By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Irrigators in the Republican River Basin picked up some major support earlier this month when the Nebraska Farm Bureau took a position on compact compliance issues in the basin.

The state's largest farm organization went on record to say that irrigators who get shut down in water-short years should be compensated.

Delegates at the annual convention in Kearney Dec. 7-8 said "all water users should be treated equitably and that there needs to be compensation for both surface and groundwater users who are required to cut back on irrigation in dry years."

Natural resource districts (NRD) in the basin have been directed by the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources to adopt one of three options to keep Nebraska in compliance with Kansas in a water-short year.

DNR has told the NRDs they must choose one of the regulatory compliance options before the end of December.

The options included a permanent reduction in annual allocation, or the shut down of irrigation in one of two rapid response areas where irrigation depletes stream flows.

Fortunately, 2010 will not be a water-short year and DNR predicts it would be unlikely that 2011 will be a water-short year.

Jay Rempe, Farm Bureau's vice president of governmental relations, said members realize Nebraska needs a plan that makes certain the state will be in compliance with the Republican River Compact.

Delegates said all of Nebraska benefits from irrigated agriculture and "all of Nebraska should have a role in paying for the costs of water management programs."

The organization expressed strong support for finding funding sources to deal with water problems.

However, they don't believe corn and sorghum check-off dollars should be used for that purpose.

Rempe said delegates expressed their willingness to look at the sources available, such as the occupation tax, or in the Platte Basin, additional property taxes."

Nebraska Farm Bureau President Keith Olsen of Grant said the state needs to be involved in a solution.

"We can't destroy agriculture in the Republican Basin," he added.

Olsen said Farm Bureau doesn't have any magic solutions.

"There are going to be challenges ahead and we need to work to resolve them," he said last week.

He sees his organization as one that can bring the NRDs and the state together to work on joint solutions.

In the future, it’s likely the Platte, Elkhorn and Niobrara basins will be faced with similar situations being dealt with in the Republican Basin.

It’s important to do the right things, Olsen noted.

Two NRDs Act on DNR Options

Earlier this month, the Upper Republican NRD opted for the shut down of the least number of irrigated acres, known as option 3.

This would still idle 22,700 in the district. The broader plan would have idled 44,500 acres.

The URNRD board also asked the state for some type of funding mechanism to implement alternatives to shut downs.

Jasper Fanning, URNRD manager, said his board is looking for alternatives to prevent the shut downs from ever occurring.

Alternatives could include augmentation projects, leasing of surface water and targeted retirement of irrigated acres.

Still, there must be some type of funding to accomplish this, he said.

Whatever funding option that evolves, Fanning said, it must be defendable against a court challenge.

Last week, the Middle Republican NRD board, on a 6-5 vote, opted for the same option as the URNRD did.

This option would shut down 44,500 acres in the MRNRD.

Dan Smith, manager of the MRNRD, said their goal is to figure out a way that the shut down options will never be implemented. Funding is a key element as well.

He said they are also working on another option that would include rolling allocations, based upon the state's averages for compliance with Kansas. "This is a work-in-progess," he said.

The Lower Republican NRD did not act on the issue during their regular meeting this month but will hold a special meeting, Monday, Dec. 28 to readdress the issue.

Option 3 would shut down 45,800 in the LRNRD.