While the 69th General Assembly didn't officially start business until Wednesday, Jan. 9, the two legislators from northeastern Colorado are already hard at work on bills on water, agriculture and other issues affecting rural Colorado.

This week's session marks the start of the last two years in office for Sen. Greg Brophy (R-Wray) and Rep. Jerry Sonnenberg (R-Sterling), who are both term-limited in 2014. The November election changed little for Brophy in the state Senate; he has served in a Democratic-controlled Senate for the past six years. The 2012 election changed control of the House from the one-vote majority held by Republicans to a five-seat Democratic majority. That meant Sonnenberg is no longer chair of the House Agriculture, Livestock and Natural Resources Committee.

Sonnenberg said last week his agenda for the upcoming session is the same as it has been for the past six years: protecting agriculture, water and rural Colorado. "It's my job to educate our urban cousins on the impacts of rural Colorado," he said. That includes both the impact of rural Colorado on urban areas, and how the laws they want to pass will impact rural Colorado.

Brophy has already announced that he will try again to eliminate the semi-annual change between mountain standard and daylight saving time. His last effort, in 2011, made it through its first committee, in part because he scheduled the hearing for the day after the state made the switch, and legislators were yawning. This year, his bill would send that decision, to keep the state on daylight saving time year-round, to the voters.

The House and Senate are likely to take up several controversial measures that failed in the 2011-12 sessions, including an effort to allow illegal immigrants lowered rates for college tuition. Both Sonnenberg and Brophy have been "no" votes on these measures in the past. Sonnenberg said last week he will remain opposed, as he believes the state should not create special tuition rates for special groups.

However, Brophy signaled that he may be reconsidering his position. "I struggle with this a lot," he said, adding that everyone in his district knows kids that this type of legislation could impact. Brophy said he has concerns about whether making this change would add to college costs for those "who have played by the rules all of their lives," and if it would encourage people to come to the United States illegally.

But he also acknowledged that a reduced-tuition bill for illegal immigrants would likely pass with

or without his support. “The question is where I will be on it … I’ve never voted for it in the past, but the fact that I’m seriously thinking about it is a big deal to me, internally,” he said.

So what’s changed? Brophy said that it comes from the kids that he knows in the district, and in particular, the kids he coaches on his son’s baseball team. “I know [that] for some of them it would apply. I’m having a hard time with how these kids are any different” from his own.

The mass shooting at an Aurora theater during the summer is on the minds of many Coloradans. Governor John Hickenlooper has reportedly said he would consider new gun control measures in the coming session.

Brophy and Sonnenberg both said they will firmly oppose any changes to Colorado’s existing gun laws. “Would one or two more laws, added to the tens of thousands of laws on guns already on the books, change anything?” Sonnenberg said. “You can’t stop evil people with new laws.”

“We understand that evil exists in the world, but only law-abiding citizens would be affected by new laws,” Brophy said. “There’s no way to ensure firearms would be taken away from the bad guys.”

Water, as always, will continue to be a big issue for the two northeastern Colorado legislators. Both served on an interim committee during the summer and fall on water resources.

The group decided to authorize six bills and two resolutions on issues such as well permit requirements, water conservation, protecting water rights and irrigation. Sonnenberg, as chair of the committee, is the House sponsor of all eight measures; Brophy is the chief Senate sponsor on several bills, including changes to state rules on stormwater runoff.

Brophy also is working on a situation on the Republican River, where some wells pumped too much water in the past year. There were harder days in 2012 than in the past, with more evaporation, he explained, and people used more water than usual, and some more than permitted. The question is how to deal with those who used too much. Brophy said he is holding

a bill title, meaning he could draft a bill for the session on the matter. But he first wants to work with the state water engineer to see if a solution can be found without legislation.

Among his other bills is one to establish how autonomous vehicles operate in Colorado. Brophy noted that area farmers have been operating tractors that drive themselves straight across a field for some time. “How great that is!” Brophy exclaimed. He’s also aware of at least one autonomous vehicle that has 300,000 miles on it with no accidents. Brophy’s bill would establish parameters for how those vehicles operate.

One of the battles likely to pit the governor against some in his Democratic majority is hydraulic fracturing, known as fracking, in the production of oil and natural gas. Hickenlooper has been firmly in favor of it, pitting him against environmentalists. Sonnenberg said he will be a strong opponent of anti-fracking measures this session, and allied with the governor, to make sure the industry remains in Colorado and is not hampered by what he says is unnecessary legislation.

On the agriculture side, Sonnenberg said he will also work with the governor to oppose legislation coming from animal rights groups on “tail-docking” of dairy cows. The practice involves amputation of up to two-thirds of a cow’s tail and is designed to reduce disease and improve hygiene and the quality of a cow’s milk. Sonnenberg has already spoken to Agriculture Commissioner John Salazar, who he said is opposed to potential legislation to ban the practice.

Finally, Sonnenberg intends to run a bill that would set standards for the confiscation of animals. He cited a case in Clear Creek County, where county animal control officers last year confiscated more than 100 reindeer, dogs and other animals from a landowner who played Santa Claus in the area.

According to Westword, the animals were seized because officials thought the owner had too many animals, some appeared too thin or ill, and they lacked access to water and shelter 24/7. Some of the older and infirmed animals, including several reindeer, were euthanized by animal control.

Sonnenberg’s concern is that this type of action could apply to any farm or ranch. “It’s no different” than what happens to farmers or ranchers, Sonnenberg explained: water freezes or cows are out in the fields during inclement weather. Sonnenberg’s bill would require

consultation with the state veterinarian before such action can be taken in the future.

The General Assembly convened on Jan. 9. The governor will present his State of the State address on Thursday, Jan. 10.

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