

### ***By Russ Pankonin, The Imperial Republican Co-Publisher***

There's an adage among those who observe the Legislature that Nebraskans are never quite safe when the Legislature's in session because you just never know what kind of laws might make it through.

That couldn't be more true for groundwater irrigators in the Republican Basin and more especially in the Upper Republican Natural Resources District (URNRD).

This session two bills have been introduced that could have a devastating impact on this region.

One bill, LB 1056, could ultimately shut down groundwater irrigation if groundwater declines in the aquifer exceed 30 percent or more since the baseline period of 1963.

The other bill, LB 1054, would set groundwater allocations the same in the basin under a share-and-share-alike policy. In the most drastic situation, if an area's allocation would be set to zero, the whole basin's allocation would be set to zero.

What a chilling effect these bills could have on this region if one or both would become law.

Over the years, the aquifer in the URNRD has not recharged as fast as it was pumped, creating groundwater declines in numerous areas across the three-county district.

However, during that same time, irrigators and NRD board members realized the situation that was being created. They took action by becoming the first NRD in the state to implement local controls to address the conditions that had developed.

Today, the URNRD and the entire Republican Basin face the additional challenge of keeping the state in compliance with U.S. Supreme Court compact settlement with Kansas over water use and supplies in the basin.

In looking at LB 1056, only two areas in the state would be subject to the law if passed—the URNRD and areas in Box Butte County.

Senator Tom Carlson introduced the two bills this session. Carlson told me he remains a strong proponent of irrigation and I believe him, as evidenced by previous efforts in the Legislature.

He said the main goal of introducing LB 1056 is to generate discussion on what the state is doing to insure that there will be water in the basin for generations to come. Those intentions are honorable.

However, Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial said he's already seen instances when emotions can take hold of a bill. Before you know it, emotions, not common sense, propel a bill through the body and bad law is created.

Water can be an emotional issue, especially when eastern senators conjure up notions that we're just irresponsibly pumping the area dry. That couldn't be further from the truth but too often perception represents reality.

As a result, Christensen said these bills need to be killed because of the harm that would occur in the Republican Basin if they would somehow become law.

This is a wake-up call for irrigators in the basin. They must realize they can no longer just stand on the sidelines and take whatever the Legislature decides to dish out.

It's time for "joe irrigator" to get involved in the effort. One way that irrigators can make an impact, Christensen said, is to attend the hearing in Lincoln. Just by attending and registering on the record that they are opposed to the bills, committee members hearing the bills will take notice.

Presently, these two bills are set for hearing in front of the Natural Resources Committee on

Wednesday, Feb. 10.

If irrigation plays a key role in your farming operation or agri-business, you need to be involved. Don't expect the next guy to do it for you.

Now's the time to help make your government accountable by standing up and being heard. Your livelihood may well depend on it.