

Christensen seeking compensation for loss of surface water in Republican River Basin

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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The mandated release of water from Enders Reservoir last week totaled 452 acre feet. The release dropped the elevation of the lake about six inches. The photo shows the water line on this beach as well as where the water stood before the release. (Imperial Republican Photo)

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Senator Mark Christensen of Imperial wants the state to reimburse surface water irrigators in the Republican River Basin if they don't get water this year.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has issued a compact call on all surface water in the basin.

That limits surface water irrigation districts in the basin to use only water stored before Jan. 1,

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That effectively reduces the amount of surface water that can be delivered by the irrigation districts to their users.

To make matters more contentious, DNR issued an order for the districts to release downstream all the water stored in Bureau of Reclamation reservoirs from Jan. 1 to March 31.

Christensen said this amounts to more than 13,000 acre-feet of water that must be released for eventual capture in Harlan County Dam.

The largest release will come from Harry Strunk Reservoir north of Cambridge, totalling 7,548 AF.

Another 3,232 AF was released from Swanson Reservoir near Trenton, 1,984 AF from Red Willow Dam north of McCook and 452 AF from Enders Dam.

Christensen's priority bill, LB 522, seeks to give surface water users compensation of up to \$300 per acre for the water they will lose due to the compact call from DNR.

After meeting with DNR officials Monday, Christensen believes the only way the surface irrigators will get compensated for their loss of water will be through his legislation.

He said the bill is likely to come up for debate next week sometime.

Christensen said he faces a particular challenge because he represents both groundwater and surface water irrigators in his district.

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He doesn't believe it's fair for the state to shut off surface water to help keep the state in compliance with Kansas.

He said groundwater irrigators don't face similar treatment.

There's no way that's fair and I can't stand for that," he said Tuesday during his weekly teleconference call.

As a result, he believes it's only fair for the state to pay surface water irrigators for their loss because their water is being used for a state purpose—compliance with Kansas.

If drought conditions continue this summer or even longer, it can't be business as usual for any irrigator in the basin he said.

He doesn't believe DNR is in a position to deal with such future circumstances.

Irrigation district worried

Brad Edgerston, general manager of the Frenchman-Cambridge Irrigation District, worries that his area's next corn crop has been jeopardized by the state order to tap reservoirs so Nebraska can send enough water downriver to Kansas.

Edgerston wasn't happy with the state ordering extra releases from four federal reservoirs that collect tributary and runoff from the river basin.

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“And if the state can take our water this way, I don’t know how we exist,” Edgerton said.

His district may be able to deliver to irrigators only two inches of water per acre during the growing season along one of its canals and 1.5 inches in another, Edgerton said. Typical releases have been eight inches.

Jim Schneider, DNR deputy director said, “We don’t know for sure that (the 13,000+ acre-feet) is a sufficient amount, but that’s the start of what we’re going to provide,” said Schneider.

Rain remains the key. Without it, Schneider said, the state may be forced to require additional releases from the reservoirs.

(Associated Press reports were also used to compile this story.)