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Midlands Voices: Republican River project aids compact adherence

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When disputes over compliance with the three-state Republican River Compact began making headlines a few years ago, some were concerned that the State of Nebraska alone would bear the financial obligation to address a water issue localized in one part of the state.

State senators responded by passing legislation that gave Republican Basin natural resources districts (NRDs) the ability to levy a local tax on irrigators. This tax would help pay for measures to increase water availability during dry times and to aid compliance with the compact that includes Kansas and Colorado.

The 2007 legislation, shepherded by State Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial, is now accomplishing what Nebraskans expected.

Last week, the Upper Republican NRD's Board of Directors approved a project that will be financed with the occupation tax on irrigators. This project represents the most significant step to date in efforts to ensure long-term compliance with the compact. The board approved a purchase agreement to buy nearly 3,300 irrigated acres for about \$2,600 an acre near Rock Creek State Fish Hatchery in Dundy County.

After this year, the land will not be irrigated again, benefiting the underlying Ogallala Aquifer and increasing flows in Rock Creek, which spills into the Republican River near Parks, Neb. During dry times when Nebraska is expected to have trouble complying with the compact, water will be piped into Rock Creek, essentially increasing the total water supply available to Nebraska under the compact.

Less water — probably significantly less water — will be piped into Rock Creek than was historically pumped on the 3,300 acres for crop irrigation. It's expected that water will have to be piped into the creek every three or four years, at the most.

The project is expected to cost between \$12 million and \$15 million and be operational in 2012. That is a bargain compared with the estimated \$25 million cost of relying solely on irrigated-land retirement to produce a similar increase in stream flow. And the project will allow the district to

focus more attention on its holistic approach to regulations aimed at sustainably reducing overall water consumption in the district to aid compact compliance and the Ogallala Aquifer.

Overall, we believe the project will be beneficial to the entire Republican River Basin and the state. It has the potential to keep farmers throughout the basin in business and conserve water at the same time, while maintaining statewide compliance with the compact so one of the most productive agricultural regions of the state continues to thrive and taxpayers all across Nebraska are protected.

In a larger sense, this project also illustrates the willingness of farmers to pay for solutions to issues that have both local and statewide implications.

The acceptance among farmers in our area of an occupation tax — in our NRD, they pay \$6 per irrigated acre — reinforces the fact that farmers are willing to pay for solutions to issues that have potential consequences beyond their own operations.

Because while Nebraskans may not want to be on the hook for all of the costs of compact compliance in southwest and south-central Nebraska, the future costs of failures to stay in compliance with the compact — failures this project seeks to avoid — may be shouldered by all Nebraskans.

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