

## SENATORS CALL FOR WORK COMP RATE CUT

By Shawn Ashley  
Staff Writer

■(GIT) The state lawmaker who will carry the results of a special commission looking at Oklahoma's workers' compensation system next year and other legislators joined together Monday to call on the State Board of Property and Casualty Rates to cut workers' compensation rates again this year.

Citing new statistics he said showed the positive impact of recent reforms, Sen. Jim Maddox, D-Lawton, said, "The numbers we've seen indicate the reforms of recent years are working and workers' compensation costs are coming down. We want the board to pass the savings on to Oklahoma business owners, and the quicker, the better."

Maddox, who has agreed to carry the workers' comp reform bill based on the recommendations of Lt. Governor Mary Fallin's Commission on Workers' Compensation before the 46th Legislature, was joined in the call by senators Stratton Taylor, D-Claremore and President Pro Tempore of the Senate; Trish Weedn, D-Purcell; Lewis Long, D-Glenpool; Penny Williams, D-Tulsa; Bruce Price, D-Chickasha; Brad Henry, D-Shawnee; Dick Wilkerson, D-Atwood; Frank Shurden, D-Henryetta; Robert Kerr, D-Altus; Gilmer Capps, D-Snyder; Larry Dickerson, D-Poteau; J. Barry Harrison, D-Fairfax; Sam Helton, D-Lawton; and Angela Monson, D-Tulsa.

The legislators cited a new Senate staff analysis, entitled "Workers' Compensation in Oklahoma: Recent Reforms and Results," which reviewed the impact of 30 workers' compensation reforms approved by the legislature in the last four years. Among the findings:

- Citing legislative reforms earlier this year, an independent actuary recommended a workers' comp rate reduction of as high as 14 percent, but only a 4.5 percent reduction was implemented by the State Board of Property and Casualty Rates;

- Workers' comp filings have decreased eight percent since a reform package, which included stiffer fraud penalties, workplace safety initiatives and so-called "dueling doctor" reforms, was passed in a 1994 special session;

- Fraud charges have increased by 37 percent in the last year with 92 percent of the cases ending in guilty pleas;

- The use of the independent medical examiner has increased by 42 percent from 1994; and

- More than 40,000 workers are currently enrolled in workplace medical plans designed to contain workers' comp premium costs.

"I think we've got a pretty strong arsenal of evidence to argue for another cut in workers' comp rates," said Maddox. "Based on the numbers, it's pretty clear that businesses are being charged too much and deserve some relief."

The Lawton lawmaker said one of the most compelling reasons for another reduction is the testimony of an independent actuary delivered in January. Maddox said the fact that only a fraction of his recommendation for reducing rates was implemented is significant. Additionally, the actuary testified in his report that more reductions would

be warranted as reforms took effect in the months to come.

"Things have only gotten better since that testimony was delivered, so I think the logical conclusion is rates should come down even more," he said. "It takes a while for reforms to have an impact on the marketplace, but we're starting to see signs that they are having a positive influence."

"We are definitely on the right track, but we must not let up," Maddox added. "Between 1990 and 1992, workers' compensation premiums increased by 62 percent in the private sector. Even with the enactment of the reforms of the last several years, we have a long way to go before rates are where we want them to be."

## STATE PARTIALLY REIMBURSED FOR KEATING POLITICAL FLIGHTS

By Shawn Ashley  
Staff Writer

■(GIT) The Department of Public Safety has been partially reimbursed for some "purely political" flights taken by Governor Frank Keating since the department acquired a new plane for the use of the executive branch earlier this year, information provided to House of Representatives staff indicates.

Department commissioner and state Secretary of Public Safety Bob Ricks informed the House staff last week that his department has received \$5,902 for Keating's use of the state airplane to attend partisan political events. Keating's use of the plane for such events has become the subject of much controversy. The governor revealed in September that he used the plane to attend what he called some "purely political events," and that he would ask those involved in those events to reimburse the state for the fuel used to attend the various functions.

Almost two-thirds of the nearly \$6,000 reimbursed to the state, \$3,600, was repayment for the governor's trip to the GOP national convention in San Diego and for his flight to the North Dakota Republican convention in March, which involved a leased aircraft.

Meanwhile, a Senate staff member confirmed Monday that Senate Speaker Pro Tempore Stratton Taylor, D-Claremore, and House Speaker-elect Rep. Loyd Benson, D-Frederick, will appoint a joint committee to consider whether there should be changes in the state policy concerning airplane use. A formal announcement of the panel's for-

mation is not expected until sometime next week or perhaps later.

Keating and Ricks, citing state statutes and a legal analysis prepared by the governor's chief deputy counsel, have said it is the Department of Public Safety's responsibility to provide security and transportation to the governor at all times. At the request of lawmakers, the attorney general and auditor and inspector are looking into the matter.

The attorney general is expected to rule on whether it is legal for the governor to use the plane for personal and political trips, while the auditor and inspector is expected to determine what rate of reimbursement would be appropriate for the plane's usage for trips not related to state business. Both may address the acquisition of the plane, which some lawmakers have charged may have been improperly conducted.

Ricks refute that allegation, going so far as to say in an interview with *Capitol Network News* that his staff deserves a commendation for their work.

"I would love to see this whole thing reviewed, because I think everyone would then see that the Department of Public Safety staff involved in obtaining the new plane deserves a commendation," Ricks said. "They got the best deal possible for the state."

*"Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."*

H.G. Wells

*The Outline of History, 1920*