

Upper NRD passes augmentation, retirement plan

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IMPERIAL, Nebraska -- The Upper Republican Natural Resources District unanimously voted to approve a multi-million dollar augmentation and irrigated land retirement project.

The project involves purchasing 3,300 irrigated acres north of Parks, Nebraska in Dundy County with 24 center-pivot systems north of Rock Creek State Fish Hatchery for \$10 million. The project also includes building a 10-mile pipeline to Rock Creek, for use only during water short years.

"The land is in an ideal location for such a project because of its proximity to Rock Creek. Only about 10 miles of pipeline is expected to be needed to occasionally collect groundwater on the land and dispense it into Rock Creek," said URNRD assistant manager, Nate Jenkins. "Including the cost of the pipeline and land costs, total project costs are expected to be between \$12 million and \$15 million."

The pipeline will only be pumped when the district is projected to be in non-compliance during a water short year and they will only pump the water necessary to reach compliance.

"The project [pipeline] may only need to be used every three to four years, at the most," according to Jenkins. "History suggests that during the driest of years, the district may need an additional 10,000 acre feet of water to stay in compliance with the compact. The proposed project has the potential to supply roughly that amount of water, and more water could be provided in the future granted the district retires more acres."

According to the compact-compliance guidelines, the amount of water piped from the pipeline into Rock Creek cannot exceed what has historically been pumped for irrigation on the land purchased, or other future acres that could potentially be retired to expand the project. To get credit for creating stream flow, enough acres must be retired so that the amount of water being piped from the pipeline does not exceed the historical stream flow.

"In other words, water put into the stream must be offset by reducing irrigation by the same amount or more than the amount of water that was historically put into the stream," said Jenkins.

The Upper Republican NRD worked with the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources to analyze the feasibility and benefits of the project.

"We believe this project has the potential to significantly aid efforts to stay in compliance with the Republican River Compact and the local integrated management plan," said Brian Dunnigan, director of the DNR. "This is the type of initiative needed to help farmers throughout the Republican River Basin."

The district's compact-compliance plan that is outlined in the Integrated Management Plan, which was approved in the summer of 2010 by the URNRD and the state, calls for groundwater pumping across the three-county district to be 20 percent less than it was between 1998 and 2002. Farmers in the district surpassed the goal in 2010, pumping about 9 percent less than the targeted goal. Groundwater levels responded by rising nearly a half a foot.

Jasper Fanning, Ph.d., general manager of the URNRD said, "This project is a cost-effective way to stay in compliance with the compact while protecting our water resources and keeping farmers in the

basin in business. It doesn't negate the need for reduced water use to stay in compliance and the district, as it has for 30 years, will continue to be at the regulatory forefront of groundwater management."

In addition to aiding compact compliance, the pipeline and water conservation project is designed to help preserve water resources by requiring less groundwater pumping than has historically occurred on the land purchased by the URNRD, according to Jenkins.

"This project will actually reduce the amount of water that is consumed and is for dry times, not all the time. We'll continue to take actions throughout the district to reduce water consumption for long-term compact compliance and the preservation of water resources in the region including the Ogallala Aquifer," said URNRD board member and farmer Tom Terryberry.

The district's occupation tax on irrigated land will finance the project. The pipeline is expected to be fully operational by 2012.

The URNRD encompasses Dundy, Chase and Perkins Counties in southwestern Nebraska.

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