

NORTH PLATTE NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT  
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**Water issues headline NARD Legislative Conference**

**By KAY GROTE**

**NPNRD**

LINCOLN -- From the Governor to individual district directors, water, and finding the funding to manage and restore it, was the leading topic at the annual gathering of Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts held last week in Lincoln.

During opening remarks Tuesday morning, Gov. Dave Heineman spoke of his commitment to the state's water issues.

"Water is and will continue to be the issue of the decade in this state," Heineman said, indicating \$3.2 million has been earmarked specifically for water-related issues this year.

Sen. Ed Schrock, chairman of the Natural Resources Committee, during the conference challenged the districts in the Platte River Basin, including the North Platte NRD, to counter a proposal by Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District to cut in half water use in the upper Platte River basin. Schrock called some of the requests in Central's proposal "ridiculous" to western Nebraska water users.

"Any plan should be done in a good faith attempt to protect the economic viability of the entire basin," Schrock said.

Schrock also supported efforts made by districts to limit new irrigation development.

“I’m an irrigator and the last thing I want to do is prohibit the livelihood of my fellow irrigators,” Schrock said. “But I’m of the mind that we have enough wells in the state.”

Schrock commended the districts, including North Platte NRD, who have utilized moratoriums and urged other districts to follow suit.

Heineman, while commending NRD managers and directors for their continuing efforts to manage the state’s groundwater, said more education about regional water issues east of Grand Island is still needed.

“They don’t understand yet,” Heineman said.

Heineman called for cooperation between irrigators and municipal and economic interests and for continued work to achieve long-term, common-sense solutions. He credited those participating in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), efforts by NRDs to establish groundwater banking agreements, stream bank vegetation removal programs and regulatory efforts including metering and drilling moratoriums.

Drought-stricken districts, including those in the Republican and North Platte River basins, were acknowledged by officials for their part in managing through water-shortened years. Attorney General Jon Bruning said the 15 to 30 percent lower usage than allocation volunteered by irrigators in the Republican Valley will be strong defense as the state continues to work out water settlement with the State of Kansas.

District delegates also took the opportunity during the two-day conference to meet with their respective senators to discuss water and other resource issues. North Platte NRD directors Jerry Dillman of Mitchell, Myron Lembke of Bridgeport, Arden Wohlers

of Scottsbluff and general manager Ron Cacek met directly with Senators Adrian Smith, Phil Erdman and LeRoy Loudon. Currently the North Platte NRD is working with the NRCS to provide establish EQIP ranking criteria for irrigators in the Pumpkin Creek Basin to permanently retire irrigated acres.

The program, targeted at taking out 2,500 acres the first year, would provide \$450 per acre for permanent retirement from irrigation. The plan, which has received a commitment of \$750,000 from the federal level, is contingent upon securing state funding to prolong the program beyond its initial year. The program would ultimately return flows to the North Platte River basin, a key component to a basin-wide integrated management plan.