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Upper Republican Natural Resources District Project To Help Keep State in Compliance with Republican River Compact

IMPERIAL, NE – A multi-million dollar project that will reduce groundwater use by agriculture while boosting stream flow to help keep Nebraska in compliance with the three-state Republican River Compact during dry periods has been approved by the Upper Republican Natural Resources District.

The irrigator-funded acre retirement and pipeline project approved Tuesday night will be the largest of its kind in the state and has the potential to help keep farmers throughout Nebraska's Republican River Basin, where 1.2 million acres are irrigated, from being shutdown to stay in compliance with the Republican River Compact that divides water use between Nebraska, Colorado and Kansas. Complying with the compact has been a source of conflict that is expected to be considered by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The project greatly reduces chances that producers who farm close to the Republican and its tributaries in the Upper Republican will have to be shutdown during dry times to help increase stream flow so the district doesn't exceed its allotted amount of allowable stream flow depletions caused by groundwater irrigation.

"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," said Jasper Fanning, Ph.d., general manager of the Upper Republican Natural Resources District. "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."

The district's Board of Directors on Tuesday night unanimously approved the purchase of nearly 3,300 irrigated acres with 24 center-pivot systems located just north of Rock Creek State Fish Hatchery, which is seven miles north of Parks in Dundy County, at a cost of \$10 million. A portion, not all, of the water that historically has been used to irrigate the land will instead be piped into nearby Rock Creek, which flows into the Republican River near Parks. The water will be piped only when needed, during dry times, to stay in compliance with the compact. The land is expected to eventually return to natural vegetation. It is hoped that the pipeline will be in place in 2012.

The project may only need to be used every three or four years, at the most. 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.

The Upper Republican NRD worked cooperatively 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 DNR. “This is the type of initiative needed to help farmers throughout the Republican River Basin.”

Compact-compliance guidelines ensure that the amount of water piped into Rock Creek will not exceed what has historically been pumped for irrigation on the land or other acres that could potentially be retired in the future to expand the project. To get credit for creating stream flow, enough acres must be retired so that overall pumping that affects stream flow does not increase. In other words, water put into the stream must be offset by reducing irrigation by the same or more amounts of water than what is put into the stream.

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. Including the cost of the pipeline and land costs, total project costs are expected to be between \$12 million and \$15 million.

The project is part of the district’s adaptive, holistic management approach to water issues: The conservation-minded project will help ease a transition into tighter water regulations that will become more economically feasible as drought-resistant crops and other technologies are developed. That transition has already begun.

For example, the district’s compact-compliance plan that is outlined in the Integrated Management Plan it crafted with the state and that was approved this summer by the NRD and 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 last year, pumping about 9 percent less than what is targeted in the IMP goal. Groundwater levels responded, rising nearly ½ a foot on average. Also, the district is launching a program to retire irrigated acres.

In addition to aiding compact compliance, the pipeline and water conservation project will help preserve water resources for future generations by requiring less groundwater pumping than has historically occurred on the ground the NRD purchased.

“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. Approved by lawmakers, the tax was designed for the type of projects the Upper Republican NRD is embarking upon.

The Upper Republican NRD encompasses Dundy, Chase and Perkins Counties in extreme southwestern Nebraska. It was the first NRD in the state to restrict irrigation and meter groundwater wells, doing so in the late 1970’s.