By Russ Pankonin
The Imperial Republican

Should irrigators be allowed to transfer allocation from one well to another well 30-40 miles away?

Should irrigators get an incentive of more water if they transfer allocation from a well near a stream to an upland location to reduce stream flow depletions?

Should a transferred allocation be reduced the further it moves away from the original well?

Those are all questions the board of the Upper Republican Natural Resources District will discuss when they convene for their regular meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 3.

The board held a special meeting on Tuesday, Jan. 20, to hear recommendations from the groundwater committee on long distance transfers. The board also took input from the public.

Committee member Tom Terryberry said keeping from increasing water use in the district remains their top priority.

However, transfers may allow irrigators to make more efficient use of their water, he added.

Terryberry said one of the concerns was seeing farmers with a large amount of carryforward (CF) attempting to sell it.

Typically, if a tract of land has a large CF in the district, it's because the well does not have the capacity to pump a full allocation.

As a result, one of the recommendations the committee is suggesting is limiting CF to no more than three years of allocation, or 39 inches, or remaining CF, whichever is less.

Terryberry said they are also considering an incentive for retiring allocations in the quick response area (QR)—those areas within 2.5 miles of any stream, tributary or river in the basin.

By reducing water use in QR areas, the district receives more credit in the water model used to determine compliance.

So, the committee is looking at an incentive of more water to the irrigator for retiring a QR well.

Farmer Bob Mollendor of Lamar questioned whether transfers should be allowed at all.

He said moving water from a QR area to an upland area will eventually catch up with the district.

NRD Manager Jasper Fanning noted the benefits would be short-term. However, the depletion facvtor from upland wells 20-30 miles from the stream won't show up for 100 years or more.

Fanning noted that current rules allow transfers. However, putting some guidelines and defined restrictions on how they are made will be a help to both the board and irrigators.

It's the long-distance transfers the committee and board are most concerned with, Terryberry said.

Irrigators' input sought

Committee member Kerry Bernhardt said they are seeking input from irrigators in the district.

Bernhardt said he's not in favor of long-distance transfers that could actually increase the district's pumping goal of 425,000 acre-feet per year.

Both Terryberry and Fanning noted that when transfers allow more efficient use of water, it's in the best interest of the district.

For instance, Fanning said moving an allocation from poor land that has a high historical use to better ground may actually reduce pumping and improve efficiency for the irrigator.

Irrigator Kurt Bernhardt of Lamar told board members that CF represents an important water management tool.

He feared that if the district begins allowing transfer of water over long distances, it could give Kansas more ammunition in their dispute with Nebraska over water use.

He cautioned that if CF is ever lost, it will affect not only irrigators but the economy in the district.

Chairman Greg Pelster asked the groundwater committee to draw up a proposal that could be presented to the board next week for further discussion.

The meeting begins at 7:30 p.m. at the NRD office in Imperial, 511 East 5th Street.