

KANSAS — Members of Oklahoma's Board of Agriculture experienced an immersion into eastern Oklahoma's poultry industry expansion issue Thursday, some of it on the ground, a lot of it in a planned hour that rolled into 90 minutes of public testimony offered in five-minute increments. With only 24 hours' notice of the 5 p.m. meeting that Secretary of Agriculture Jim Reese acknowledged was "inappropriate" planning, residents of area counties still managed to pack the auditorium of the Northeast Technology Center just off U.S. 412 at Kansas. At times they pleaded for help, and they often lay the blame directly on the board members for what resident Danny Duncan called "a quality of life that is gone." Residents chastised the board for lack of vision and "pencil pushers" for signing dozens of \$10 permits that led to a concentration of giant chicken feeding operations that make old rural neighborhoods unlivable and that, they believe, will ruin roads, contaminate water, depress property values, kill tourism and chase residents away. The purpose of the visit to Delaware County was to educate board members with a firsthand look at the area and hear from residents about their issues and two pending permits for poultry operations that were stopped when the Department of Agriculture suspended issuance of any new permits the first week of October. The suspension came after an influx of new poultry operations — locals call it a "saturation" — with 207 new poultry houses approved in the past 12 months in eastern Oklahoma, most in the northeast and 120 in Delaware County alone. The new operations come with construction of an upgraded Simmons Foods processing plant near Decatur, just across the border in Arkansas, which is planned to open in 2019. Reese said he has learned from Simmons that the poultry houses needed to supply the larger plant have been established, save the two, so no new larger influx of poultry operations is expected anytime soon. The secretary openly admits that the state was caught flat-footed but says that now, through an advisory Coordinating Council, it is attempting to address the issue so it won't become worse. Reese said the two pending permits will be discussed

further and likely decided upon at a regular Dec. 11 meeting of the board in Oklahoma City. The board also will be making decisions regarding new guidelines for future permits, and Reese said he thought it was important for all the board members to see the poultry houses for themselves. "The barns are large," said board member Karen Dodson of Hydro. "It's really just a lot of input at this point, seeing how close together are they, how far from the road they are, seeing it to consider where do my beliefs fit in there, where do the rules fit in there. It is a little overwhelming all at once." While touring the area, the board "along with other interested parties, including Ron Suttles of the Conservation Coalition of Oklahoma" got up close to the farms in several areas and visited with local residents. "What is proper? What is right? I'm coming away with a lot more questions than I have answers," Dodson said. "I want to do right by Oklahomans, do right by the responsibilities in the purview that I am given. What's fair? What's the right thing to do?" Dodson lives on a fifth-generation farm and said she understood the passion exhibited by residents in their testimony. "It was hard to listen and not respond or ask questions" hard not to take it a little bit personally," she said. "It's also easy to see it. That could be our family, and I can identify with their concerns. I can also identify with industry, and there are landowner rights to consider. Right now, it's more questions than answers for me." Delaware County resident Grant Hall said the state has at least come to the realization that it had a flawed process for issuing permits, and he encouraged the board to do more than "tweak the process." "The process is broken," he said. "These are not family farms; these are poultry factories." Pam Kingfisher, organizer of the Green Country Guardians, invited the board to a pre-Thanksgiving potluck the community had organized at a local church for the same evening. After a long summer fighting the poultry battle, she let into her

testimony emotion that has been measured in past meetings. The Cherokee citizen told the board she lives on 160 acres that was given to her grandmother in 1906 and that she will give her all in its defense. "I will not stop fighting for them, because this is wrong," she said. "This is not only quantity of water; we have to worry about quality of water. Water is the new gold, and if you knew what it was worth, we wouldn't be giving it away. You should have been here a year ago; then we could have had a good conversation." Kelly Bostian 918-581-8357 kelly.bostian@tulsaworld.com Twitter: @KellyBostian