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Limits on water use possible for lower Platte basin
BY DAVID HENDEE

Omaha and a big chunk of Nebraska's Sand Hills may face tight restrictions for the first time on future water use.

The constraints could halt an Omahan's plan to build a pond on a suburban acreage, a developer's plan to build an ethanol plant on the edge of a Columbus cornfield or a rancher's plan to irrigate more alfalfa to feed cattle near Broken Bow.

The constraints won't affect current water uses for homes, industry, livestock, irrigation and recreation.

The potentially sweeping restrictions across a third of Nebraska's landscape loomed nearer after Monday's announcement by the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources that demand for water in the lower Platte River basin upstream from its confluence with the Missouri River is on the verge of outpacing supply.

In the agency's technical jargon, the basin is "fully appropriated." If that preliminary conclusion is upheld, it would fill in the last blank piece of the Platte map across Nebraska as either fully or over-appropriated. Fully appropriated means there is sufficient supply for current demand. Over-appropriated means the demand for water exceeds the supply.

Reaction was wide-ranging.

"I'm stunned," said Kirk Nelson, an assistant director of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. "Lower flows in the lower Platte have begun to adversely impact the habitats of terns, plovers, pallid sturgeon and other species."

John Hays, manager of the Lower Platte River Natural Resources District at Wahoo, said he was surprised that the designation came this year.

"We assume the department used the best science to reach its decision. That doesn't mean we like it," he said. "It's disappointing to our district as we sit here the last two

falls and winters and watch high water at North Bend flow through and past our district on the way to New Orleans."

Tom Wurtz, president of the Metropolitan Utilities District, which provides water to Omahans and others in the area, said the designation was expected and shouldn't have much impact on M.U.D.'s ability to provide water to customers. Municipal water providers are allowed to drill replacement wells.

The lower Platte basin includes a huge area of Nebraska from Omaha west to an edge of the Panhandle outside Hyannis. It covers the Loup and Elkhorn River basins and the cities of Lincoln, Fremont, Columbus, Norfolk.

The long planning process triggered by the designation will give more Nebraskans an opportunity to think about water and how they want to use and preserve it, said Brian Dunnigan, director of the State Natural Resources Department.

Nearly a year ago, the department determined that the lower Platte wasn't fully appropriated.

Dunnigan said a new computer model illustrated a worrisome long-term impact that irrigation wells in the Elkhorn and Loup watersheds will have on water flows in the lower Platte in decades to come. That would mean less water for irrigators and fish and wildlife habitat.

Dunnigan's designation temporarily bans new groundwater irrigation wells, halts new permits for diversions of river water for irrigation and stops farmers from expanding the number of irrigated acres in their operations. There are about 45,200 wells in the affected basin. Irrigation wells make up about 58 percent of the total. Public water supplies use 2.5 percent of the wells. Other wells include industrial, livestock and private wells.

Natural resources districts with significant area in the basin are the Lower Platte South, Lower Platte North, Upper Elkhorn, Lower Elkhorn, Upper Loup, Lower Loup and the Papio-Missouri River.

Public hearings on the designation will be held across the basin during the next three months. Sites and dates have not been determined.

If the preliminary designation is upheld, the entire Platte River system across Nebraska to Wyoming and Colorado would be designated as fully appropriated. The designation would require state and local natural resources districts to jointly develop a plan for managing the river and groundwater, including whether to allow new irrigation.

The temporary drilling moratoriums can be changed or lifted as necessary after a plan is developed to integrate management of underground water and water flowing in streams and rivers.

Ann Bleed of Lincoln, a former Department of Natural Resources director who now is a senior program manager for a Boulder, Colo., consulting firm, said the critical aspect of declaring a basin fully appropriated is developing a plan to determine how best to use available water.

"If you've got a checking account with \$10,000 to get you through the month, you probably don't worry too much about planning," she said. "But if you have only \$800 to last the month, you'll plan pretty carefully.

"This fully appropriated designation means we're not at the point of running out of water, but we're close to it."

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Demands on Platte River tipping out of balance, state says
BY DAVID HENDEE

The supply of water in eastern Nebraska's lower Platte River basin is on the verge of being outpaced by demand, the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources said Monday.

The department said the Platte basin, from the river's mouth at the Missouri River to the western Sand Hills, was preliminarily designated as "fully appropriated."

The designation bans new groundwater irrigation wells, halts new permits for diversions of river water for irrigation and stops farmers from expanding the number of irrigated acres in their operations.

The impacted area includes the Elkhorn and Loup river basins, and includes the cities of Omaha, Lincoln, Fremont, Norfolk, Columbus, Broken Bow and Hyannis.

The department said it plans to conduct public hearings on the designation during the next three months.

If the preliminary designation is upheld, the entire Platte River system across Nebraska to Wyoming and Colorado would be designated as fully appropriated. This designation would require state and local natural resources districts to jointly develop a plan for managing the river and groundwater, including whether to allow new irrigation.