called a news conference to discuss how he plans to comply with the governor's recent orders to trim most state spending by 10 percent to relieve a mounting budget deficit projection.

Odom must shave about $2.5 million off his $25 million budget.

Odom said he doesn't mind cutbacks, but he is angered by what he considers wasteful spending in other areas of state government.

"Why pay somebody to pay somebody else" for telephone service, Odom asked. His staff could make its own purchases at no extra cost, he said.

Odom said he started cutting unnecessary expenses from his budget when he took office six years ago, while other agency heads were still trying to justify higher spending for their operations.

"There are some agencies that are fatter than the others" and can more easily absorb the cuts, he said.

Odom said his own salary will be cut as much as all his employees. He said the shorter work week and lower salaries might remain in force until the end of the fiscal year next June 30. Until then, no employees will be laid off, but some funds will be saved by not filling vacant jobs, he said.

Besides saving money on salaries, Odom said, he will take some of his department's cars off the road, eliminate out-of-state travel, reduce all contracts by 10 percent and slash insurance costs from $1.7 million to $1 million this year.

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