

Lawmakers clucking over poultry talks
By BARBARA HOBEROCK World Capitol Bureau
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OKLAHOMA CITY -- Several lawmakers are concerned about Attorney General Drew Edmondson's handling of negotiations over potential litigation with the poultry industry.

Edmondson set a Monday meeting with lawmakers to discuss their concerns.

In letters dated last month, lawmakers said they were concerned about "development of agricultural and environmental policy without participation by the Oklahoma Legislature."

The letters were signed by Rep. James E. Covey, D-Custer City, the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee chairman; Sen. Bruce Price, D-Hinton, the Senate Agriculture and Rural Development Committee chairman; and others.

Lawmakers said they welcome Edmondson's input into policy development but that creating policy without them attempts to use litigation to violate the separation of powers clause.

At issue is phosphorus-rich chicken waste, which promotes algae blooms in rivers and lakes.

The blooms take oxygen from the water and choke aquatic life. They also can create taste and odor problems in drinking water.

"It is our intention to enforce the laws and standards that have been adopted by the Legislature and not to create new ones," Edmondson says in a written response.

"It is our concern that the major poultry companies are violating Oklahoma laws and standards and will not cease those violations on a voluntary basis," he added.

Lawmakers also said they are concerned that monetary damages against the integrators, or those who process chickens from growers, would hurt the individual growers and their communities.

"We are aware that monetary damages sufficient to damage the poultry industry would not be in the best interest of Oklahoma, and we will construct any recovery to be certain that the industry will survive and thrive," Edmondson's response says.

"We will not tolerate, however, the industry profiting from the destruction of our lakes and streams, thereby damaging the tourism and recreation industry, which is also important to the state."

The lawmakers also said they feel that the growers, whose livelihoods depend on his negotiations, have been left out.

Marla Peak, the Oklahoma Farm Bureau's director of regulatory affairs, would not say whether the bureau drafted the letter but said it provided the recommendations.

"We don't tell people what to say," she said.

"They wouldn't have signed something they weren't comfortable with."