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# Water Current

March/April 1982

## Director's Memo

### Questions and Answers About the Platte River Forum

The Water Resources Center, and other University of Nebraska representatives, are involved with the Platte River Forum (PRF). The PRF is designed to help answer questions about how to best allocate Platte River water, but so far the forum has mostly stimulated questions about what it is and how it works. Here are some answers:

#### *What is the Platte River Forum?*

It is a group of 25 scientists, policy makers and water users from Nebraska led by an experienced consulting team from Colorado. Their purpose is to:

- discuss water requirements for various uses of Platte River water;
- describe what will happen to irrigated crop yields, recreation, wildlife habitat, municipal water supplies, water quality, power generation, etc. as we change the uses of water in the Platte River system; and
- train a team of Nebraskans in conducting these kinds of forums.

#### *Why is the PRF necessary?*

There is no agreement at present on how to describe the effects of one use of Platte River water on other uses. Such a description must be developed so that all parties involved in the future management of the Platte River will agree with the predicted effects of suggested water uses. Similar forums have been successful elsewhere in the U.S.

#### *How will the PRF operate?*

The PRF will include a series of workshops and technical meetings at which interrelationships between the various uses of Platte River water will be determined. These interrelationships will be described mathematically and entered into a computer.

#### *What will be the end product of the PRF?*

An agreed upon mathematical description of the important interrelationships in the Platte River system and a team of Nebraskans with the ability to use this procedure in other parts of the state.

#### *How will the end product of the PRF be used?*

The mathematical description will be used to calculate the effects of a series of suggested uses of Platte River water (scenarios). Policy makers and water planning agencies can later use these scenarios to develop the "best" water management schemes for the Platte River system.

#### *How is the PRF related to the ongoing State Water Planning and Review Process?*

The State Water Planning and Review Process (SWPRP) is a state-wide identification of impacts that could occur as man changes the uses of Nebraska's water. The PRF is a refinement of the SWPRP to a smaller area, specifically the Platte River system. Unlike the SWPRP, the PRF will assign numerical values to the effects of various Platte River water uses. Laws and water policy developed from the SWPRP will be used to select PRF scenarios for implementation. Forums such as the PRF are the next logical step in developing a management system for Nebraska's water resources.

An organizational meeting for the forum will be held June 14-15 in Lincoln. The week-long workshop will be held in August.

—Bill Powers  
Director

Water Resources Center



NEBRASKA WATER RESOURCES CENTER



## Sandhills Task Force Meets

The Sandhills Task Force met for the first time April 2 to begin determining NU Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources research and extension priorities for this region of the state.

"We're looking at questions associated with irrigated agriculture and ranching in the Sandhills and will project what research and extension programs will be needed in the area for the coming 10 years," said Bill Powers, task force chairman and director of the Water Resources Center.

The task force of 13 IANR faculty members began listing questions at the April meeting that IANR programs could address. They will further develop the list when the task force meets June 3 at the Halsey 4-H Camp in the Sandhills. NU extension agents, managers of natural resources districts and SCS area conservationists working in the Sandhills will be on hand than to share their ideas on IANR priorities for the region.

The task force will devote the remainder of the meeting to reviewing the list and identifying existing information that can be incorporated into extension programs. From June to August, task force members will work in groups to develop research and extension programs. An August meeting will be scheduled to review and revise the programs, and begin drafting a report for IANR Vice-Chancellor Roy Arnold.

The report will be submitted to the vice-chancellor by December, Powers said.

## Water Measure On Ballot

The 1982 session of the Nebraska legislature set the stage for a heated campaign this fall between foes and supporters of irrigation development, concludes a University of Nebraska extension water law specialist.

At issue is LB 577, a bill designed to permit financing of water development projects with state revenue bonds, said specialist J. David Aiken. The measure goes before voters in November because it requires an amendment to the the state constitution.

"The campaign will give both sides a concrete issue to take to the people of the state, and they will have a real opportunity to try and get their point made politically that people are either for or against water development," Aiken said. "I think it is going to be a real test of public opinion."

