

OMAHA (AP)—The state government's financial problems caused by the state's economic headaches were voted the top state stories in 2009 by members of The Associated Press.

Finishing first in the survey was how Gov. Dave Heineman and the Legislature handled a projected \$334 million revenue shortfall over the state's current budget year and next.

That shortfall was caused by the national recession finally taking hold in Nebraska, reflected by rising unemployment and general declines in economic activity. That story finished No. 2 in the AP member survey.

Members' votes were weighted to reflect the stories' rankings on each ballot.

Heineman called a special session for November to trim \$334 million from the \$6.9 billion two-year budget the Legislature had fashioned during the 2009 regular session. He acted after September tax revenue fell \$40 million short of earlier projections by the state economic forecasting board.

The drop was blamed mostly on lagging personal income taxes—Nebraskans were working fewer hours, salaries weren't rising and more people were losing their jobs. For example, the state jobless rate was 4.9 percent in October, compared with 3.6 percent a year ago.

Heineman said spending cuts were the only answer he would accept—no tax increases.

After several days of hearings and relatively little wrangling, the Legislature sent the governor a plan that he signed without complaint or veto.

It was based on across-the-board cuts to most agency budgets of 2.5 percent this fiscal year and 5 percent next year. What gets cut—or who, if any layoffs—was left up to the agencies.

Other top stories

Finishing third in this year's survey was the state's adoption of lethal injection to replace the electric chair as Nebraska's sole method of execution.

In February 2008, the state Supreme Court ruled electrocution was cruel and unusual punishment.

The lethal-injection law went into effect Sept. 1. Experts have said they don't expect an execution in Nebraska for several years because a protocol must be developed and approved, then likely legal challenges must be overcome.

The last execution in the state was in 1997. There are 11 people on Nebraska's death row.

Finishing fourth in the AP survey was how Nebraskans fared as H1N1, also known as swine flu, struck here, across the country and the world.

By December, the deaths of more than a dozen Nebraskans had been blamed on swine flu.

The supply of swine flu vaccine was short of demand most of the year, so inoculations were limited to people in high-risk groups, such as those with underlying health conditions, pregnant women, health care personnel and young people. But by mid-December, state health officials said, enough doses were available that anyone could be immunized.

Another health issue—smoking bans—finished No. 5 in the member survey.

The law bans smoking in public places but provides exemptions for cigar bars, some hotel rooms, tobacco-only retailers, facilities that research the health effects of smoking, and private residences.

Court action against the law continued in 2009. In October, an Omaha pool hall owner renewed his legal challenge by filing a revised complaint in Lancaster County District Court, arguing that the exceptions to the ban are unconstitutional.

University of Nebraska football ranked No. 6 in the eyes of Nebraska AP members.

A rock-solid defense propelled 9-4 Nebraska to the Big 12 conference title game against Texas. The Huskers 13-12 lost on a last-second field goal—literally, a second put back on the play clock after the final play was reviewed.

Most decorated among the Husker defenders was tackle Ndamukong Suh. He finished fourth in the Heisman voting and won the Outland, Lombardi, Bednarik and Nagurski awards.

Many experts project Suh as the top pick in next year's NFL draft.

No. 7 on the list of top stories was Sen. Ben Nelson and his share of the national spotlight on health care reform.

Nelson was the last known holdout among the 60 senators who are members of the Democratic Party's caucus. On Saturday, he announced he would support the legislation after winning concessions to limit the availability of abortions in insurance sold in newly created exchanges, as well as tens of million in federal Medicaid funds for Nebraska.

Nebraska's continuing water woes in the Republican River basin came in No. 8 on the AP survey for 2009.

In October, state lawmakers got an earful from water officials, farmers and others concerned that irrigation cutbacks and outright shutdowns in the Republican River basin might be too high on the state's list of options for dealing with water problems.

In a nonbinding decision on July 1, a Colorado-based arbitrator ruled that Nebraska owes Kansas only \$10,000 for Nebraska's alleged overuse of the water in 2005 and 2006. Nebraska's use is limited by a compact with Colorado and Kansas.

Finishing ninth in the AP survey was new news about an old crime. In 2008, DNA evidence cleared six people wrongfully convicted in the 1985 rape and murder of a 68-year-old Beatrice woman.

The development prompted legislation in 2009 that would allow inmates wrongly imprisoned to get up to \$500,000 from the state.

The continuing story of former Lexington middle school teacher Kelsey Peterson finished No. 10 in the AP survey. In April, Peterson was given eight-to-10 years in prison on state charges of sexual assault. She had fled to Mexico with a 13-year-old student in fall 2007.