

By Dave Vrbas

The Wauneta Breeze

Emotions ran high before the coffee was even served.

As the crowd gathered at an informational 'community coffee' meeting in Wauneta's American Legion Hall on Friday, friendly debate between local farmers and Upper Republican Natural Resources District staff and board members got underway well before the main presentation had even begun.

Those heated discussions continued for well over an hour, as irrigators near the Frenchman River and Stinking Water Creek expressed concern regarding what they perceive as unfair treatment should their irrigation wells be shut off during water-short years.

Jasper Fanning, URNRD manager, led the presentation to provide insight into what the NRD believes are solutions to southwest Nebraska's challenge in meeting the mandatory water restrictions set forth by the Republican River Compact's arbitration ruling.

Wauneta's community coffee, one of two informational question-and-answer sessions scheduled in the area last week, was also attended by URNRD board members Mick Strand and Dean Large of Wauneta and Tom Gaschler, Tom Terryberry and Jeff Wallin of Imperial.

The crew headed to Benkelman that afternoon and are scheduled to host two more community coffees, in Lamar and Champion, on Wednesday of this week.

Regulatory options

As proposed solutions to Nebraska's mandatory compliance with the compact were shared with the crowd on hand, Fanning said the Department of Natural Resources offered two options for compliance — cut all water allocations across the board or look at each well and its impact on the stream.

One of the common misconceptions, Fanning explained, is that all wells have the same impact on groundwater throughout the Republican River and Frenchman River basins. That misconception was created, Fanning said, when hydrogeologists attempted a 'nutshell' explanation for the groundwater issues facing the area.

The fact, he went on to explain, is that wells closest to the rivers have a greater impact on the stream than do those furthest from the rivers. That explanation didn't sit well with many in attendance who farm ground along the river.

"I realize this doesn't give anyone farming near the stream any comfort," he went on to say. "But when you're faced with making a 50 percent impact along the river or with the same amount of money making a two to three percent impact farther away, it's obvious."

Unfair treatment

Craig Fanning, who farms ground north of town near the Stinking Water Creek, was vocal in his belief that proposed shutoffs along the river showed potential for unfair treatment.

"What's the hurry to push option three through?" Craig Fanning asked, referring to a proposed plan that addresses each well and its impact on the stream and groundwater supply, at times forcing irrigation well shutoffs, most likely along the river. "Why don't we slow down and think this through?"

Urging the NRD's board members to look at restructuring option one — restricted allocations across the board — Craig Fanning felt as though all irrigators, not just those who farm near southwest Nebraska's rivers, should 'feel the pain' of meeting compliance with the arbitrator's ruling.

Jasper Fanning explained that the NRD is currently working on an option four that combines option one's allocation limits with option three's proposed shutoffs of those wells along the river basins with a funding mechanism that allows financial compensation to those forced to shut off their wells.

Part of that funding mechanism would include a proposed \$10 occupation tax, and Jasper Fanning urged those in attendance to remember that the NRD's goal was to meet compliance in a way that has the least adverse impact on the local farm economy.

"All three NRDs in this area know that option three in itself is not the answer. Option three will be devastating locally if we don't have a funding piece intact," Jasper Fanning said, explaining that the groundwater declines shown on the meeting's handouts are actually somewhat of a good thing.

"Groundwater declines are better than the alternative," he explained. "If you don't have groundwater declines, you're pulling from the stream, which is what the compact is all about."

He also explained that the above-average rainfalls received this season will take a few years to make any recharge impact on the water table, and the recent drought was the biggest part of the water table decline.

Other ideas

One suggestion, brought up by Keenan Kitt, a farmer on Wauneta's South Divide, was to explore the option of forcing irrigators to do away with pivot end guns, which would reduce evaporation of the irrigated groundwater.

Jasper Fanning assured the crowd that the impact from such a mandate would be so insignificant as to be nearly immeasurable for purposes of compact compliance.

Kitt's suggestion led Jasper Fanning to another point, however. "Farmers in this area do more conservation agriculture than in any other area of the state," he said. "Education of farmers has as much to do with it than anything."

Financial compensation paid out to those forced to shut off wells during water short years, Jasper Fanning explained, seemed to be the most viable option. "If we can pay more for the water along the river to those who farm there, and treat the people who own those wells better, we can have more of an impact with less spent."

He quickly cautioned the crowd though. "If money and water aren't interchangeable, we're back at regulation," he said to those in attendance, many of whom were close relatives.

"Corn prices dictate what the water's worth that year," said Jo Fanning. "We don't know if it's interchangeable until we see those prices."

Norm Fanning raised the question of the allowance of water allocation transfers.

Jasper Fanning explained that each water transfer stands on its own merit. "The difference between history and today," he explained, "is that if you want a new well, you have to be willing to give something up to get it, unlike 30 years ago where no one was coming forward to say, 'I will shut this well off if I can have this one.'"

Craig Fanning urged the board members in attendance to think about the long-term effects of any decisions they make in the near future. "You have to think about the next generations and not just the here and now," he said.

The weather, Jasper Fanning explained, would be the biggest piece of that puzzle. "Mother Nature is in control of what the future holds for us."