

By Russ Pankonin, The Imperial Republican

Two years ago, the Upper Republican Natural Resources District bought 4,000 acres in southwest Dundy County. The sole purpose of the purchase was to retire irrigation on the tract and use the water to augment streamflow in the Republican River.

This week, the project became operational as water pumped from one of the 10 wells developed on the property began to flow into the dry upper reaches of the Rock Creek stream bed.

The URNRD and the state of Nebraska needs the water to stay in compliance with the 2002 Republican River compact settlement with Kansas. During the drought years of 2005-06, Nebraska fell out of compliance and has been in court with Kansas ever since.

The drought conditions of last summer resulted in increased pumping across the URNRD. To make that worse, weather forecasts don't look a lot better for this summer.

This year, the URNRD is responsible for making up slightly more than 10,000 acre-feet of water in the stream. This is a result of the increased pumping during last summer's drought conditions, along with the anticipated use if this summer is dry again.

The Rock Creek project has come under fire from landowners near the project, along with other outside entities who want to see irrigation curtailed in the URNRD.

Landowners near the project fear the pumping for augmentation will diminish the amount of water in their irrigation wells. Engineers say some additional drawdown will occur but should not endanger the aquifer in that area.

The NRD will pump no more water annually than what was originally allocated to the 24 wells on the tract.

Landowners in the area also feel they are carrying the compliance load for the whole district.

In reality, everyone across the district benefits and every irrigator pays a per-acre occupation tax to fund augmentation projects that will keep them irrigating.

Without the Rock Creek augmentation project, which will be able to provide 15,000 acre-feet of additional streamflow, a number of irrigators in the district would be shut down.

Irrigators with wells in the area near streams and tributaries, known as the rapid response area (RRA), would be forced to shut down their wells. That amounts to about 20 percent of the acres in the URNRD that would go dry for a year.

Dundy County has the highest number of acres in the RRA, followed by Chase County. Perkins County has virtually no RRA acres.

Can you imagine the economic impact from idling 20 percent of the irrigated acres in the district? So you see, everyone benefits from the augmentation project and every irrigator pays a share of the cost.

Irrigators in Perkins County don't have to fear getting shut down. Still, they pay the same amount of occupation tax that every irrigator elsewhere in the district pays. They are doing their part for the good of the whole district. So are the irrigators near the Rock Creek project.

The Rock Creek project and the Lincoln County project, which will provide nearly 45,000 acre-feet of streamflow augmentation, are key to the economic engine that drives this region and this state—agriculture.

The Lincoln County project has been delayed due to a lawsuit from two Nebraska surface water irrigation districts and some of their members.

However, proponents of the project remain optimistic that efforts to delay or derail the project

will not be successful.

Augmentation projects represent the most feasible tool to remain in compliance with Kansas. But perhaps more important, these projects protect the ag-based economy we all rely on.