

Published in [Regional News](#)

Nebraska's water management catches eye of other states

Monday, 27 July 2015 08:03

By GRANT SCHULTE

Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) - Nebraska's unique system for managing its groundwater is catching the eye of other states that are running dry and threatening farmers with restrictions after decades of overuse.

Despite its widespread use for crop irrigation, Nebraska's groundwater supply has remained stable while states such as California and Texas struggle with shortages. The difference has led some out-of-state water groups and local governments to ask about Nebraska's water-management practices.

"I think interest has certainly increased, and I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't continue to increase," said Jim Schneider, acting director of the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources.

Nebraska regulates its groundwater through 23 natural resources districts, represented by locally elected board members, while the state Department of Natural Resources oversees rivers and lakes. Schneider has been invited to discuss Nebraska's system in November before the American Water Resources Association, a national group that includes private and government water-management experts.

The Nebraska Association of Resources Districts, which represents the 23 districts, has also seen growing interest from states over the last five years, said Dean Edson, the group's executive director.

Edson said he has received inquiries from Florida, Indiana, Oklahoma and Utah, given presentations in Kansas and South Dakota, and is scheduled to speak at a conference of western states in drought-stricken California in August.

Nebraska regulates its groundwater more heavily than any other state, but the system works well because it relies on local control, said Kris Polly, a special adviser to the Washington-based National Water Resources Association, which organized the California conference. Polly said Nebraska's policies could serve as an example for states that tap their groundwater.

"If there were no controls in place in Nebraska, there would be rapid declines in the Ogallala Aquifer," he said. "There have been some, but due to the regulations, the water level is under control and in some places advancing."

Edson said the natural resources districts, commonly known as NRDs, are effective in part because they have greater authority than most local water boards.

Unlike most states' water regulators, Nebraska's districts have taxing authority to pay for water conservation projects. Their boundaries are drawn by river basin rather than county lines, letting board members focus on the basin as a whole instead of local political interests.

Nebraska's boards also allow anyone who's eligible for public office to serve, while other states restrict their board memberships to farmers who may be reluctant to impose tougher restrictions on themselves.

"Nobody wants to be regulated, but if you want good management of your water resources, you have to have some regulation," Edson said.

The Nebraska boards usually include a mix of farmers, bankers, agribusiness owners, professors and other professionals who rely on scientific data from their staff to make decisions, Edson said.

Districts prevent farmers from digging too many irrigation wells in one area, and use their taxing power to pay for canals, dams and other projects that replenish groundwater.

Nebraska was the nation's largest irrigator in 2012, according to the most recent U.S. Census of Agriculture, a study conducted by federal government every five years. Nearly 8.3 million acres statewide were irrigated, accounting for 15 percent of the national total. The second-largest irrigator was California, a state with more than twice as much total land.

Some of Nebraska's water bounty is due to luck: The state sits atop the thickest and widest portions of the Ogallala Aquifer, a massive groundwater supply that lies beneath eight states. Nebraska's portion of the aquifer easily recharges because of large areas of sandy soil that allow water to seep back into the ground.

Nebraska delegates an unusual amount of groundwater-management authority to its local natural resources districts compared to other states, said Karina Schoengold, an associate professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Department of Agricultural Economics and School of Natural Resources.

Schoengold said some parts of the state's groundwater supply face long-term concerns, but the NRDs are starting to look at new restrictions to protect it.

With the NRD system, "it's not someone who's across the state who's affected," she said. "It's your neighbor that's affected if you're using too much water. There's a greater vested interest in managing the resource."

Last modified on Monday, 27 July 2015 10:53

Read **34** times

Tweet

0

g+

[Log In](#)
