

*Senator urges irrigators
to get proactive on bills*

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Areas of the Upper Republican Natural Resources District where groundwater declines have occurred would be in the cross hairs of a bill introduced last week by Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege.

Areas with a 20 percent decline in the saturated thickness of the aquifer since 1963 would receive only 50 percent of the allotted irrigation allocation.

Areas with a 30 percent decline in the same time frame would be shut down under the proposed legislation.

Box Butte County in western Nebraska would also be heavily affected by the proposed legislation.

Another proposed bill by Carlson, under the share and share alike groundwater policy, could force all irrigators to have the same allocation, even if that meant zero.

Normally, Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial and Sen. Tom Carlson work together on water

issues in the Republican Basin.

But these two bills, LB 1054, and LB 1056, have put the two senators on opposite sides of the fence.

Sen. Carlson told The Imperial Republican Tuesday that he remains a proponent of irrigation in this state.

However, if Nebraska is to remain in compliance with state compacts and have groundwater supplies for future generations, then a discussion on groundwater declines is needed.

He said fostering that discussion was the purpose for introducing the bill, regardless of whether it only targets two specific areas of the state.

Sen. Christensen said passage of either of the two bills would be detrimental to groundwater irrigation in his district. In addition, it would wreak economic havoc on the region.

“I will continue to defend this area for irrigation,” he said during an interview over the weekend.

As a result, he said these two bills need to be killed at the committee level.

If the bills manage to make it out of committee, emotions can some times take hold of a bill and bad legislation gets passed.

With water being such a controversial and divisive issue, he fears these bills may be the kind that get influenced by emotion rather than legislative common sense.

The bills will be heard by the Natural Resources Committee of the Legislature on Wednesday, Feb. 10.

Christensen urged irrigators to become involved in the process and consider attending the hearing to register for or against the bill and to possibly testify against the bill.

These bills must be stopped, he emphasized.

Long-term planning

One of Christensen's goals this year is to create a statewide water planning commission that would look at the state's long-term water needs and issues.

He said all too often the state operates in crisis mode. Instead, if a more long-term approach could be adopted, Christensen feels the state could adequately address the water issues it faces.

Sen. Carlson also seeks to create a task force appointed by the governor through LB 1057.

Carlson's task force would include 25-30 people, he said, and could address some of the same issues.

While the two senators have each introduced bills on the issue, they both agree that the state needs to do some long-range planning on the water issue.