By Russ Pankonin
The Imperial Republican

When Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial begins his seventh year in the Nebraska Legislature, he wants to serve as the chair of the Natural Resource Committee.

Christensen has thrown his name in the hat but he's not the only one.

Christensen will face off against Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege for the chair position.

The 90-day session of the 103rd Nebraska Unicameral began Wednesday, Jan. 9th with its official reorganization.

The members elect their new speaker and committee chairs and make committee assignments on the opening day of the session.

Christensen expects to be assigned to Banking, Commerce and Insurance, along with the Executive Committee.

Christensen said water is such a critical issue, not only in the Republican Basin but in the state as well. That's why he sought the seat on the committee.

Regardless of whether he's successful or not in his bid for the seat, Christensen said water will continue to be a primary focus.

Several water bills planned

He indicated this week he plans to introduce several bills pertaining to water issues.

He plans to request a $40 million general budget appropriation to pay for the pipeline into the Republican Basin for the Lincoln County augmentation project.

He said the completion of the pipeline is key for the state to remain in compliance with the compact settlement with Kansas.

Without that compliance, Christensen said the state would likely be forced to pay compensation to Kansas. He said the investment in a pipeline makes more sense than paying fines.

Christensen also wants the water-short year and compact call declaration process re-visited.

The Department of Natural Resources officially announces on Jan. 1 of each year whether water supplies will be in short supply for the upcoming irrigation season.

Christensen said there is no provision to change that declaration even if enough rain falls to fill Harlan County Dam before the planting season begins.

Christensen said he wants another review on April 15 of each year. That way if conditions have changed, the declaration must be lifted.

In a compact call or water-short year declaration, both surface water and groundwater users will see a reduction in the amount of water they can use.

While he doesn't plan to introduce it, Christensen said there will be a bill to allow for the increase of the occupation tax or set aside a portion of state sales tax for water issues.

Carving out some of the sales tax would be the same thing the Legislature did to fund highway improvements in the state. Christensen said the figure being bounced around is 1/4 of 1 percent of the sales tax.

Other bills planned

Christensen said he plans to offer bills on signage requirements in public facilities where guns are prohibited; human trafficking; prohibiting preferential reimbursement to insurance-backed pharmacies; outlining conditions for counties to follow when encroaching on private land; and allowing work ethic inmates to work for non-profit entities.

Christensen said the state appears to be in much better fiscal shape compared to the last three to four years.

However, he still expects the body to keep a tight rein on spending.

The governor has said he will put forth a tax plan to make Nebraska more competitive nationally. Right now, the state ranks 31st as a tax-friendly state.

The senator also expects the governor to go after the repeal of county inheritance taxes again this year.

The bill was introduced in the previous session but did not advance.

Any bill that remained in the hopper at the end of the 102nd Legislature last May automatically died.

It must be reintroduced again this session to receive consideration.

Bills can be entered in the first 10 days of the session.