

## Nebraskan water stewardship has produced measurable results

Written by Wauneta Breeze  
Wednesday, 05 March 2014 17:53 -

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### Dear Editor:

Nebraskans care about preserving groundwater, and their stewardship has produced measurable results.

According to a United States Geological Survey report issued in 2012, every state but Nebraska that overlies a significant portion of the Ogallala Aquifer has significantly less water than it did before irrigation development began.

Nebraska, on the other hand, has actually increased the amount of water in the aquifer by 1.2 million acre feet since the 1950s. That compares to declines of 60 million acre feet in Kansas and 150 million acre feet in Texas.

Remarkably, this was achieved at the same time Nebraska overtook California as the state with the most irrigated acres.

A 2012 study for Nebraska Farm Bureau done by Decision Innovation Solutions concluded that the inability to irrigate in Nebraska would cause an estimated loss of \$11 billion in sales.

Despite this achievement of growing the agricultural economy without sacrificing future generations' access to water, and the far-reaching economic consequences of undercutting the irrigation in the state, a state senator from Omaha is aggressively pursuing a policy that could dismantle a significant portion of Nebraska's agricultural economy.

The bill, LB1074, introduced by Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha, has been described by supporters as a way of simply allowing any river basin in the state to be declared over-appropriated like a portion of the Platte River has been.

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In reality, the bill could replace a cooperative dialogue between Natural Resources Districts and the state Department of Natural Resources with a severe mandate that the difference between fully and over-appropriated level of a river basin be “reduced to zero.”

To understand this requirement, one must understand what fully appropriated means. The condition occurs when the most junior surface water user in the basin is unable to divert 85 percent of the irrigation requirement of corn or as much as they could divert when the permit was issued, whichever is less.

LB 1074 uses this same definition for fully and over appropriated. Since the only water use that can be regulated is groundwater irrigation, impliedly groundwater use would be limited to the point the most junior surface water user was able to divert as much as they could when their permit was issued or supply at least 85 percent of the full irrigation requirement.

In many cases, groundwater irrigation would have to make up for reduction in surface water supplies caused by conservation or irrigation.

What could this mean for water users across the state and the agricultural economy?

Groundwater irrigation would have to be unnecessarily curtailed or even shut down across large swaths of the state with no clear idea of who would actually benefit.

Just as problematic is that perceived beneficiaries of the proposal—some surface water appropriators—would in many cases not see the regeneration of water supplies promised in the bill. This is because the reduction between water supplies they have now and what they had when first receiving surface water permits in most cases is not due solely, and in many cases not even primarily, by groundwater irrigation.

In the Republican Basin, for example, studies have shown that Republican River stream flow has declined about 63,000 acre feet annually because of small dams and terraces.

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Additionally, studies have shown that the percentage of precipitation that results in runoff in the Republican River—the flow of which is 70 percent runoff and 30 percent baseflow from groundwater —has been reduced by about 40 percent since the 1940s because of modern farming practices such as no-till and fewer large rain events.

Finally, in the Republican Basin, approximately 70,000 acre feet of water that annually used to enter Nebraska from Kansas and Colorado no longer enters the state. Despite these conditions that have nothing to do with groundwater irrigation, LB1074 would impose additional regulations on groundwater irrigation to make up for these losses in stream flow.

Simply put, the bill could force historically severe water use regulations in a futile attempt to achieve the impossible.

Ironically, the same water users the bill intends to help—surface water users —could be harmed the most. In many cases surface water users also have groundwater wells because they are more efficient. Groundwater wells closest to rivers, and in many cases owned by surface water appropriators, would likely be first in line to be shut down to generate additional stream flow, if LB1074 were to pass.

While it is unclear who would actually benefit from the legislation, a recent study helps quantify the losses. The 2012 Nebraska Farm Bureau study concluded that the inability to irrigate via all types of irrigation in Nebraska would cause 31,221 job losses and a \$7.1 billion loss in direct economic activity such as purchase of supplies and equipment.

The total value-added loss—which includes loss of labor incomes, property income and indirect business taxes—would be approximately \$5.5 billion. The total annual value-added loss in the Republican Basin alone could be more than \$800 million.

The conclusions in the study were based on a cessation of both surface and groundwater irrigation in Nebraska but the majority of the impacts would be caused by the stoppage of groundwater irrigation. Approximately 8 million acres in Nebraska are irrigated with groundwater; about 565,000 acres, or roughly 7 percent of all irrigated acres in the state, are irrigated with surface water.

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Given Nebraska's thriving agricultural sector, abundant water resources and management of them that far exceeds what is done in other states, some questions should be asked of LB1074: Does it cause more problems than it solves?

Managing water responsibly for the benefit of all water users now and far into the future is one of the most important tasks we have as a state. We believe if Nebraskans take a close look at this legislation they will conclude it represents an irresponsible step that could cause permanent and unnecessary economic damage.

**Dustin Weiss, Imperial**

**Agent, Farm Bureau Financial Services**