

ANOTHER OPINION

Bureaucrats created water problems

By Don Adams
Executive Director,
Nebraskans First

As harvest time nears we need to be reminded of our heritage.

Some 100 years ago, before there was irrigation, Nebraska was an uninhabitable wasteland...a stretch of land that pioneers had to cross to get to the West. As irrigation was developed during the early 20th century Nebraska was transformed from a desert into an oasis, and when groundwater irrigation became viable and grew during the mid 1900's Nebraska became a world-class powerhouse producer of food. No other endeavor under the sun is more important to mankind.

Today, irrigated agriculture generates and injects about 5 billion dollars every year into our state's economy. It is important to understand that these dollars represent new wealth, not recycled wealth. These new dollars churn through the local and state economies and multiply. These dollars built and now sustain communities, schools and infrastructures throughout our state. One out of every three jobs in Nebraska is derived from irrigated agriculture.

In the world there are producers and there are consumers. Nebraska farmers and ranchers are producers. Those of us in Lincoln, Omaha, New York, Los Angeles, etc., are the consumers. Lawyers, doctors, insurance salesmen, teachers, bus drivers, government workers, and others do good work and provide useful services that contribute greatly to our quality of life, but they are not producers, they are consumers.

We consume that which irrigation allows our farmers and ranchers to produce. In fact, to feed one adult for just one day requires 1,700 gallons of water. Thanks to irrigation, we consumers are able to enjoy

"We do not have a water shortage problem in our state. We do have a water storage and management problem..."

the highest quality and cheapest food in the world.

It makes absolutely no sense for our government to impede our producers by restricting their use of irrigation. Do we want to end up importing all our food from foreign countries? Haven't we learned the perils of this approach from our near total reliance on foreign oil? Now more than ever, our national security demands that we maintain and actually expand our food production. Our producers' ability to operate with minimal government interference should be our state's public policy priority.

We are bombarded with editorials that say we have major water problems caused by irrigation. Such, in fact, is not the case. Our problems with Kansas are the direct result of an outdated compact entered into by government bureaucrats sixty years ago. The compact was never once amended to deal with the changing times. The dispute with Kansas is political, technical, and academic. It is not about a water shortage problem.

The Republican River begins in the northwestern-most part of Kansas. Harlan County Reservoir, near Alma, Nebraska, is the measuring stick for compact compliance. Right now about 500,000 acre feet of water is being held back from flowing into Harlan by terraces in

northwest Kansas. This fact explains why Harlan is so hard to fill. Kansas is impeding the natural flow and blaming Nebraska.

The problem in the Platte River basin is a direct result, not of excessive irrigation, but a severe seven year drought, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) coming in and forcing its will and agenda of control of Platte River flows for highly suspect habitat needs for certain birds and a fish. Again, the issue was not caused by irrigation, but rather by the federal government and our state government which caved in to FWS threats.

Every year we allow about 9 million acre feet of water to flow out of our state and into the Gulf of Mexico where it ends up as useless saltwater. Incredibly, about 90 million acre feet of water in the form of precipitation falls onto our state every year. This huge annual amount of water is enough to fill up 45 Lake McConaughys and Harlan County Reservoirs. We do not have a water shortage problem in our state. We do have a water storage and management problem that, if addressed through the construction of additional storage facilities, would provide us with an abundance of water that could be stored and used in times of drought. Inter-basin transfers of our surplus water into the Republican would resolve the conflict with Kansas.

To generate 5 billion dollars every year for our state's economy, groundwater irrigators use less than 10%, or 8 million acre feet of the 90 million acre feet that we get annually. What a value!

The contribution irrigation makes to our state is beyond measure.

Nebraskans First is a non-profit, non-partisan, grassroots organization of Nebraska farmers dedicated to protecting Nebraska's groundwater for agriculture.

GRAND ISLAND INDEPENDENT 8-27-07