By Russ Pankonin
The Imperial Republican

The joint public agency, Nebraska Cooperative Republican Platte Enhancement Project (N-CORPE), now holds the deed to 19,000 acres in Lincoln County. The agency completed the $83 million land purchase early this week.

Four Nebraska natural resources districts (NRDs) formed N-CORPE in late October through an interlocal agreement.

The four NRDs include the Upper, Middle and Lower Republican NRDs, located in the Republican River Basin, and the Twin Platte NRD, located in the Platte River Basin. Each NRD has a one-fourth share in the project.

The land, located in southwest Lincoln County, will be used to launch the largest stream flow augmentation project ever in Nebraska.

The project will enable both the Republican and Platte River Basins to remain in compliance with specific water-use agreements in their respective basins.

The Republican Basin must remain in compliance with the 2002 compact settlement with Kansas.

The Platte Basin is required to meet obligations in the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program and bring groundwater pumping back to 1997 levels.

About two-thirds of the property rests within the boundaries of the Middle Republican NRD with the other third in the Twin Platte NRD.

Engineering underway

Jasper Fanning, manager of the URNRD, said plans call for retiring active irrigation on 15,874 acres of the tract. This will generate about 45,000 acre-feet of water annually that can be used for compliance purposes.

Fanning said this week that engineering is already underway to design pipelines that will be used to deliver water to the respective river basins when needed.

Small pipelines between existing wells on the property will tie together to feed the main pipelines.

Fanning said they've set June 30, 2013, as the target date to get the well field and main pipeline for the Republican Basin operational.

He said seven to eight miles of main pipeline will be needed to deliver water in Medicine Creek.

For water delivered into the Republican Basin, Fanning said 54 percent will be counted toward compact compliance at the present time.

Nebraska is seeking full credit for the water from the Republican River Compact Administration, which includes Nebraska, Kansas and Colorado.

Bonds to be sold

N-CORPE worked with a coalition of Nebraska banks led by Pinnacle Bank for the interim financing needed to close the sale this week. The NRDs put up $8.3 million of the purchase price.

N-CORPE will then issue bonds, projected at a 20-year term, to pay off the interim loan and an estimated $20 million in project costs. Occupation taxes in each district will be used to retire their share of the bonds.

Not without controversy

While the NRDs feel this project will greatly benefit their respective basins for years to come, it hasn't been without some controversy.

Some questioned the speed at which the NRDs pulled together to negotiate for the property and form N-CORPE.

Some expressed concern that the loss of corn production on the property would harm feed supplies for cattle feeders.

Perhaps the biggest concern has been the loss of property tax dollars school districts collect from the 19,000-acre tract.

A meeting was held in Wallace last week to address the issue, which primarily affects the Wallace school district.

Fanning said N-CORPE is already working with legal counsel to see how impact to the district could be minimized.