

REPUBLICAN RIVER TOOLS SEEK TO MINIMIZE ECONOMIC HARM, KEEP STATE IN COMPLIANCE

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The last few years and especially the last several months have been complicated, sometimes gut-wrenching times throughout the Republican River basin. Kansas isn't satisfied that Natural Resources Districts and the state have done enough to stay in compliance with the Republican River Compact and wants to convince the U.S. Supreme Court of the same. The stakes are high both for the basin, and the state. It's to be expected that people within the basin will disagree.

Disagreement among well-intentioned people forges compromise and solutions and that's what happened in both the Upper and Middle Republican NRDs in recent months. The NRDs looked long and hard at proposals from state water experts who know best how to continue complying with the river compact. More than 100 meetings were held to talk about the solutions and get public input. Officials picked the solution that had the least economic impact, worked hand-in-hand with state water experts, and approved plans they thought were the best for the region.

Hydrology doesn't lend itself to black-and-white answers. Add the fact that how water moves and is used varies greatly throughout the basin and one-size-fits-all solutions simply won't work. Some people, especially those that farm close to the river, are upset that in dry years new water-management plans approved by the two NRDs might affect them more than farmers far from the river. One unfortunate aspect of hydrology is that the closer to the river one irrigates, the more immediate and substantial the impact on river flows. That may seem like a gentle way of saying that the new plans approved by the NRDs and state rely heavily on regulating surface-water users and those with wells close to the river.

But while the plans include the possibility of regulating users close to the river in years when quick action is needed to stay in compact compliance, shutdowns would likely be very rare and may never occur. That's because the plans include several steps to prevent shutdowns from occurring. If they do occur, occupation-tax dollars can be used to compensate farmers. All farmers who own irrigated land in the basin pay that tax. That means farmers far from the river who rely on Ogallala Aquifer groundwater that doesn't have a direct connection to the alluvial groundwater and runoff that primarily feeds the Republican River would compensate farmers who might, in rare instances, have to be shut down.

Also, the plans call for projects that will reduce water use throughout the basin, including far from the river. There's also an emphasis on augmenting the river with water when dry years are forecast. In addition, groundwater irrigators far from the river will have to cut water use. Both NRDs are having another round of hard talks now about how to accomplish that, and proposals will be made soon.

Just as there is disagreement now over the plans that have already been approved, there will be more disagreement over those proposals. Some upland groundwater users, like those farmers near the river who have concerns now, may not be happy. But we'll all still be neighbors. As residents across the basin

continue to talk about the recently approved plans and the new, forthcoming proposals, have no doubt that the rest of this state, other states, and even the legal system, will closely watch how we work together.