

Group offers practical water management plans

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Water-saving strategies implemented on a large scale across the state could have a huge impact on management and availability of water.

Increasing awareness among agriculture producers about how to save water and energy while irrigating is a key component of the Nebraska Water Balance Alliance, according to NEWBA director Lorre McKeone

McKeone and others spoke at a water summit on July 30 at the Monsanto Learning Center.

About 90 producers, vendors, power company officials, bankers and others attended the event.

McKeone said NEWBA promotes practical water-saving solutions that also safeguard the economy.

“We are so dependent on agriculture and also want sustainable water,” she said.

One potential way to save water is through variable rate irrigation (VRI) on center pivot irrigation systems.

Until recently, McKeone said the only option farmers had with pivots was to apply water to fields at a flat rate regardless of soil type.

“Some areas don’t get enough water and others get too much,” she explained, noting that VRI technology makes it possible to apply less water with better results by slowing down the pivot over lighter, drier soils and speeding it up over heavier soils that don’t require so much

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moisture.

Research shows that pivots which vary the amount of water applied to different areas has boosted yields by 10%, McKeone said.

NEWBA also hosts grower symposiums where producers share what water-saving measures have worked.

“That’s powerful because we want to facilitate practical innovations—not just pure research,” she said. “We’re trying to support projects on a grass roots level to see if technology and strategies are practical and can be adopted easily.”

One NEWBA Water for Generations project tests various technologies to provide “real time” data to help producers continuously track how much water is used by plants, how much moisture is in the ground and the amount of groundwater pumped instead of reviewing the data at the end of the growing season.

Satellite telemetry is used throughout the growing season to send data to a producer’s mobile device.

That’s helpful, McKeone said, in areas where water for irrigation is limited such as in the Republican River basin.

McKeone said NEWBA favors small and practical technology and grower behavior changes so they’re easier to implement and not too expensive.

“You can have all the technology in the world but is it practical?” she asked.

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To get the word out about practical water-saving solutions, the water summit showcased a variety of strategies including biogenetics, tillage methods, real-time data collection and grower behavior studies.

In 2013, NEWBA projects will continue with growers across the state.

One project involves 11 producers (including Joe Wahlgren of Gothenburg) from Holdrege to Mitchell. Another includes 16 growers from central and eastern Nebraska.

McKeone said these projects bring together many different partners and interests to better manage water such as crop consultants, representatives from power companies and natural resources districts and vendors.

All work together to come with good solutions for water scarcity, she said.

For more information about NEWBA, contact McKeone at 308-532-7246 or visit the website at www.nebraskawaterbalance.com.

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