

Telephone conference report on Tuesday, March 22.

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

When debate opened Tuesday on Sen. Mark Christensen's LB 698, he noted it was the first time that he didn't have a pulse on what kind of support the ethanol labeling bill would have.

His bill would eliminate labeling requirements for alcohol-blended fuel. Christensen said the use of ethanol-blended fuel has increased in other states who have removed labeling requirements.

A total of 14 states no longer require labeling of blended fuel.

Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege made LB 698 his priority bill and the Ag Committee offered an amendment to require labeling on any blended ethanol fuel at 11 percent or more.

Christensen said gasoline already has 300 different ingredients, so why does ethanol get singled out.

Plus, it's a great economic driver in the state in terms of jobs, use of corn, benefits to cattle feeding and in-state production of fuel.

During Tuesday's debate, several senators stated their opposition came from the aspect of truth-in-marketing, origin of the product, eliminating choice and affect on small engines and antique cars.

Although the Legislature approved the amendment to the bill, Christensen said it remained uncertain early Tuesday afternoon of whether the bill would move forward.

One alternative to not labeling ethanol was to label pumps that don't dispense ethanol as "No Alcohol."

Christensen said that would meet the concerns about truth-in-marketing and eliminating choice.

He said that amendment may be added to the bill. Further debate on the bill was scheduled for late Tuesday afternoon.

Flood Damage Expected

Christensen said areas downstream of Lake McConaughy on the Platte River are already experiencing flooding from water being released from the lake.

Christensen has introduced LB 653 that would allow the diversion of unappropriated water during times of flooding to mitigate public and private property damage and puts this unappropriated flood water to use.

Christensen said such interbasin transfers are already legal through a permit process with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). However, that's a fairly involved process.

His bill would provide the authority for natural resources districts (NRDs) and irrigation districts along with DNR to enter into an agreement that sets up guidelines to move water during times of flood.

Christensen said it's still possible that some of this flood water may be put to use this year, such as filling Elwood Reservoir earlier and allowing irrigation canals to be charged earlier. By allowing agreements between the entities, he foresees flood water being put to better use.

Revolving Water Loan Fund

Sen. Carlson's LB 595 would create a revolving loan fund for water projects in the state. Money would come from state money loaned to NRDs to purchase surface water in the mid-2000s for compliance purposes.

When this loan money is repaid to the state, it would go into the revolving loan fund.

The Natural Resources Committee has prioritized the bill.

Christensen said Carlson wants to tack LB 645 on to LB 595.

That is Christensen's bill that would address virgin water splits in the basin by putting surface water in the mix.

Christensen said he introduced it, because he knew it was going to be introduced by someone. By introducing the bill, he felt he had a better chance of guiding the proposed legislation.

However, if it gets tacked on to LB 595, Christensen said that advantage would be lost.

LB 645 could have an effect on the allocation splits agreed to by the basin NRDs in the compact settlement.

Senator MARK CHRISTENSEN holds weekly teleconferences at 7 a.m. MT/8 a.m. CT each Tuesday morning. The public is invited to attend the conference calls. Hosts of the conference calls are Southwest Public Power District in Palisade and Midwest Electric in Grant. Christensen can be reached at 402-471-2805, or by mail at P.O. Box 94604, Lincoln, NE 68509, or via e-mail at mchristensen@leg.ne.gov.