Opponents of LB 577 probably will stress that state-funded irrigation projects will divert river water needed for recreation, fish and wildlife, the specialist explained. Supporters will argue that state financing is required for irrigation to continue expanding and contributing to the state economy, especially since federal funds are not as readily available for projects, he believed.

The Reagan administration has indicated that it will

no longer pay for 90 percent of a project's cost. States will be expected to bear half the cost, and provide money "up front" before construction begins, he said.

Aiken called LB 577 a "first step" toward generating full financing for water projects. The amendment would not raise enough funds for large-scale projects, but overwhelming approval of it at the polls would indicate that the climate is right for increasing state taxes to adequately fund water projects, he believed. If the November vote on LB 577 is close, or the measure is soundly defeated, it will be a political signal for promoters to proceed cautiously with future water development legislation, he said.

Two bills to hike the state sales tax by either one-half or one percent for water development were stymied in the legislature this year, probably because public sentiment about water development is unknown, Aiken pointed out. The one percent tax would have raised \$90 million annually.

The NU extension specialist added that many of the proposed water diversion projects for the Platte River are designed to supplement water supplies in areas where irrigation has led to declines in groundwater levels.

"If the state doesn't come up with the financing for projects, then groundwater irrigators in particular are going to have to be more realistic about managing groundwater supplies," Aiken said. "They're not going to have a bailout, or rescue project, built at state and federal expense."

On other water legislation passed in the 1982 session, Aiken said that LB 375 provides natural resources districts more flexibility in managing groundwater.

"The bill opens the door for natural resources districts to try and regulate irrigation if they choose to," the water law specialist said.

LB 375 stipulates that a NRD can develop well spacing regulations, require the installation of water meters and irrigation scheduling procedures, and other water conservation measures if it submits a groundwater management plan to the Department of Water Resources. The measure excludes the use of a well drilling moratorium.

"The groundwater management plan does not have to be approved by the director of the state Department of Water Resources," Aiken explained.

The water law specialist also said there are several contenders vying to succeed Sen. Maurice Kremer of Aurora as the "Mr. Water" of the Nebraska Unicameral. Kremer retired at the end of the 1982 session.

Possible contenders include Sens. Peter Hoagland (Omaha), Chris Beutler (Lincoln), John DeCamp (Neligh) and Loran Schmit Bellwood). Their philosophies on irrigation development range from cautious to supportive, Aiken said.



## Water Laws Filed at NWRC

The 1982 session of the Nebraska Unicameral concluded on April 16, ending 60 days of often hectic legislative activity. LB 375, 577 and other bills pertaining to water resources issues were enacted during the session.

To keep the UNL community and general public abreast of state water legislation, the Water Resources Center maintains a file containing a variety of materials, including:

- Summaries of legislation enacted in previous sessions;
- Pending legislation, resolutions, and daily journals (maintained only while senators are in session);
- "Slip law" (final version) of enacted legislation;
- Unicameral Update*, published weekly during the legislative session and periodically during the interim, by the Unicameral Information Office. It provides information about pending bills and legislative issues;
- Nebraska Water Law Update*, prepared by Prof. J. David Aiken, UNL Water Law Specialist. It provides synopses and commentary on pending legislation and water resources issues;
- Legislative memos prepared by the Natural Resources Commission staff; and
- Pertinent newspaper articles and other materials.

We hope to continually add to this "clearinghouse" of information. It can be an effective teaching and learning resource for students and faculty interested in state and local water resources issues. If you wish to review these materials, feel free to stop by the Water Resources Center office at 310 Agricultural Hall on the UNL East Campus.

This file has not been publicized, but steps are being taken to improve its visibility. If you have questions about available information or have suggestions for making this service more effective, please feel free to call me at 472-3305.

—Robert E. Burns  
Water Resources Planner

## Need for Funds Cited at Water Conference

The theme of the 1982 Nebraska Water Conference held March 16-17 in Lincoln was "The Changing Platte". And one of the changes many speakers dwelled on was the new mood in Washington, D.C. about funding water projects on this important river in Nebraska.

