By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

With a pair of 3-3 votes, members of the Republican River Management Districts Association (RRMDA) opted not to take any position on LB 1057, which would create a task force to look at water issues in the Republican Basin.

Members of the group met in Imperial Monday for their quarterly meeting.

The association includes the four natural resources districts in the basin—Upper, Middle, Lower Republican and
Tri-Basin–and the three surface water irrigation districts–Frenchman Valley/Hitchcock & Red Willow (FV/H&RW) Frenchman-Cambridge, and Nebraska Bostwick.

Hearings on LB 1057 are scheduled for today (Thursday) and the first motion at Monday’s meeting called for the group to testify against the bill introduced by Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege.

Proponents of testifying against the bill said the a basin group already exists in the form of the RRMDA. They said the association represented interests in the basin and is the best group to address issues and solutions for the basin.

Those opposed to taking a position on the bill said RRMDA hasn’t taken up some of the issues that would be addressed by the task force, such as long-term sustainablilty of irrigation in the basin.

When the first vote to testify against the bill as a group was taken, the motion failed on 3-3.

The Upper and Middle Republican NRDs, along with the Tri-Basin NRD, voted in favor of testifying against the bill.

The Lower Republican NRD joined surface water districts Frenchman-Cambridge and Nebraska Bostwick, in voting against the measure.

The Frenchman Valley/H&RW district was not present to cast a vote, leaving the measure tied at 3-3. As a result, the motion died.

As the meeting came was about to come to a close, representatives of the Middle Republican NRD made a motion for the group to testify in a neutral position on the bill.

They noted the group must take the lead in educating state senators about the unique situations that exist in the Republican Basin.

They felt this could be accomplished by testifying in a neutral position.

Again, the vote went down on a 3-3 vote, with the various representatives casting their vote the same way they did on the first motion.

With a lack of a majority, this motion died as well and was not readdressed during the meeting.

Difference of views

The two votes personified the differences that exist between the surface water irrigation districts and the NRDs, as well as the differences that exist among the NRDs themselves.

Mike Clements, manager of the Lower Republican NRD, said they feel the task force could focus on some issues the association has been ineffective in addressing.

He said his district doesn’t believe the long-term sustainability of irrigation in the basin has been addressed by the group or the state.

He said focusing on compliance only provides a short-term solution while long-term planning for sustainability is key for the future.

“I’m disappointed the other three NRDS don’t feel the same way,’ he added.

Ever since compliance efforts began after the 2002 compact settlement with Kansas, the Upper and the Lower Republican NRDs haven’t been on the same page in terms of what needs to be done.

The latest difference emerged after the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources demanded the basin NRDs develop regulatory restrictions to insure compliance in water-short years.

DNR presented three options that included permanently reduced allocations or shutting down irrigators in rapid response areas (RRA) in water-short years.

Both the Upper and Middle Republican NRDs opted for a plan that would shut down the least number of irrigators in an RRA during water-short years.

However, each NRD predicated their plans be based on other management solutions and funding that could be implemented before shut-downs, which are considered last-resort efforts.

Clements said they don’t see regulation as a viable option. He said the Lower is entitled to 26 percent of Nebraska’s water supply in the Republican.

However, 44 percent of the RRA acres in the basin subject to shut down rest inside the Lower district.

He said all his district is asking for from DNR is that the percentage of acres subject to shut down not exceed the percentage of their water allocation.

They have presented their own plan to the Attorney General’s office for review two weeks ago.