

**By Russ Pankonin**

*The Imperial Republican*

The Upper Republican Natural Resources District will offer an irrigation retirement program again this year.

Farmers and landowners will need to act quickly with a March 15 sign-up deadline.

This marks the third year the acreage retirement program has been offered. A total of 1,540 acres have been retired over the last two years. All but about 200 acres was enrolled in 2011.

The program, known as the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP), is a joint effort of the URNRD and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The URNRD provides a local match to federal funds provided for the program. Nate Jenkins, assistant URNRD manager, said. Available federal funds total more than \$840,000.

The URNRD board will discuss the amount of match at their March 5 regular meeting.

Jenkins said acres where irrigation has substantial impact on streamflow receive higher payments under the program.

Payments to those who have enrolled in the program the last two years have averaged approximately \$2,350 per acre. He said this is the highest average payment rate for retiring irrigated land in the region.

To qualify, land must have been irrigated at least two of the last five years and cannot currently be enrolled in CREP.

Irrigation on acres where groundwater modeling shows a high impact on streamflow over both a 2-year and 50-year period will be given the highest priority.

The extent of historical pumping will be a factor in the scoring process.

Enrollees in the program retain ownership of the land and can still farm it on a dryland basis.

The NRD holds a permanent easement on enrolled acres that prevents the ground from being irrigated in the future.

Eligible land can still be irrigated during the 2013 crop season, with payments beginning in 2014.

The NRCS portion of the payment is spread out over five years. The NRD portion of the payment can also be spread out over time, or paid in one lump sum.

The main intent of the program is to increase streamflows to help the district do its part to maintain compliance with the Republican River Compact.

Maintaining compliance with aid from the retirement program helps prevent severe and sudden irrigation reductions or shutdowns to maintain compact compliance, Jenkins said.

People interested in applying can contact the Imperial NRCS office at 308-882-4263, ext. 3 or the URNRD office at 308-882-5173 now to begin the application process.