



By Jan Schultz

The Imperial Republican

It was a stormy 2009, at times, both in politics and the weather.

And, that can also describe the three news events that staff members of The Imperial Republican chose as their top stories of the past year.

It's an annual tradition for the staff—voting on the year's top stories from a list of 15 choices.

As it's been for nearly a decade now, the Republican River Basin water issues topped the list of stories again. It's been the same the past eight years.

It's no wonder.

Those issues not only made news here in Imperial and Chase County, regularly gracing the front page of The Imperial Republican. Major state newspapers also covered the issues much of the past year, too.

A weather-related story that was with us much of the year came in at No. 2. The summer hailstorms coming with deluges of rain multiple times caused millions of dollars in damage to homes, businesses and crops.

Weather also was a factor in the No. 3 story—a year of challenges for agriculture. It wasn't just the frequent summer rains and hail, but early snowfall put harvest well into December with some corn still in the fields.

Rounding out the top 10 stories, in order of their rankings, were the October fire at Harchelroad Motors, events surrounding the grand opening of Imperial's new pool, the city's purchase of the Miller ground for economic development, the school's football field lights, new Reading Mastery Program at Chase County Schools, deaths of local youths in vehicle accidents and police investigations.

The 10 staff members of The Imperial Republican choose the year's top stories from a group of 15 news events presented them by the editorial department.

No. 1: Challenges to LB 701;

DNR pushes for shut-downs

In 2009, the additional 10-cent property tax created in LB 701 in the Republican River Basin NRDs was declared unconstitutional by the Nebraska Supreme Court, saying it was a local tax for a state purpose.

Another aspect of LB 701, the occupation tax on irrigated acres, is also being challenged in court now, while the NRDs seek court direction on how to repay the unconstitutional property taxes that were paid by all property owners, not just irrigators.

And, the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) pushed hard late in the year to get the NRDs to adopt strict regulatory rules that would shut down wells in rapid response areas—without compensation—to insure compact compliance with Kansas in water-short years.

At least a water-short year won't be the case in 2010 based on the amount of water in Harlan County Dam.

No. 2: Summer of hail

The summer of 2009 will long be remembered for its multiple hailstorms. The barrage started

when back-to-back storms hit June 25-26, damaging roofs and vehicles in the community. Three more hailstorms came in July, adding to the home, vehicle and crop damage. A late July storm stripped corn and bean crops in the Lamar area.

Roofers worked into the fall as late as possible. In some cases, homes reroofed after the initial June storms were damaged again from the July hailstorms. The June storms, accompanied by high winds, also uprooted some of Imperial's largest trees.

No. 3: Moisture presents challenges for agriculture

In an agricultural community, no one complains much about the rain or snow. But, with over 26 inches of moisture and more than 43 inches of snow, there was some grumbling heard at times among producers.

Continual spring rains delayed corn planting, then summer rains and high humidity delayed wheat harvest. Fifteen inches of snow in October, and more the final two months, put the 2009 corn harvest among the latest in decades. State reports indicated 12% of corn was still in the field in December.



No. 4: Harchelroad Motors fire

Harchelroad Motors, including all of its offices and showroom, service shop, parts department and body shop at 316 Broadway, was completely lost in an early morning fire Oct. 17. Insurance and State Fire Marshal investigators were in town several days afterwards going through the rubble to find clues to the cause, which has not yet been released. Work started the day before the fire to tear down the shop, as Harchelroad's had planned to rebuild a new, updated shop. The firm is operating out of its showroom across the street.



No. 5: Pool grand opening

A highlight of Memorial Day weekend in Imperial was dedication ceremonies and grand opening of Imperial's new swimming pool May 24 on East 9th Street. The new pool drew the district swim meet here in July, and remained open until mid-September both for the public and P.E. classes. Earlier in the year, the city's 70-year old pool in Campbell Park was torn down.

No. 6: Land for economic development purchased

Using sales tax funds of \$360,000, the city of Imperial purchased 77 acres from Melvin and Dorothy Miller, east of the Schroeder Park ball fields. The purchase gives Imperial an industrial/commercial development area for interested businesses that wish to consider a move here, and also helps Imperial be designated a Certified Economic Development Community, creating new opportunities for marketing the city. City officials learned in October that not all of the ground's water rights came with it like they thought, causing some controversy.

No. 7: Football field lights

Chase County Schools played its first Longhorn football game on the East 9th St. field under

new lights Sept. 4, after a year of more discussion on the height of those lights. There was school board discussion about challenging the airport zoning board's height restrictions on the NE pole by going to the city's variance board, but a 5-4 vote in July went against that challenge.

No. 8: Reading Mastery Program

Students in grades K-6 at Chase County Schools are working toward improving their reading skills via the Reading Mastery Program instituted in the fall. Teaching staff is also using the "Direct Instruction" teaching method.

Staff members in November stated success already is being seen with the program, but some parents have expressed concern about the cut-back of classroom time spent on science and social studies.

No. 9: Young deaths in accidents

The community was saddened with the tragic deaths of three of its young people in 2009—Debra Ridlen Palsar, 28; Elisha "Bubba" Sanchez, 21; and Adrian Marquez, 16. Forty-four-year-old Carl Bartels was also killed in an accident near Holyoke in the fall.

No. 10: Police investigations

Two major cases took up a lot of Imperial police time last year. In early February, attempted break-ins at three Imperial businesses were thwarted, and following the arrest of an Indiana man, it was discovered the burglars were likely involved in a 15-state theft ring. In August, two police officers testified at a murder/drug trial in Kansas after drugs were confiscated from a storage unit here early in the year.

The other five stories rounding out the top 15 were:

No. 11—Arrival of Dr. Jose Garcia and Nurse Practitioner Brandy Hanes. Dr. Steven Boyer, working parttime here, left the community.

No. 12—Plans for a new fire hall started, while the county is looking into its own facility for EMS and emergency management.

No. 13—H1N1 virus and multiple shot clinics here for both that flu and the seasonal variety.

No. 14—Jan. 6, 2009, fire northwest of Imperial that burned 600 to 700 acres.

No. 15—Local residents' unhappiness with the Omaha World-Herald's decision to stop home deliveries here.