By Russ Pankonin
The Imperial Republican

Irrigators in the Upper Republican Natural Resources District (URNRD) will be operating under a new water management plan in 2016.

Board members adopted a revised integrated management plan (IMP) for the three-county district during their regular meeting Dec. 1.

The focus of the new plan shifts from reductions in the amount of water pumped in the district to achieve compact compliance to reducing streamflow depletions caused by pumping.

The URNRD worked closely with the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to craft the revised IMP that goes into effect in January 2016.

Jasper Fanning, manager of the URNRD, said the availability of augmentation pumping, along with a favorable U.S. Supreme Court ruling on water accounting, enabled the URNRD and DNR to shift focus on depletions to streamflow.

That compares to the previous IMP which focused primarily on keeping Nebraska in compact compliance with Kansas on water use in the Republican River Basin.

Reductions in pumping allocations was one of several tools used to help meet compliance. Other tools included surface water leases and temporary and permanent retirement of irrigated acres.

Augmentation pumping from the URNRD's Dundy County project and NCORPE's Lincoln County project can now produce more than 80,000 acre feet of water to use for compliance purposes.

Presently, Nebraska receives 100 percent credit towards compliance for the groundwater pumped from the projects.

In addition, the state picked up an additional 10,000 acre feet of water annually due to compact accounting changes made by the U.S. Supreme Court.

This additional water can also be used to meet compact compliance with Kansas.

Backstop regulations remain

The new IMP still includes severe pumping reductions if for some reason the augmentation projects weren't used or more measures are needed.

These measures would require the shutdown of wells in the 10-5 rapid response areas along the streams and rivers in the district.

The 10-5 area is defined as the area including wells where pumping would cause a 10 percent depletion in nearby streamflow over a five-year period.

The current IMP calls for shutting down wells in the 10-2 area, along with a one percent reduction in pumping annually if compliance is not met.

By expanding the area to the 10-5 acres, the 1 percent reduction in pumping isn't needed, Fanning said.

Board member Jason Kunkel expressed concern the 10-5 area would include more wells under regulation than the 10-2 area. Fanning noted by enlarging the area to the 10-5 wells, the annual 1-percent reduction in pumping was not required as part of the new IMP.

With augmentation in place, the likelihood of imposing this drastic action is highly unlikely, Fanning said.

Compared to the augmentation, far less benefit would result from such a regulatory move, Fanning noted.

The effect of shutting down wells in the 10-5 area would only reduce streamflow depletion by 3,000 acre feet of water in the first year. By year three, the reduction would total 12,000 acre feet.

That compares to more than 80,000 acre-feet achieved with augmentation pumping.

The proposed IMP also provides more flexibility in the time frame of augmentation pumping to ensure compact compliance.

Opposition expressed

While the board approved the new plan with no opposition, the Bureau of Reclamation and Frenchman Cambridge Irrigation District do not like it.

Both testified against the new IMP during a hearing in late November.

They prefer to see reductions in pumping to increase streamflows to their projects.

They said surface water irrigators lose access to streamflows depleted by the overpumping of groundwater upstream, more specifically in the URNRD.

They noted that while augmentation helps keep the state in compliance, it does not offset the reduced streamflows they experience.