

Bill would place groundwater allocation in hands of the state

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State Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege told the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District board of directors that he intends to introduce a bill that will address groundwater aquifer depletions in Nebraska.

In general, he said, the current manner of managing groundwater resources and the lack of oversight from the state means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to reach a consensus on how to address the issue.

Sen. Carlson said his bill would establish allocations for groundwater use based upon the amount of depletions that have occurred since predevelopment of groundwater supplies. He envisions that the Department of Natural Resources would ultimately be responsible for setting allocations through the integrated management planning process with individual natural resources districts.

“It is terribly important that we take steps to address depletions,” Sen. Carlson said. “We’ve heard estimates that agricultural production will need to double within the next 20 years in order to feed the world’s population and we’re going to have to do that with less water.

“I think that’s possible, but only if we have an adequate and available supply of water to allow increased production. It won’t be possible if we continue to deplete our aquifers.”

Sen. Carlson said he also intends to introduce a bill that statutorily defines correlative water rights.

In theory, he said, correlative rights mean that water users are supposed to share shortages of groundwater during dry years. In practice, he said, that is not happening.

“I see no reason why producers in the Lower Republican NRD get only three and half inches of water, and those in the Middle and Upper NRDs get higher allocations when more depletions are occurring upstream than downstream,” Sen. Carlson said. “That needs to be addressed.”

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