The Reagan administration has had a "change of heart" about funding as much as 90 percent of the cost for water projects, said J. David Aiken, a University of Nebraska extension water law specialist. "One of the few things the Reagan and Carter administrations have in common is their belief that states should bear more of the financial burden for building water projects," he added.

Unless the state raises funds for water development, Aiken predicted that none of the proposed Platte River irrigation projects would be built.

The water law specialist described three fund-raising bills in the Nebraska Unicameral, which was in session at the time of the conference. LB 577 would allow the state to issue revenue bonds for water projects. The measure would generate limited funds for projects. The bill has subsequently passed the scrutiny of state senators and will be on the November ballot for voter approval (see *Water Measure Goes on Ballot* for more details).

The other fund-raising bills did not survive the 1982 legislative session. LB 846 would have increased the state sales tax by one-half percent to earmark \$40-50 million for water development. LB 945 called for a one percent sales tax hike to raise \$90 million.

Aiken pointed out that state financing of irrigation projects may be met with opposition. Nebraskans who are concerned about maintaining flows in rivers for fish and wildlife, and recreation may speak against the measure. Some may also question the use of state funds to build projects that benefit groundwater irrigators who have depleted underground water supplies, he said.

### Severance Tax on Water

Lee Orton, executive director of the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts, said funding for water projects will become the issue of the 1980s.

"We must find new dollars if we are going to manage our water resources," Orton said. "Nebraska's natural resources districts are not capable of doing a great deal in terms of funding large-scale water projects because they neither are set up for that purpose nor have access to sources of large funding."

Orton suggested that resource severance taxes, called "painless taxes" by some, could provide needed funds. Severance taxes have been levied on coal, natural gas and timber when they are removed for use. Nebraska does not have an abundance of these resources, but it does have groundwater in large supply that could be taxed, he said.

Orton discussed other revenue raising measures. Property taxes could be used, but the tax base would have to be broadened to raise adequate funds, he said. General revenue sources such as the state sales tax are another possibility, but he added that the chances of going this route were slim to none.



### *Governor Says State Will Address Problem*

Governor Charles Thone stressed that the state must put large amounts of money in water projects to capitalize on the opportunities afforded by its water resources.

Once "we get past current fiscal problems, we can confront the need for significant—and I mean significant—investments in water projects," Thone said in his brief address to the conference. "We need to be real competitive in this area of water and we shall."

Thone pointed out that most of the "easy" projects have been completed and that federal funds for such projects have largely ended.

Irrigation has added billions to the state's economy and has made Nebraska a world "superpower in food production", he continued. Nebraska can double its irrigated acreage in the next 30 to 40 years, and more than double irrigation's economic impact if handled properly, he said.

Calling water Nebraska's "Fort Knox" and the Platte River the backbone of irrigated agriculture, Thone said it will be essential to obtain agreement and cooperation among the many varied interests looking to the waters of the Platte to serve their needs. "We will come much closer in that general direction if all these interests will work together and plan together toward that end," he said.

### *Federal Official Explains Philosophy*

Robert K. Dawson, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works) confirmed the Reagan administration's intention to cut federal funding for water projects.

"We are faced with new economic realities and new political circumstances which mean that the normal way of doing business in water resources development will not work in the foreseeable future," he said at the conference luncheon on March 16.

"Requiring repayment of project costs by the beneficiaries is a sure way of testing the merits of a project," he added. "Repayments over an extended time, however, do nothing to relieve the current pressures on the federal budget."

The administration is addressing the range of "up front" financing approaches, Dawson stated. "We are putting top priority on those (projects) where net economic benefits are greatest and where potential exists for a non-federal participant to come forward with an innovative financing proposal."

Dawson said that the Reagan administration "is making a determined effort to identify what the federal interest really is in various water projects."

"At the same time, we are addressing what is not in the federal interest. For example, water projects with only local or regional beneficiaries may not qualify as they have in the past for federal financial support," he

continued. "In any event, creative application of the concept of the 'user pays' will remain fundamental to the administration's support for proposed federal water projects."

The changes in federal funding procedures will be positive and productive, he said.

