By Russ Pankonin
The Imperial Republican

The acreage retirement program being planned by the Upper Republican Natural Resources District (URNRD) got a big boost this week.

According to URNRD assistant manager Nate Jenkins, the district received approval for a new, multi-million dollar program that could lead to the retirement of thousands of irrigated acres in the district.

Retiring acres in rapid response areas near rivers and streams in the district will aid compliance with the Republican River Compact while boosting stream flows and replenishing underground aquifers.

Jenkins said the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) notified the district it will receive roughly $1 million this year under the Agriculture Water Enhancement Program (AWEP).

The district was approved for an additional $3.48 million over the following four years, though that amount could change significantly depending on federal budgeting.

The money will be coupled with occupation tax dollars gathered in the district to permanently retire irrigated acres.

The URNRD board could finalize details on the retirement program at the April meeting, which was set for Tuesday night, April 5.

Preliminary proposals call for total per-acre retirement payments to range between roughly $2,000 and $2,600. The AWEP money will be used to help pay a portion of the retirement buyout.

“We believe this is one of the most financially appealing retirement programs in the state and we strongly encourage producers to consider it and act soon if they want to participate,” said URNRD manager Jasper Fanning

“This program could be a significant benefit to farmers, our continuing efforts to stay in compliance with the Republican River Compact and help preserve our water resources,” he added.

The new AWEP program is called the Ogallala Aquifer and Republican River Basin Recharge and Enhancement Program and will be administered by NRCS.

Enrollment to begin soon

Farmers and landowners in the URNRD will soon have the chance to sign up for the new program announced recently by NRCS. Jenkins said the focus will be acres close to streams, such as the main stem of the Republican River, that have high, immediate impacts on stream flow.

Farmers will have to act quickly to seize this opportunity this year, he said. The signup deadline is expected to be late April or sometime in May. All dollars available this year must be obligated in contracts this summer.

Highest priority acres

The NRD especially wants to target irrigated acres where the groundwater modeling shows a high impact on stream flow depletions over both a two-year and 50-year period. These acres will be given the highest priority.

To be eligible, ground must have been irrigated at least two of the last five years, and the

extent of historical pumping will also factor into the scoring process.

Other considerations will be whether land has been enrolled in a temporary retirement program and if all the acres in a field will be enrolled.

Secondary priority areas will be those with significant groundwater level declines but that have minimal effects on stream flow depletion.

Next in priority will be cost-share agreements with producers to purchase tools and technologies that increase irrigation efficiency.

Those interested in applying for the AWEP program should call their local NRCS office (308-882-4263 in Imperial or 308-352-4776 in Grant). Questions can also be directed to the NRD in Imperial at 308-882-5173.

(NRD staff reports were also used to compile this story.)