By Russ Pankonin
The Imperial Republican

Officials can declare the first-ever permanent irrigated acreage retirement program in the Upper Republican Natural Resources District (URNRD) a success.

Officials with the URNRD and the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)wanted to get 1,000 acres enrolled in the program. Applications totalled more than 3,000 acres and they expect to retire 1,000 of those acres in this year's sign-up.

Gary Lee, NRCS district conservationist in the Imperial office, said they got applications to enroll about 3,000 acres in the program.

He said the applications received a rating that included how much stream flow depletion each tract had.

Irrigated tracts right along the mainstem of the Republican River in Dundy County represent areas with the highest stream flow depletion factor (SDF) in the URNRD.

These acres represent the most highly-targeted acres in the district due to their impact on stream flow.

Lee said it appears about 80-90 percent of the acres enrolled in this year' sign-up will come from this area, with SDFs running from 70-90 percent.

The higher the SDF, the higher the payment to the irrigator for permanently retiring the acres.

Nate Jenkins, an assistant manager at the NRD, said these retired wells with have significant short-term impact on stream flows as well as long-term impact.

Money for Retiring Acres

The URNRD was developing it's own retirement program when the NRCS got an Agriculture Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) grant to pair with NRD funds.

The board then committed $1.75 million to the retirement program, coupled with up to $1 million in federal funds from the Agriculture Water Enhancement Program (AWEP).

The NRD will use money collected from the occupation tax to fund their portion of the program.

The 2011 baseline per-acreprice for retirement is $2,500 per acre-foot of benefit or water savings. A multiplier that takes into account a $6 per bushel corn price boosted the per-acre bid to $2,701 per acre -foot of benefit.

URNRD manager Jasper Fanning said retiring the 1,000 acres would create a savings of 780 acre-feet of water that could be used towards compact compliance.

The ultimate goal would be to retire enough acres to generate about 5,000 acre-feet of cushion, he said.

That can be coupled with the district's augmentation project in southwest Dundy County which is expected to generate about 10,000 acre-feet towards compliance.

Lee said the AWEP grant will provide for an additional $3.48 million over the following four years. However that amount could change significantly depending on whether federal budget cuts get approved.