By Russ Pankonin
The Imperial Republican

When Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial introduced LB 185, he hoped he could get the bill on a fast track towards passage.

The bill would authorize a $40 million loan from state cash reserves to build a pipeline from the Lincoln County augmentation project to feed the Republican Basin.

His hopes for quick passage appeared dashed during a legislative hearing on the bill in front of the Appropriations Committee Friday, Feb. 1.

In his weekly teleconference call Tuesday, Christensen said committee members believe the loan should be approved as part of the overall budget process.

Instead of the bill being moved out of committee for debate and passage in February, it will become part of the budget bill.

Typically, the Legislature deals with the budget in the final weeks of the session, which is scheduled to end June 5.

N-Corpe was looking for the loan to start the pipeline since a lawsuit against the project has delayed the sale of bonds to cover purchase and development costs.

N-Corpe is the entity formed by four natural resources districts to own and operate the Lincoln County project. The NRDs include the Upper, Middle and Lower Republican NRDs and the Twin Platte NRD.

Christensen feels he has support for the loan but senators want assurance of repayment. The occupation taxes on irrigated acres will be collected to pay off the loan and bonds when they are issued.

He also noted he needs to get with some senators to brief them on the importance of the loan and respond to any questions they may have.

He regretted this will push the project back three to four months. The Lower Republican NRD needs to offset some overuse from last year's drought-dominated summer.

That offset may not be able to come from the augmentation project this year due to the delay from incorporating the loan into the budget process.

Another water task force

Senator Tom Carlson of Holdrege introduced LB 517, which would create a statewide Water Sustainability Task Force.

By Jan. 1, 2014, the task force will be responsible for identifying water resources programs, projects and activities in need of funding to meet the long-term statewide goals of water sustainability, increased water-use productivity and otherwise maximize the beneficial use of Nebraska's water resources for the benefit of its citizens.

This would be the second water sustainability task force sought by Carlson.

The first task force, which was focused solely on the Republican River Basin, completed its work in 2012.

Carlson is also looking to create a cash fund, through LB 516, to fund water projects in Nebraska.

Called the Nebraska Water Legacy Fund, the fund would be funded by seeking 1/8 of a cent sales tax.

Presently, the state earmarks 1/4 of one percent to fund road projects in the state.

Carlson's bill would drop the highway earmark funding to 1/8 of one percent, with the other

1/8th going to the water fund.

The hearing for LB 517 is set for Wednesday, Feb. 13.

Christensen's primary concern with the bill comes from the composition of the appointed task force.

As proposed, the task force will consist of 15 voting members, 12 of whom shall be appointed by the Legislature's Natural Resources Committee and three appointed by the Governor.

There will also be four members from each of the state's three congressional districts and three at-large members.

That would mean Lincoln and Omaha would get eight seats while the rest of Nebraska would get four. Christensen said he doesn't feel this representation would be adequate and would like to see changes made in this area.