

Testimony runs against temporary well drilling suspension

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CENTRAL CITY -- Public testimony concerning a proposed temporary suspension of new well drilling within the Central Platte Natural Resources District during a hearing in Central City Thursday ran strongly against the proposal.

The Central City meeting, sponsored by the Central Platte NRD, was the third in a series of four meetings the NRD is holding throughout the district before its board of directors vote on the proposal at its Nov. 20 meeting in Grand Island.

Of that more than 20 people testifying about the proposal, three-quarters were in opposition. According to a Central Platte NRD board member attending the meeting, similar strong opposition to the proposal was expressed at meetings held earlier in the week in Lexington and Kearney. A fourth hearing was held in Grand Island at the NRD's headquarters in Grand Island Thursday night.

Among the concerns expressed by farmers at the hearing were:

The Central Platte NRD was moving ahead with the proposal before studies are completed that could definitely show that groundwater irrigation was depleting flows in the Platte River.

The NRD was bowing to political pressure from the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources to impose the temporary moratorium.

A general suspicion that once a temporary new well-drilling moratorium was imposed by the NRD, it would become permanent.

Ron Bishop, Central Platte NRD manager, told the crowd that the purpose of the series of meetings was to get public input about the proposal that board members can use in making its final decision whether to impose the suspension on Nov. 20.

The proposed area for the temporary suspension of new well drilling is an area six to eight miles wide along the entire length of the Platte River in the Central Platte NRD. It covers about 60 percent of the district. The proposed ban area now has 14,437 registered wells, including 10,650 for irrigation.

In September, the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources asked the Central Platte NRD to consider the temporary suspension.

When the board voted 12-8 in September to consider the proposal, one of the driving factors was the proposed Platte River Cooperative Agreement between Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado and the U.S. Department of Interior and possible consequences that agreement could have on district irrigators.

The proposed Platte River Cooperative Agreement is concerned about providing adequate water flows in the Platte River for endangered species and other wildlife.

Testifying at the hearing was Jim Cook, representing the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources.

He said that since 1997, 1,738 new wells have been added that irrigate around 200,000 acres in the Platte River basin upstream from Columbus. He said 60 percent of those new irrigation wells are in the Central Platte NRD where the proposed temporary suspension would occur.

"That means an additional depletion to the Platte River over the next several years," Cook said. "These depletions are affecting existing surface water users, and if we enter into a Platte River program, most of these depletions will need to be offset."

He said for new wells that have been drilled since 1997, the DNR estimates that the additional impact would be more than 2,200 acre feet per year within the next 15 years.

"It is envisioned that the state will assume the responsibility for this obligation, but however in these difficult economic times there is no assurance that the state would be able to provide the needed money," Cook said.

He said if the state cannot find the money, regulations would probably be needed to offset the depletions.

"That means that existing water users will have to give up some water to accommodate this new development," Cook said. "Any new wells or new users will only increase the burden."

He said the reason the DNR is urging the Central Platte NRD to adopt the temporary suspension of new well drilling is to provide time to come up with a new management plan that would keep down exposure to Central Platte NRD water users in the advent that regulations are needed.

In the Central Platte, there has been an informal moratorium on new surface-water allocations since 1993.

Cook said if the recommendations of the state's Water Policy Task Force are implemented, a stay on new well development would be required once the Department of Natural Resources declares the Platte River Basin fully appropriated pursuant to legislation adopted by the Nebraska Legislature.

He said that could occur in 2004.

"In taking action now, your board is being proactive," Cook said.

Testifying against the proposed temporary suspension was Dick Grosch, a Merrick County farmer and irrigator.

Grosch said the DNR is trying to create an emergency situation to "ram" the moratorium through.

"That state claims that groundwater users are causing the Platte River to run dry," he said. "But I say that that lack of rainfall and the lack of snowpack in the Rocky Mountains has caused this. Plus, the state has no factual evidence to back up their claims. The river has a history of going dry during dry years prior to any wells being drilled in the vicinity of the river."

Grosch also said that environmentalists are claiming that irrigators are causing a hardship on endangered species by drying up the river.

Grosch also questions the claim that the moratorium will only be implemented until conditions change.

"I say that once a moratorium is voted in, it will never be lifted," he said. "This quick attempt at a moratorium is one of the first steps to completely control groundwater by the environmentalists pushing their agenda through the state and the NRDs. If they accomplish this, they are putting birds and animals ahead of people and the economy of Nebraska."

Don Adams, executive director for Nebraskans First, a statewide irrigator's organization, said if a moratorium is implemented in the Central Platte NRD, "It would send a message to farmers that the growth of food production through irrigation is over."

"A moratorium would signal the beginning of dropping land values and eroding tax bases, which is the foundation for the funding of our schools, roads, hospitals and everything else when we talk about quality of life," he said. "A moratorium here would send a chilling signal to all irrigators that the endangered species act is more important in the eyes of our government officials than agriculture. It would confirm a shifting of priorities of water use away from agriculture to species needs as defined and directed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and their environmentalist allies."

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