By the time you read this column, we will have already made our budget presentation to the Senate Finance Committee, which is the final of three presentations we have made since the process began last year. As is always the case, the Governor provides agencies budget targets. Due to the pandemic, the targets were lower than what our authorized spending was for the previous year.

Having just about gotten the department up to full staffing level when the pandemic turned everyone’s world upside down, the last thing that I wanted to do was to cut back on our staffing level. Even at full staffing, we don’t have enough positions to do everything asked of us. That isn’t a complaint, it is just a statement of fact, and I would suspect that every agency in the state feels the same way. In the grand scheme of things, I believe that we have been treated very fairly by both the Governor and the Legislature.

In order to keep our positions funded, we had to think outside of the box. In total, this is about a $7 million-a-year agency. Just under $1.1 million-a-year comes to us from the federal government. A large percentage of that money is, in turn, paid out in the form of grants to farmers through various grant programs, but it also includes the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). We also generate about $2.6 million of revenue which stays in the department. This includes money from pesticide, fertilizer, and animal feed registrations. The Spay and Neutering Program is also run using revenues that flow to the department from municipal clerks from dog licensing fees.

That leaves just over $3.3 million-a-year coming from the state general fund to finance our operations. However, that is a deceptive number. In reality, for the upcoming budget cycle we will actually be sending about the same amount of money to the general fund as we are requesting from it. In a normal budget year, we end up being a revenue positive agency, but only due to underspending our budget and bringing in more revenue than planned.

For this budget cycle, we are making some adjustments to the budget, to make the department revenue neutral to start. The Integrated Pest Management Fund has consistently brought in more revenue than we have been able to spend, so we are requesting that more of the revenue going to that fund pay for more of the current staff in the Pesticide Division. This would be a permanent change. The Product and Scale Testing Fund, is where we are looking to make a temporary shift in how we fund part of the department. The fund has a healthy fund balance and, to avoid layoffs, we are asking to draw down on that fund for the next two years. This is not a sustainable plan, but it is our expectation that state revenues will continue to be strong and the $400,000-a-year in excess of revenues that we are planning to draw down from the fund can, once again, be funded through the general fund in the
next budget cycle. If the legislature continues to support our plan, the department will remain at a full staffing.

Shawn N. Jasper – Commissioner