

Telephone conference report held on Tuesday, Jan. 15

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial introduced a bill into seeking a \$40 million loan from the state to finance construction of a pipeline to carry augmentation water into the Republican Basin.

Christensen dropped the bill into the hopper on the first day of the 103rd legislative session.

The bill seeks to secure a \$40 million loan for N-CORPE, the Nebraska Cooperative Republican Platte Enhancement Project.

N-CORPE was formed last fall through an interlocal agreement between the Upper, Middle and Lower Republican Natural Resources Districts (NRDs), located in the Republican River Basin and the Twin Platte NRD, located in the Platte River Basin.

N-CORPE would use the money to build a pipeline to carry streamflow augmentation water into the Republican Basin for compact compliance purchases.

Last fall, N-CORPE purchased 19,000 acres in Lincoln County for \$83 million.

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

Due to drought conditions last summer, water use in the Republican Basin exceeded the level needed to stay in compliance with Kansas.

Water from the Lincoln County project could be used for compliance purposes to offset last year's overuse in the basin.

The Upper Republican NRD must offset 10,680 acre feet (AF) of use. That's down from the initial estimate of more than 15,000 AF.

N-CORPE wants to get the Republican basin portion of the pipeline under construction as soon as possible.

They had planned to issue bonds for the project and construction. However, the bonding company will not issue bonds with the lawsuit pending by two Nebraska surface water irrigation districts trying to halt the project.

As a result, Christensen is asking his colleagues to approve a loan to N-CORPE to allow pipeline construction to begin as soon as possible.

In order to get funding right away, Christensen said it will be necessary to suspend the rules of the body. A total of 30 votes will be necessary to do this.

If that occurs, the bill would get an immediate hearing and could hit the floor within a day if forwarded by the committee holding the bill.

Christensen said he told his colleagues they can vote to do this now or pay Kansas damages later. "I made it clear they are going to spend it one way or the other," he said Tuesday.

Plus, he said it's a loan. He said the Republican Basin has already proven their credit worthiness in repaying a \$8.7 million loan from the state for surface water leases in 2006.

In addition, the occupation tax has already withstood a constitutional challenge so the districts have a revenue source to repay the loan.

Jan. 23 last day for new bills

Christensen said senators have until Wednesday, Jan. 23 to introduce bills for consideration.

Activity will pick up when hearings on bills will begin early next week.

Christensen said he has filed the bill, LB 16, to transfer ownership of Champion State Recreation Area to Chase County.

He has also introduced two other bills dealing with NRDs—one addressing man-ure application and the other addressing certified irrigation acres.

Falls short of chairmanship

Christensen fell short 32-17 in his bid for chairmanship of the Natural Resources Committee.

Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege won the seat in the body's reorganization elections last week.

The votes are cast by secret ballot but Christensen said some of the senators who said they'd support his bid didn't in the end.

Christensen asked to be appointed to the Judiciary Committee and was also chosen vice-chair of the Banking, Commerce and Insurance Committee. He also serves on the body's Executive Committee.

Senator MARK CHRISTENSEN holds weekly teleconferences at 7 a.m. MT/8 a.m. CT each Tuesday morning. The public is invited to attend the conference calls. Hosts of the conference calls are Imperial Republican in Imperial, Southwest Public Power District in Palisade and Midwest Electric in Grant. Christensen can be reached at 402-471-2805, or by mail at P.O. Box 94604, Lincoln, NE 68509, or via e-mail at mchristensen@leg.ne.gov.