

By Russ Pankonin, The Imperial Republican

On last week's Opinion page, we reprinted an editorial by the Lincoln Journal-Star on the issue of the state paying surface water irrigation users for water they have lost this year.

In April, the Department of Natural Resources issued a compact call on water stored in basin reservoirs for surface water irrigation. This water will instead be used by the state for compact compliance with Kansas.

This action by DNR forced surface districts to release all the water that had come into the reservoirs since Jan. 1, 2013. This amounted to more than 13,000 acre-feet that was released downstream, eventually ending up in Harlan County reservoir.

Last week, DNR ordered the release of 20,000 acre-feet of water from Harlan into Kansas as a big step in ensuring Nebraska is in compliance with the compact.

Their editorial pointed out that "surface water irrigators are getting the shaft." I don't think anyone will argue that point.

What bothers us most is what follows: "They're getting the bill for generations of ignorance and bad decisions by state policymakers." This insinuates nothing has been done for years to address water issues in the state, which couldn't be any further from the truth.

Had they done their homework, they would have known that the Upper Republican Natural Resources District was the first NRD in the state to impose allocations on irrigation and require flow meters to measure usage.

The URNRD was also the first to take specific actions to reduce a decline in the aquifer due to

groundwater pumping. In addition, the URNRD and the other NRDs in the basin, the Middle, Lower, and Tri-Basin have all adopted integrated management plans to better manage groundwater use as part of the state's effort to remain in compact compliance.

The URNRD became the first NRD to implement an augmentation project to help offset pumping and assist with compact compliance. They have joined with three other NRDs to do the same thing on a bigger scale in Lincoln County for both the Republican and Platte River Basins.

One of the biggest problems the Republican Basin faces comes from the lack of understanding of issues in the basin. That misunderstanding gets further perpetuated by a half-cocked, shoot-from-the-hip approach exhibited in that editorial.

To say that state policymakers have failed at water policy would be a slap in the face of state senators who worked on LB 108, which established the correlation between groundwater and surface water. The Legislature took great strides to make major water policy with the passage of LB 962.

If the state policy was to shut down groundwater use whenever surface water use was shut down, that would decimate the economy of the state. Perhaps by not acting, the Legislature is actually acting—by not adopting bad policy.

In Nebraska, both surface water and groundwater are owned by the state, for the beneficial use by its people. The time has come to acknowledge that the state's water be used for the "most" beneficial use, not simply beneficial use.

Whether in the Republican Basin or throughout the state, Nebraska depends on the groundwater irrigation that sustains the state's economy through agricultural production.

The editorial also insinuates that groundwater pumping uses so much water "that the soil is thirsty for moisture, depleting runoff." Frankly, the soil is thirsty and runoff affected as a direct result of drought conditions that have returned to this state.

Changes in farming through the use of no-till and strip till have made a significant impact on holding moisture in the soil, which in turn reduces runoff. Years of conservation practices, such as building terraces and small retention ponds, have also negatively affected runoff.

Yes, groundwater pumping does have an effect on stream flow. However, when assessing the “most beneficial use” of water in this state, the highest economic return, after domestic use, comes from the use of groundwater for irrigation.

When looking at streamflow declines, let’s take Swanson Reser-voir near Trenton as an example. Surface flows into the lake are approximately 60,000 acre-feet less today compared to pre-groundwater irrigation development. It would be easy to assume groundwater irrigation is to blame.

However, the amount of streamflow coming into the lake from Kansas and Colorado has dropped 53,000 acre feet during that same time. Groundwater pumping, changes in farming practices and conservation efforts account for only about 12 percent of the reduction in streamflows.

No one likes to see when another irrigator gets shut off. Do the surface water irrigators deserve some compensation, as proposed in Sen. Mark Christensen’s LB 522, for losing their water? Probably. Will it happen? That remains to be seen.

LB 522 got 27 votes on General Reading. However, Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege fired a shot across the bow. Until the surface water districts who have filed suit against the NRDs, the state and numerous state officials over the Lincoln County augmentation project lift their suit, he said he won’t vote for giving them a dime.

As you see, water issues can be tricky and complex. There’s no room half-baked, half-cocked approaches. This only results in further misunderstanding.