

**By Russ Pankonin**

***The Imperial Republican***

Three natural resources district (NRD) managers lobbying state senators in Lincoln on compact compliance issues just isn't enough.

That's what Upper Republican NRD Manager Jasper Fanning told a crowd of more than 300 farmers and business people during an irrigation meeting in Holdrege last week.

Fanning said the political attitude they ran into was that Republican Basin irrigators were pumping too much water.

"You just need to shut them down, because we're not paying for this," Fanning said senators told him.

Fortunately, senators gave the basin their own funding solutions in 2007 under LB 701. However, the property tax funding in the bill has been declared unconstitutional.

The occupation tax in LB 701 is presently under the same challenge.

Fanning said the key to keeping the occupation tax intact is for the Legislature to open it up to other NRDs in the state.

The district court ruled the law represented closed-class legislation, since the funding was only available to NRDs in the Republican Basin.

With 20 senators facing re-election in 2010, Fanning said the political reality is that these senators don't want to say they passed a tax that could be imposed on their constituents.

Taxing isn't popular, Fanning said, but this is one that those being taxed don't mind paying.

He said some farmers have called him, asking if the basin could form its own water district and sidestep the Legislature all together to fund compliance efforts.

"Ultimately, we've got to lobby our Legislature and our governor, work with those folks through the legislative process," he said, "but it's got to be more than three NRD managers down there."

Fanning challenged farmers to get involved in the process through organizations they are members in.

He said there's a great need to convince people in other parts of the state how important the occupation tax is to this region.

**No Political Will to Help**

Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial didn't hold back when he talked about the situation.

He told the crowd if they want local control and control their own, it's going to take a lot of work from them.

Frankly, he said there's no political will in Lincoln "from the very top all the way down to most of the senators" to open up the occupation tax to other NRDs.

"It's going to take every farm group you belong to, to get organized and get a hold of the governor and get a hold of senators and make a difference," Christensen said.

Christensen said he doesn't like taxes anymore than the next guy, "but I don't want somebody else controlling my destiny."

While there's little support for the Republican Basin, he said that will could change when the Platte has to start fighting compliance issues on Platte River flows.

However, he fears the precedent of shutting off surface water and quick response wells will already be set, instead of funding tools that will work.

"If you want to take whatever the state's going to give you, or what the courts are going to give you, then we can do nothing," he warned.

Do nothing and expect the worst, he added. “That will be an economy killer.”

The time to stand up is right now, the senator said.

He urged people to call or e-mail every senator and get a hold of the governor and let them know that the basin needs local funding, state funding and local control decisions to avoid water-short years.

He said he’s been very vocal that he doesn’t want a shut-off plan. Instead, he wants tools to avoid getting into a water-short year while also staying in compliance with Kansas.

If no one gets involved, Christensen said, the basin will be at the mercy of the courts or at the mercy of a shut-off plan.

“We’ve got to get a plan that works.”