

Republican River decision a win for Nebraska, reduces need for augmentation

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The recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the Republican River Compact Compliance issues has generated questions about how it will impact the Nebraska Cooperative Republican Platte Enhancement Project (NCORPE) augmentation project. The ruling will undoubtedly have a positive influence on the project, agriculture in the region, and water resources.

It is expected that significantly less water will have to be pumped from the project moving forward because the ruling essentially gives Nebraska an approximately 10,000 acre foot annual credit for compact compliance. This annual credit will provide additional assurance that NCORPE has enough capacity moving forward to prevent an irrigation shutdown on hundreds of thousands of acres in the Republican Basin. Additionally, it will help preserve even more water in our area for future generations to use.

Since the planning stages of the NCORPE project, it has always been the intent of the NRDs to pump the same amount, or less, water into Medicine Creek than what would have been pumped on the nearly 16,000 irrigated acres had the property not been retired from irrigation. More water may have been pumped in a given year when the project was needed to maintain compliance than what would have been pumped had the land remained an irrigated farm -- 2014 is an example. But the project won't be used every year. And over the long term, it was expected the reduced water use in years when the project wasn't used would more than offset the amount of water pumped in years when the project was operated.

The ruling is a "game changer" in that respect. Now, it is very possible that less water will be pumped during those single years than if the ground remained farmed. And the ruling could reduce the number of years when it is operated at all. Take last year as an example. With the credit, an agreement that gives Nebraska 100% credit for water pumped under NCORPE, and non-augmentation actions by the NRDs to generate more stream flow, NCORPE would have been required to generate roughly 8,000 acre feet of water last year. That is about half the amount of water that would have been used for irrigation in a typical year on the property and approximately 20% of the water that was pumped for compliance purposes in 2014 under the project. Assuming the 10,000 acre foot credit was in place but 100% credit for all water pumped was not, total water pumped under the project would have been roughly equivalent to the amount of water irrigated on the farm in a typical year.

What's the financial value of the 10,000 acre foot credit? The irrigation value of that amount of water is approximately \$20 million annually, much more than the one time, \$5.5 million penalty Nebraska will pay Kansas for noncompliance in 2005 and 2006. Kansas had sought \$80 million and an irrigation shutdown on 500,000 acres, which would have reduced assessed values in the Republican Basin by approximately \$1 billion.

Undoubtedly the recent U.S. Supreme court decision was a win for our state of Nebraska, our region and our agricultural community.

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