

# Questions raised about the validity of COHYST project

## Landowner tells Natural Resource District testing is 'politically motivated'

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A Gothenburg landowner and irrigator told members of the Central Platte Natural Resources District's Water Resource Committee Thursday that the Platte River Cooperative Hydrology Study (COHYST) now being conducted is flawed and politically motivated.

"Somebody is assuming that the use of groundwater is bad for the river," said Ron Klein of Berthoud, Colo. "Yet we heard Duane Woodward (Central Platte NRD's engineering hydrologist) state that there is no evidence that groundwater use is depleting river flows. Yet environmental interests and some of the surface water interests like Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District are claiming it is and they are part of the process. It is all about politics and it is not being driven by sound science and engineering."

Klein released a study, sponsored by Nebraskans First, in June showing his research that showed that groundwater irrigation is not diminishing Platte River flows and groundwater tables as some officials are claiming.

Klein presented his arguments against the COHYST project before the NRD's Water Resources Committee. Woodward was also at the meeting to answer Klein's questions.

COHYST is a cooperative effort to improve understanding of the hydrological and geological conditions in the Platte Basin in Nebraska upstream from Columbus.

The Central Platte NRD is a major financial contributor to the ongoing COHYST project, which has a goal to develop scientifically supportable hydrologic databases, analyses and computer modeling.

While Klein said he has gotten a better understanding about how the COHYST computer model is being calibrated, he is still convinced that project is ultimately flawed because there are biases built into it.

Klein, who said he isn't against the project but how it is being conducted, is recommending that the Central Platte NRD hire an independent outside entity to audit and run the COHYST project to make sure the study is sound from a scientific and engineering standpoint and that political considerations are void from the process of giving NRD members good information on which to base sound decisions involving future water policy.

"It is only as good as the number you use and it is only as good as the equations your model uses," Klein said. "If your equations are wrong, then your predictions are wrong."

He said the way the COHYST study is currently being developed will not give NRD board members good information.

"No, I don't, because of the way they (board members) are behaving on the moratorium and interactions I have had with some of the board members," Klein said. "Some people are quite unhappy with me about the fact that I'm raising questions. For some reason they consider me a bad person for asking reasonable questions. The board is too political. If there is no evidence that groundwater pumping is depleting the river, why are they considering a moratorium?"

He said a potential moratorium on new well drilling has huge economic and social implications for producers in the Central Platte NRD.

Members of the Central Platte NRD board will be deciding next month whether to implement a temporary moratorium on new well drilling in certain parts of the district.

The moratorium would allow NRD and state officials to look over the situation between groundwater and surface water to determine if a problem exists and how bad it may be. The reason the board is considering a temporary moratorium is because of ongoing negotiations on the Platte River Cooperative Agreement between Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming and the U.S. Department of the Interior. The Cooperative Agreement's main objective is to address endangered species issues affecting the Platte River.

In September, Roger Patterson, director of Nebraska Department of Natural Resources, urged the NRD to consider the temporary suspension of new well drilling.

"The NRDs are supposed to be independent from the state of Nebraska, yet they are responding to Roger Patterson coming in and asking them to do this," Klein said. "That violates the whole concept of the Natural Resources Districts because it is supposed to be an independent entity to deal with localized problems."

Duane Woodward, hydrologist for the Central Platte NRD, said COHYST is being developed as a tool for NRD board members to get a better understanding of the district's water resources so they can make informed decisions on water policy.

Woodward, who is working on the COHYST project, said it isn't politically motivated and doesn't have built-in biases.

"I don't see that because the people we have doing the work are from engineering firms, and the USGS (U.S. Geological Survey), who are non-biased kind of water scientists," he said. "So I don't see that that is there."

Woodward said there's no great body of evidence that groundwater pumping is

impacting stream flow in the NRD, but there is evidence that in some areas of the NRD groundwater pumping is influencing stream flow.

"You don't see it in some of the mainstream tributaries and some of that is because you can't sort it out because of the variations in the flow," he said. "Some of our local investigations show that there is quite a wide range of what groundwater inflow or outflow can be because there are losses in some major areas where we know surface water is going to feed groundwater."

Woodward said the Platte River from Odessa to Grand Island is a good example.

"Right now we have a 125-cubic-feet-per-second flow at Kearney on the Platte River," he said. "But it is not coming to Grand Island. It is going to fill the groundwater aquifer or feed those trees."

Natural vegetation along the river, especially trees, uses a large amount of water from the river.

Woodward said the value of the COHYST project is that it takes in all the different factors that influence Nebraska's water resource.

He said the ultimate decision on whether there will be a temporary moratorium on new well drilling is up to the NRD board.

"But if we are to the point where we have overstepped irrigation development, I would rather say let's stop and wait and don't make producers pay later if they are forced to take out any new wells they have drilled," Woodward said.

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