

Ag department plans 2-day shutdown

By Tom Seery
The Associated Press

DES MOINES — All 502 employees of the Department of Agriculture, including Agriculture Secretary Dale Cochran, will take two unpaid days off this spring to help the agency meet state budget cuts.

Cochran announced the furloughs Friday, calling it "one of the saddest days in my career as secretary of agriculture."

He said a third furlough day might be needed to keep his budget balanced without laying off workers.

"As an administrator, I could

have taken the easy way out and laid off employees and eliminated programs and services," Cochran said during a news conference.

"Our employees of the Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship are too important to simply be discarded — to be tossed out of their jobs and the ability to support their families."

Cochran said the department will shut down on March 30 and April 13, saving \$45,000 in salaries each day.

"It appears at least one additional day of unpaid leave will

also be necessary. We will be notifying our employees of those additional details at a later date," Cochran said.

The furloughs affect the department's administrators in Des Moines and a statewide field staff that regulates an array of agricultural enterprises in the state, including grain elevators and meatpacking plants.

Cochran said some activities subject to department regulation would have to be put on hold for the furlough days, including slaughter at some small meatpacking plants.

"Our department is an es-

sential part of the infrastructure of our basic industry in Iowa," Cochran said. "However, we have been denied the funding necessary to carry out our responsibilities in environmental protection, consumer protection, producer protection and rural economic development."

Cochran's agency has a \$23 million annual budget. He said that Gov. Terry Branstad's 3.25 percent cut in state spending last summer and the governor's veto of \$250,000 for the department's grain warehouse bureau left the agriculture budget down 24 percent from a year earlier.

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