

Sounding for the most part more wishful than confident, Oklahoma's congressional delegation trudges back to Washington, D.C., this week for what could be an eventful lame-duck session. Lame-duck sessions - the time when Congress meets between the elections and the convening of the new Congress in January - are typically quiet. This year, though, Congress and the administration are playing chicken on the edge of a so-called "fiscal cliff," a combination of automatic tax increases and spending cuts that everyone seems to agree would be bad for the country but that neither side wants to be the first to back away from. "Once Congress returns, the main items of focus will be what to do about expiring tax items and the looming sequestration cuts," said U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe. "The exact way forward remains unclear. What is apparent, though, is that the Republican leadership in Congress is committed to finding a way forward." Sequestration is a series of automatic spending cuts that go into effect if Congress and the president cannot agree on a plan to reduce the nation's budget deficit and, ultimately, its debt burden. The idea was to make these cuts - \$1.2 trillion in budget year 2013 - so drastic that an agreement would have to be reached. So far, it hasn't. In addition to sequestration, negotiators are also dealing with \$488 billion in expiring tax cuts, including the so-called Bush tax cuts and two-year payroll tax holiday, and \$36 billion in new taxes associated with the Affordable Care Act. "Congress must act this year to avoid the looming fiscal cliff, or else families and businesses in Oklahoma and across the country are going to get hit with massive tax increases," said 1st District U.S. Rep. John Sullivan, R-Okla. "House Republicans will also work to stop the devastating defense sequestration cuts scheduled to hit our military on Jan. 1, 2013. President Obama has promised he doesn't want these cuts to happen, yet he has failed to take any action to stop it." The president and congressional leaders have signaled a willingness to work out at least a temporary fix, but the intractability of the past two years tempers those remarks. "It

is important that Congress lays out a plan of action that will help avert the fiscal cliff," said 3rd District U.S. Rep. Frank Lucas, chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. "While I realize we will not be able to solve all our nation's problems during the lame-duck session, I can assure you I will work with my colleagues in the House of Representatives to put a plan into place that will help boost the economy and put people back to work. We must make certain we produce long-term common sense solutions." "My belief is that it is unlikely we will have a grand bargain for real debt reduction," said 2nd District U.S. Rep. Dan Boren, D-Okla. "Unfortunately, it is more likely that a short-term deal will occur to prevent the sequester. The one area that remains unclear is the expiration of the Bush-era tax cuts. There may be an agreement to allow some to expire and extend others. It has been my hope to come to a compromise that would reduce marginal rates, lower corporate taxes, close loopholes, cut spending in turn reducing long-term debt." The lame-duck session will be the last for Sullivan and Boren. Sullivan was defeated in the GOP primary; Boren did not seek another term. Randy Krehbiel 918-581-8365 SUBHEAD: Negotiators will discuss tax increases and spending cuts in the lame-duck session. Original Print Headline: Congress returns to session on 'fiscal cliff'