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## Testimony taken on well drilling moratorium

*Central Platte NRD has hearings*

by Elizabeth Barrett  
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Several Gothenburg people attended the Central Platte Natural Resources District's public hearing Monday afternoon about a proposal to suspend the drilling of new wells in the area from Gothenburg to Columbus. Pictured in the foreground, l-r: are Roger Wahlgren, Joe Wahlgren, Jay Richeson and Joe Richeson all of Gothenburg. The hearing was in the 4-H Building in Lexington.

As moisture drizzled from a cold November sky, about 100 ag producers and others in ag-related businesses crowded the 4-H Building in Lexington to talk about the key to sustaining crops and grazing land.

That key element--water--is said to be depleting from both ground and surface water sources, according to Central Platte Natural Resources District (NRD) officials who want to suspend new well drilling for at least three years.

At Monday's meeting--the first of four public hearings across the Central Platte NRD district

this week--officials explained why the suspension was needed and answered questions.

A hearing followed where testimony was taken from two people who favor the suspension and from eight who oppose it.

The Central Platte NRD board--whose members represent an area along the Platte River from Gothenburg to Columbus--voted to propose the moratorium on the drilling of new wells in September.

By law, public hearings within the district must then take place.

Board members will meet and vote whether to implement the moratorium at their Nov. 20 meeting.

Ron Bishop, Central Platte NRD executive director, said officials feel the suspension is needed because of a perceived relationship between surface water (from irrigation canals and the Platte River and its tributaries) and the pumping of groundwater for irrigation and other things such as municipal water supplies.

Bishop said the suspension has been requested by the state Department of Natural Resources because surface water needs are not being met--a result that may stem from over-appropriation of water in the district west of Elm Creek.

He added that drought has added to the problem and that sizeable declines in groundwater are evident--as much as seven to 10 feet in some areas.

"This will give us and them time to do studies and see where we're at," he said, noting that the drilling of new water wells for irrigation, industry and cities would be affected by the suspension but not replacement wells.

During a presentation by the Central Platte NRD, Bishop pointed out that canal systems like the Thirty Mile, Cozad and Gothenburg have had trouble the past several years in providing enough water to customers because of low supplies.

Since July 1, 1997, he said 845 new wells have been drilled in the Central Platte NRD area and 63,630 acres of new irrigated land added.

He noted that water usage by cottonwood and willow trees along the Platte River is also being examined as they could also be taking more water than what one might imagine.

Bishop said that a Cooperative Hydrological Study is being done that looks at the hydrological and geological conditions in the Platte River Basin upstream from Columbus.

That study--which Bishop said probably won't be done for at least 10 more months--has been said to be driven by Nebraska's obligation under the Cooperative Agreement that addresses endangered species issues in the Platte River Basin.

Central Platte NRD, the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources and Nebraska Public Power District also plan to do a water study of the Buffalo and Dawson County canals.

Bishop said the moratorium is requested so water shortage problems don't worsen.

"It's better to have a plan," he said. "The economy of this area depends on irrigated agriculture so we need to protect it. We need the studies to see where we're at."

During the public hearing, Roger Patterson--Department of Natural Resources director--testified that the suspension is needed because water is overcommitted and depletions must be offset according to the Cooperative Agreement.

Because of that, Patterson said he didn't want to see existing users have to give up water because of additional users getting the resource from newly drilled wells.

Don Adams, executive director of Nebraska First, described the proposed suspension as "Draconian" and blamed the Cooperative Agreement as the driving force behind it.

If enacted, Adams said the measure would relinquish control of the Platte River to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is under the U.S. Department of Interior which, along with Nebraska, Wyoming and Colorado, entered into the Cooperative Agreement.



Ron Bishop

Several people who testified against the proposal echoed the same sentiment--that the proposal was politically motivated and that no suspension should be enacted until studies have been completed that show the drilling of new wells is lowering surface water supplies.

A handful of well drillers testified such as Wesley Liehs of Lexington who said the CPNRD board would relinquish local control to the state if they passed the suspension.

"Don't make your decision on a perceived problem and politics but on sound science," Liehs said.

Mike Allen, a farmer from Eyr, said a NRD staff hydrologist has stated that a key component in river flow is weather. Allen said that the hydrologist's data shows there aren't any trends that show significant declines from groundwater pumping.

Allen and several others said any ground and surface water depletions are drought related--a condition that is cyclical and will change.

Don Batie, a farmer from Lexington, said he supports the proposal in principle but is concerned that producers who switch from surface to groundwater for irrigation might not be able to drill wells and then could "be held hostage by the owners of canals" and be forced into dryland farming.

Another farmer from Lexington--Jim Lundgren--said groundwater tables do drop during drought.

"That's when we need to have access to water," Lundgren said.

He recommended that the board wait to act until members have answers from studies.

Joe Wahlgren, who farms 11 miles southeast of Gothenburg, attended the hearing along with several others from Gothenburg.

Wahlgren, who serves on the Twin Platte NRD board headquartered in North Platte, said Twin Platte board members are also looking at the suspension of new well drilling and will decide whether or not to propose it to constituents on Nov. 13.

He said he was encouraged by the testimony about an issue that shouldn't be taken lightly.

"I'd like to see sound science prove that we're moving in the right direction," Wahlgren said. "I do understand the reluctance of producers to sign on to take action when we've not completed hydrology studies that I feel are needed to determine the problem."

Central Platte NRD board members from Dawson County are Daryl Keiser of Gothenburg, Bill Vasey and Doug Gruber of Cozad, Kurt Kline of Lexington, Mary Heusman of Eddyville and Tom Brennan of Overton.