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Gov. Heineman Plans Meetings to Discuss Future of Republican River Basin

(Lincoln, Neb.) Gov. Dave Heineman has instructed the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to organize a series of discussions with Natural Resource Districts (NRDs) about long-term solutions to Nebraska's water challenges. The goal of the meetings will be to work with local water users in the Republican River Basin on the implementation of comprehensive and long-term plans to manage regional water supplies.

Gov. Heineman said, "Our first priority is to plan for future management of the resources in this part of our state, and while we're working to develop short-term solutions, it's important that we come together with all those with a stake in future of this region to begin to address long-term planning for sustainable water management."

In partnership with DNR officials and the Attorney General's Office, the Governor has been working to develop an arrangement that would provide a one-time payment to irrigation districts for the lease of their water supply during the 2006 irrigation season. The state would direct water supplies from the Nebraska Bostwick Irrigation District, the Riverside Irrigation Company and the Frenchman Valley Irrigation District to Kansas in an effort to help comply with the Republican River Compact settlement.

"No place are our water quantity challenges more immediate than in the Republican River Basin," Gov. Heineman said. "The settlement did not change our obligations under the original compact agreement. Nebraska made a commitment and so it is critical that we work together to fulfill our compact obligations. This is a statewide issue of tremendous importance."

Expressing a desire to do their part in helping the state comply with the terms of the settlement, leaders of the Riverside Irrigation District have already agreed to sign a tentative agreement, pending the availability of state funds. The Bostwick Irrigation District is expected to announce a decision on whether to commit to the proposal following a meeting planned for Wednesday, March 15.

The Governor included funds in his mid-biennium budget recommendations for a potential agreement with area irrigators for the short-term leasing of surface water to help the state comply with the settlement.

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The funding was proposed as a one-time commitment that would give area NRDs time to study the impact of regional water management plans already in effect. Republican Basin NRDs implemented the plans as required by the Water Policy Reform legislation, LB 962, passed in 2004. Last year, these conservation plans led area irrigators to use substantially less water than was originally allocated.

DNR Director Ann Bleed said, "I applaud the willingness of area NRDs and water users to be part of the solution on this issue. I'm hopeful we're headed toward a resolution that will have a meaningful and positive impact on water flows this year."

In addition to progress made by NRDs, the state and federal government have also provided funding to assist in the implementation of conservation programs, such as the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Irrigators enrolled in these programs voluntarily agree to enroll acres for 10 to 15 years.

Nebraska chose to devote a portion of its EQIP funding for a water conservation initiative in the Republican River Basin. In addition, the Platte/Republican CREP is the first in the nation to be used to address issues of water quantity instead of quality.

"Six years of sometimes severe drought has put strain on our producers, particularly those in the Republican River Basin," Gov. Heineman said. "While the current settlement recognizes the toll the drought has had by adjusting the amount of water allocated to Kansas in dry years, we are working to fulfill our obligations under the agreement. We look forward to a successful resolution of this immediate hurdle so we can continue making progress on challenges related to long-term and sustainable water management in this part of our state."

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Draft suggestion for a press release

Concerned about the impacts of the severe drought in the Republican River Basin Governor Heineman has initiated an extraordinary one-time lease of surface water to assist the state in its efforts to honor Nebraska's commitments under the Republican River Compact.

Heineman stated

"Although the Compact recognizes the impacts of drought and automatically adjusts the amount of water allocated to Kansas in dry years, the extent of the drought, in its sixth year in the Republican River Basin, has put a severe strain on the citizens of the Republican Basin.

The Republican Basin natural resources districts have already implemented integrated management plans to reduce their use of water in the basin. The state has also provided funds to assist in the implementation of federal CREP and EQIP programs. Irrigators in these programs voluntarily agree to stop irrigating their crops for a number of years. However, more must still be done."

In taking this action Governor Heineman said "When Nebraska signed the Compact in 1943, we made a commitment to comply with the requirements of the Compact. The Settlement of the lawsuit with Kansas in 2001 did not in anyway change our obligations under the Compact. As Nebraska's Governor, I will do what I must to keep our promise to fulfill our Compact obligations."

For this reason the Governor included funds in his budget to assist the Department of Natural Resources and the Natural Resources Districts in these efforts. He has also instructed the Department of Natural Resources to work with the Attorney General's Office to negotiate a lease for irrigation water for one year only from the Nebraska Bostwick Irrigation District, the Riverside Irrigation District and the Frenchman Valley Irrigation.

Under the terms of the agreements the State will provide a one-time payment to the irrigation districts to lease the use of their water supply during the 2006 irrigation season. This extraordinary action is intended to be a one-time action to provide time for the impacts of the Republican River natural resources districts management plans to be realized. The agreements cannot be finalized until the legislature and Governor actually appropriate the funds needed for the leases.

Expressing their desire to do their part to help the State comply with the Compact, the Riverside Irrigation District has already agreed to sign a memorandum of agreement, pending the availability of funding. On March 15, the Nebraska Bostwick Irrigation District will hold a meeting to decide whether to commit to the agreement.

In January letters to the Governor the natural resources districts again emphasized their commitment to do their part to help the State maintain compliance with the Compact and ensure that the Republican Basin ground water and surface water supplies are protected and preserved for the benefit of future generations. The Governor has asked the Department of Natural Resources to work closely with the natural Resources Districts to develop comprehensive long term plans to manage the water supplies in the basin.