

Opinion

OUR SAY

2 NRDs think out of the box on water

SELDOM is there a dull moment in the world of Nebraska water. The issues, conflicts, turf battles and laws keep attorneys and government officials employed, and farmers on edge. That's always been the case.

Not every aspect of this state's water management is negative, though. It's worth noting some innovative actions currently taking place in Nebraska to conserve water and to comply with mandates, particularly relating to keeping more water flowing in Nebraska rivers such as the Republican and Platte.

Credit needs to go to the Nebraska natural resources districts for two precedent-setting programs.

The Central Platte NRD, which already conducts a successful water-banking program to retire irrigated acres for the benefit of the Platte River endangered species, earlier this year negotiated with 30 landowners to buy and fill the Six-Mile Irrigation Canal south of the river near Gothenburg (see story on Page 107 of the February *Nebraska Farmer*). It was a first-ever transaction by an NRD to buy out a private irrigation canal. The canal had annually diverted water from the Platte River, but no surface water will now be used by the irrigators, who will or have already switched to more efficient center pivots.

Page 54 of this issue explains another novel NRD transaction to save water

and beef up streamflows. The Upper Republican NRD, covering Chase, Dundy and Perkins counties, just bought 3,300 acres irrigated by 24 center pivots from one landowner as part of its requirement to reduce groundwater pumping and increase flow in the Republican River. It stems from the Republican River Compact and recent court decisions. In dry years, it's likely that some irrigation wells near the river would have had to be shut down.

By buying the land, returning it to native vegetation and, in those dry years only, piping groundwater to a nearby Rock Creek in Dundy County and letting it flow to the Republican River, the NRD hopes to avoid any well shutdowns.

Kansas still has to accept the augmentation program, and the water will still need to reach the state border. There are no guarantees.

These are decisions made locally by NRD board members. And, in the latter case, irrigators in the Upper Republican are paying for the land purchase through a per-acre irrigation occupation tax. This is an NRD that has been progressive through the years in managing groundwater, and its staff, board members and irrigators are to be commended.

No decision is without its downside. In these situations, retiring irrigated acres will have an adverse impact on local economies and may hurt the local tax base. In

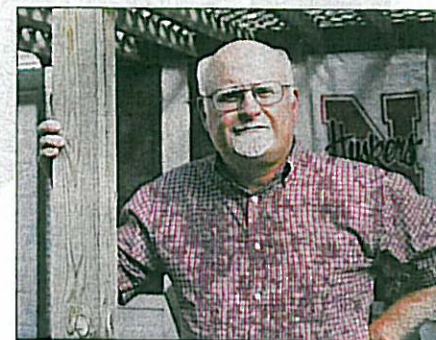
addition, eliminating even a small amount of irrigated cropland won't help meet the need for increased world food production.

It used to be that NRDs made decisions about groundwater based on its availability — in other words, how best to manage a declining supply. That's their authority under law, although the state always had a final say if it deemed there was NRD inaction. Today, NRD action over groundwater use has as much to do with federal mandates as it does with groundwater levels. The Endangered Species Act is the force behind the current Platte River programs, and the interstate Republican River Compact affects in large part how NRDs manage their groundwater programs, whether a groundwater decline exists or not.

Common sense

Natural Resources Conservation Service Chief Dave White, who spoke at the recent National Association of Conservation Districts annual meeting in Nashville, Tenn., doesn't sound like your average federal official within the current admin-

istration. That's a good thing. Here's what he told several Nebraska NRD representatives and other conservation leaders from around the country: "The fate of the environment is not going to be determined by regulations. It is going to be determined by the millions of men and women who own the land." Now, if he could just set everyone else straight in Washington, D.C.



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Olsen to retire by year-end

KEITH Olsen, Nebraska Farm Bureau president, has announced he will not seek re-election when his current term expires in December.

"When I became Farm Bureau president in 2002, my wife, Doris, and I discussed how long I would want to serve, assuming the delegates would want to re-elect me," he says. "We decided on six to nine years — two or three three-year terms — and now it's nine years later. Time goes fast when you are enjoying what you are doing."

We want to hear from you!