

By Benjamin Welch
Nebraska News Service

LINCOLN—Here comes the river's rising tide.

The Nebraska Department of Natural Resources and five Natural Resource Districts are making headway in bringing Platte River stream flow back to its 1997 levels.

If the Platte Basin Water Management Action Initiative's goals are met, farmers will be less likely to face restrictions on using groundwater for irrigation.

"It's really preventing more intrusive actions that NRDs or the state would have to take to limit farmers' abilities to irrigate," said John Thorburn, the general manager for the Tri-Basin NRD in Holdrege.

"We, by doing these projects, are acting on behalf of our constituents—our farmers—so they don't have to take individual responsibility. It's economically beneficial to do these projects and avoid regulation that would have more widespread impact," he said.

The Department of Natural Resources in cooperation with the Central Platte, Twin Platte, Tri-Basin, South Platte and North Platte NRDs created an integrated management plan within the Platte River Basin to restore groundwater being intercepted by irrigation wells.

In 2009, the group developed plans to offset uses that have come online since 1997 that affect the stream flows and to recover flows in part in central and upper basin. The coalition's efforts are slated to be completed by 2019 and are currently ahead of schedule.

To meet these goals, project managers are examining shortages in target flows in the Central Platte Basin with an eye toward using measures like retiring irrigated land and converting areas back to grassland. Lately, re-timing water has been the focus, which takes excessive flows in an aquifer and reintegrates them in times of drought, like these.

By 2004, new irrigation growth had halted, but water levels remain over-appropriated in the basin because of new demands on water for commercial and municipal use.

"Eventually, had the groundwater use for irrigation continued, it would have dried up the Platte enough that some of the existing water rights wouldn't have been able to be met," said Ron Bishop, general manager for the Central Platte NRD in Grand Island. "There wouldn't be enough water for them."

The project is funded primarily by the Platte Basin Water Coalition Group, which looks to implement the projects and enact the goals of the integrated management plan. The projects are being funded in part with a \$3.3 million grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust, with additional funding from the affected NRDs.

In Nebraska, water is managed through two parallel tracks. The DNR manages and permits surface water usage and the 23 NRDs in the state manage groundwater for quantity and quality.

"The Platte Basin Water Management Action Initiative provides a great opportunity for the state and local NRDs to work collaboratively to identify projects to assist in meeting the goals of the integrated management plans in the basin," said Brian Dunnigan, the director of the Department of Natural Resources.