By Russ Pankonin, The Imperial Republican Co-Publisher

Just a few years ago, groundwater irrigators in other parts of Nebraska never dreamed of facing the kind of upheaval irrigators in the Republican Basin have been experiencing since the 2002 compact settlement with Kansas.

In some circles, people just scoffed at the problems we faced here because they believed we simply pumped too much water and were draining our aquifer.

Au contraire, my friends. Nearly 30 years ago, the Upper Republican Natural Resources District was the first NRD in the state to adopt and enforce regulations designed to reduce water use, along with imposing a moratorium on further development.

Unfortunately, that fact never seemed to carry much weight with legislators and other irrigators when it came time to help the Basin achieve compact compliance with Kansas.

This week, a hearing is being held in Denver to determine whether several aspects of Kansas' claim that Nebraska used too much water are valid.

Now, the North Platte NRD in the panhandle is facing a similar claim that irrigation development there robbed downstream surface irrigators of water.

However, this lawsuit is coming from an irrigation district right here in Nebraska—Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District.

They claim that groundwater irrigation development above Lake McConaughy robbed them of stream flow that would otherwise have come into the lake to be later delivered to surface water irrigators down the line.

Top it off with an eight-year drought the like of which has not been seen since the Great Depression, and the problems intensified.

Several eastern Nebraska NRDs have formed a coalition to protect their water interests should Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District prevail.

On another front, the Department of Natural Resources is preparing to declare the Lower Platte Basin as fully appropriated. That would put about 90 percent of the state in fully- or over-appropriated areas. Those designations basically mean that no further groundwater irrigation development can occur.

As a result, those irrigators in the eastern part of Nebraska are starting to wake up and realize that their lack of empathy for what was happening in the Republican Basin is coming back around to bite them.

And while other regions of the state face new water challenges, problems in the Republican Basin have not yet been solved.

With the declaration that the property tax levy in LB 701 to pay for water purchases is unconstitutional, one funding mechanism is down the drain. If the per-irrigated-acre occupation tax in LB 701 goes down as well, there's no money to purchase surface water in water-short years.

Senator Mark Christensen of Imperial said there's very little sentiment in Lincoln to have the state buy water in future years just so the Republican Basin can continue to irrigate.

It's not a concern when lots of rain falls and reservoirs hold plenty of water. The real concern occurs in a water-short year, Christensen said this week.

If that occurs and there is no funding mechanism to buy water for compliance, Christensen fears the state will just mandate lower allocations—in the four- to six-inch range. That would be a killer—just like it would be in eastern Nebraska under appropriation designations.

People need to be careful what they wish for. Those who wanted the property tax and occupation tax in LB 701 to be ruled unconstitutional may find themselves in a different pickle

when their allocations are cut to 4-6 inches and the state doesn’t step up.

Water problems in our great state will not go away any time soon and before it’s done, those problems will ensnare all of Nebraska.