"In the coming months, we will see many of these new directions bearing fruit in our program to get water resources development back on track again," Dawson concluded.

## **Awards Given at Conference**

Two advocates of wise water use and management were honored at the Nebraska Water Conference held March 16-17 in Lincoln.

State Senator Maurice Kremer of Aurora received the 1982 Pioneer Irrigation Award for his leadership and dedicated service in the legislature. The Ainsworth Irrigation District accepted the Progress Award for being a "forerunner" in irrigation development, conservation and wise water use.

James Jackson of Hastings, awards chairman of the Nebraska Water Conference Council, bestowed the honors at the conference banquet.

Jackson described Kremer as the "Mr. Water" of the Nebraska legislature. He said Kremer, who retired from the legislature at the end of the 1982 session, advocated the wise use of water longer than any of his colleagues.

The Progress Award presented to the Ainsworth Irrigation District commended the district's advocacy and sponsorship of water management in north-central Nebraska, Jackson said.

The Ainsworth Irrigation District was formed in 1953 and includes parts of Cherry, Brown and Rock counties. It supplies irrigation water to 34,539 acres, which produce an average \$12 million of crops in what had been a drought-stricken area, Jackson said.

The construction of canals and laterals in the district has also created fish and wildlife habitat, and offers water quality control benefits.

The district operates the \$26 million Merritt Reservoir on the Snake River. The reservoir, built by the Bureau of Reclamation and completed in 1964, hosts 164,000 recreationists annually. Water that the district releases from the reservoir maintains a popular brown and rainbow trout sport fishery in the Snake River.

### ***\*\*A Special Accolade\*\****

The Nebraska Water Conference Council also presented a plaque of appreciation to Leslie F. Sheffield at the awards banquet.

Sheffield has served as secretary of the council



since it was formed in 1971. The assistant to the Vice-Chancellor of the NU Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources retired from the position in 1981. He is also an NU extension farm management specialist.

Sheffield has been instruction in organizing the annual water conference and summer irrigation tour.

William L. Powers, Director of the NU Water Resources Center, has succeeded Sheffield as secretary. Sheffield will continue to coordinate the annual irrigation tour in the summer.

## NWRC Proceedings Completed

Proceedings of the Workshop on Water Research Needs are now available from the Water Resources Center.

The workshop was the second in a two-part series that the center organized to plan its research, information and education programs. In the first workshop, water users and managers met and ranked by priority the most pressing water problems in the state. The latter workshop, held in February, gathered together scientists to identify existing research information about the problems, and suggest research needs.

Forty-seven research needs are listed in the proceedings. A bibliography of the information sources the scientists identified is also included. Proceedings of the first workshop are also available.

### —Other Publications—

The fifth edition of the center's *Water Resources Publications Related to the State of Nebraska* has just been completed. It contains a bibliography of the information available from the Water Resources Center, University of Nebraska departments, state and federal agencies, and other organizations.

Another publication—the proceedings of the Spring 1982 Water Resources Center seminar series—will be completed in June. Seminar speakers represented both sides of water development issues in Nebraska, including irrigation development in the Sandhills, interbasin water transfers and the proposed Norden Dam.

## NWRC Staffers Present Papers

Two NWRC staffers will give papers at the American Water Resources Association's International Symposium on Hydrometeorology in Denver June 13-17.

M.-L. Quinn, Assistant Professor of Water Resources, will present "Wave Management on Reservoirs: A Nebraska Example." Dr. Donald A. Wilhite, Assistant Professor in the Center for Agricultural Meteorology and Climatology, will present "Measuring Drought Severity: A Call for a New Index."

More information about the conference can be obtained from AWRA, St. Anthony Falls Hydraulic Laboratory, Mississippi River at 3rd Avenue, S.E., Minneapolis, Minnesota 55414.

### PLEASE NOTE

The article about the Great Plains Center in the November/December issue of *WATER CURRENT* listed an inconvenient phone number for the staff at the center. When inquiring about activities at the Great Plains Center, please call 472-3082.

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## WATER CURRENT

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