

Editorial, 2/14: A new way to solve water dispute

Credit the Upper Republican Natural Resource District for coming up with a novel and intriguing way to keep an adequate supply of water in the Republican River.

The NRD last week announced a plan to buy about 3,300 acres of farmland that have been irrigated with 24 center pivots to grow corn and other grain crops.

The NRD plans to stop irrigating the land, located in Dundy County. Instead it will use the irrigation wells in dry years to pump water to augment flows in the Republican River so the NRD can meet its obligations under the three-state compact with Kansas and Colorado.

The \$12 million to \$15 million project entails constructing a 10-mile pipeline from the property to Rock Creek. The water will travel another five miles in the creek before it reaches the Republican.

The plan will be funded by a \$6-per-acre occupation tax on irrigated land. NRD Director Jasper Fanning says the project has the potential to keep farmers in business during dry periods.

Based on historical records, the district may need to come up with about 10,000-acre-feet in a dry year. NRD officials believe the wells on the purchased land may be able to supply that amount, but are keeping open the option of purchasing more acres.

Fanning points out that retiring the 3,300 acres from irrigation will help maintain the water level in the underlying Ogallala Aquifer, and may increase flows in Rock Creek, near the Rock Creek State Fish Hatchery.

NRD officials point out that the plan is more cost-effective than trying to achieve sufficient flows by converting irrigated acres to dryland farming. That approach would cost about \$25 million.

Still uncertain is how the 3,300 acres will be used in the future. The NRD plans to replace the cornfields with natural vegetation. The seller has a five-year option to graze cattle on the property.

Among the long-term options under consideration is converting the land to wildlife habitat, according to NRD staffer Nate Jenkins.

Whether the plan can actually achieve its goals remains to be seen. Some water experts worry that in drought years some of the pumped water could simply soak into the dry riverbed.

One of the most admirable features of the plan is that it represents an effort by farmers in the area to find -- and pay for -- a solution to the ongoing dispute with Kansas over flows in the Republican River. The state of Kansas currently is suing Nebraska for \$72 million in damages for what it claims was a shortfall in the amount of water owed it under the compact.

The NRD should be applauded for its creativity and commitment. If the project works it will be a big step toward achieving a sustainable water policy for the state.

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