

Public hearings under way on well drilling suspension

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A series of public hearings on a proposed temporary suspension on the drilling of new wells within parts of the Central Platte Natural Resources district will begin today.

The first two meetings will take place today in Lexington and Kearney. The Lexington meeting will be held beginning at 1 p.m. at the 4-H Building at the Dawson County Fairgrounds. The Kearney meeting will take place at 6 p.m. at the Buffalo County Extension Service office.

The final two meetings will take place at 1 p.m. Thursday at Central City's City Hall building, and at the Central Platte NRD District office in Grand Island at 6 p.m.

Each of the four hearings will begin with a one-hour question-and-answer session in which Central Platte NRD officials will explain the proposed temporary suspension and field questions on the proposal. The second hour will be devoted to Central Platte NRD board members taking testimony from interested parties about the proposed temporary suspension.

At each of the hearings, Central Platte NRD officials will explain to the public the rules and regulations governing the suspension, and boundaries of areas proposed.

According to Ron Bishop, Central Platte NRD manager, testimony taken during the series of public hearings will be used by board members when determining whether to implement the temporary new well drilling suspension at their regular monthly meeting Nov. 20 in Grand Island.

For those who cannot attend any of the hearing dates, Bishop said they can submit written testimony to the board up until Nov. 19. Also, at the board's meeting on Nov. 20, they will take additional testimony before deciding whether to impose the suspension.

The proposed area for the temporary suspension of new well drilling will be a six- to eight-mile area along the entire length of the Platte River in the Central Platte NRD.

"That was the area that was identified some 15 or 20 years ago by U.S. Geological Survey as part of a Platte Basin study as the area that over a 40-year time period, groundwater would have a significant impact on Platte River flows," Bishop said.

He defined significant as being more than 25 percent of the groundwater pumped would show up as a depletion in the river.

Bishop said the board is encouraging the public to comment on the proposed suspension in helping them to make their final decision.

He said the Hall County and Buffalo County Farm Bureau boards have voted to support the proposed suspension.

A number of organizations, such as Nebraskans First and the Nebraska Well Drillers Association, have come out in opposition to the suspension.

Bishop said the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources has asked the Central Platte NRD board to consider the temporary suspension.

He said when the board voted 12 to 8 in September to consider the temporary suspension, the members took into consideration the proposed Platte River Cooperative Agreement between Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming and the U.S. Department of Interior and the possible consequences that that agreement could have on district irrigators.

"According to that plan there would be no new depletions of the Platte River from surface water or groundwater activities after July 1, 1997, some six years ago, and we certainly have put in a lot of new wells since then," Bishop said.

Another consideration is what is being proposed by the state's Water Policy Task Force in the fact that if the Central Platte NRD is overappropriated, making up that overappropriation falls back to existing users.

"The other consideration that has brought everything home is the drought that we are in," Bishop said. "That has really aggravated the groundwater situation, the surface water situation and it has aggravated the conflict between groundwater and surface water and has made everybody a bit edgy."

He said groundwater levels in the district have historically both risen and fallen over the years.

"But the board's concern is that we catch the point where we are in a balance before we get out of balance, and we just don't know where we are at, especially when you look at all the new wells that have gone in over the last 10 to 20 years," Bishop said. "We have added a lot of new wells and a lot of new irrigated land."

He said the proposed suspension is taking a time out from adding new wells, new lands and adding pressure to the balance of water supply and water use, while studies are made to determine what impact groundwater use is having on surface water supplies.

"It's not a question of politics over science. It is a question that we don't have all of the answers right now, so let's take a time out just in case we are there, we don't want to make the situation worse," Bishop said.

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