By Russ Pankonin
The Imperial Republican

Requests by farmers to transfer irrigation allocations over a long distance has forced the Upper Republican Natural Resources District (URNRD) board to take a much closer look at the issue.

Next Tuesday, Jan. 20 at 10 a.m. in Imperial, the board will hold a special meeting to get input on developing guidelines for such transfers.

This process serves as the beginning stage for formulating a rule to address the issue.

Jasper Fanning, URNRD manager, said the board will discuss guidelines for the consideration of allocation transfers.

Currently, the district's rules allow for the transfer of allocation within a floating township, or an area six miles by six miles.

However, there are no rules addressing transfers at a distance further than the six-mile limit of the floating township.

One of the big factors in the transfer of allocation revolves around what impact it will have on the URNRD in terms of compliance with the Republican River Compact Settlement.

Fanning explained there are a number of tracts in the district that, for one reason or another, don't use their full allocation annually. As a result, this creates a large amount of carryforward on these tracts.

Typically, this occurs in areas of the district where the well capacity or water quantity is not sufficient to pump a full allocation.

What the district doesn't want to see is a transfer of a full allocation and carryforward off these tracts to other areas of the district with more water quantity.

Fanning said that would ultimately increase pumping as a whole, which would be detrimental to compliance efforts and would likely result in lower allocations for all irrigators in the district.

However, certain conditions exist in which it would be beneficial to transfer allocations on wells in quick response areas that create a high depletion factor on stream flows.

Quick response areas are those within 2.5 miles of any river, stream or tributary in the Republican Basin.

In some instances, Fanning said it's beneficial to move that allocation out of the quick response area into areas that show very little depletion factor on stream flows.

Reducing pumping in the quick response area and transferring the allocation away could benefit the calculations of water supply used to determine compliance.

Under the settlement, the URNRD has a target of limiting pumping to 425,000 acre-feet per year. (An acre foot of water covers one acre of ground 12 inches deep.)

This year, the district was just slightly over that goal.

Fanning said carryforward is an important tool for farmers to manage their water use. He said the district does not want to do anything to jeopardize the use of that tool.

As a result, Fanning said the board is considering limiting the transfer of any carryforward to an amount equal to three years' allocation, or 39 inches.

Managing the carryforward is the real crux of this matter, Fanning noted.

Info meeting held last week

During a public information meeting Tuesday, Jan. 6 in Imperial, Fanning told a crowd of around 25 that work is continuing on examining the feasibility of augmenting stream flow from a groundwater well field.

One of the questions being looked at is whether it is more beneficial to pump from fewer wells

and store the water for a timed release or pump a large amount of water from more wells.

Either way, Fanning said the NRDs would have to buy or retire water rights to make the water available.

He estimated a well field, water rights and a delivery pipeline could cost between $50-100 million. He added the proposal is similar to what Colorado is planning to do on the North Fork of the Republican near the Colorado-Nebraska border.

Water quality specialist Heather Francis reported the URNRD district has few problems with nitrates in the water supply.

She said they have been collecting water samples and data since 1998, which provides a detailed look at trends.

Assistant Manager Dirk Dinnel demonstrated the process of using digital technology to accurately measure irrigated acres.

Using Geographic Info Systems which includes high resolution aerial images, Dinnel said they accurately account for irrigated acres.

He added this will be a helpful tool when measuring compliance efforts.

Water use in 2008

In 2008, early calculations show the district used an average of 11.8 inches of water for the year, which is under the 13-inch allocation.

However, the district used 428,000 acre-feet, which was slightly over the goal of 425,000 acre feet.

In Chase County, water use averaged 11.4 inches, with 10.8 inches being pumped in quick response areas.

In Dundy County, the average use totalled 12.8 inches with 11.6 pumped in the quick response areas.

Perkins County averaged pumping of 11.4 inches. There are no quick response acres in the county.

Jason Kepler with the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources said 2009 will not be a water short year. However, he warned that long-term trends show a reduction in overall water supply.

Ron Theis, an attorney with DNR, said the recent rulings by the arbitrator over differences between Kansas and Nebraska were beneficial to Nebraska in several areas.

However, he warned that a declaration of victory by Nebraska could still be premature. He said the issues still face a March hearing and no decision is final yet.

He said either state could still file suit in the U.S. Supreme Court if they are unhappy with the non-binding arbitration.

Roger Stockton, director of the Southwest Nebraska Resource and Conservation District in Cambridge, reviewed the success of vegetation and tree removal project in the basin.

In areas sprayed and/or cleared, property owners have reported an increase in stream flow.

Last year the Legislature appropriated $2 million for vegetation control in the Republican and Platte River Basins.

A bill will be introduced again this year to continue the funding.