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Water task force wants 5 more years  
BY DAVID HENDEE

KEARNEY, Neb. - Nebraska's Water Policy Task Force says the state's continued water challenges demand that the Legislature not disband the panel next year.

The task force endorsed proposed legislation Wednesday that would extend the panel's authorized existence five years to 2014.

The endorsement came despite a recommendation from the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources that the task force not continue its work.

"The department sees no need for the task force. We don't have the money to fund it," said Pam Andersen, the agency's attorney. Andersen sat in for Brian Dunnigan, department director, who didn't attend the meeting.

Andersen said Gov. Dave Heineman told water officials in Lincoln last week that the 49-member task force possibly could fit into the agency's budget priorities if it modified its mission and streamlined the number of members.

"But just to continue to have one (task force), he's not for that," Andersen said. "Leaving it just like it is, and the department providing funding and staff, we don't see any need to continue."

Andersen said the department is understaffed and faces layoffs as state officials balance the budget next year during a recession.

Supporters say that if the task force didn't exist, no state agency or other organization would be likely to fill the role.

The task force has been an umbrella organization that established consensus among rival water interests. Without it, supporters say, the coalition would splinter.

The Legislature created the task force in 2002 to examine conflicts between users of

underground water and water in rivers and streams and to identify solutions. It gave the state the 2004 law that integrated management of Nebraska's underground water and surface water for the first time.

The governor appoints task force members. They represent irrigators, power districts, natural resources districts, cities, agriculture, recreation, environmental groups, the Nebraska Natural Resources Department and the State Attorney General's Office. Twenty-nine of the 49 task force members attended Wednesday's meeting.

Some state senators have attempted to pull the plug on the task force in the years since it developed the integrated water management law passed in 2004. Critics wonder if the panel has outlived its role and usefulness

Task force members estimated that it would require \$100,000 during the next five years in direct costs to continue its work.

Tom Schwarz, a Bertrand irrigator and task force member, said he is never eager to pay more in taxes, "but if we want to protect this water resource, it'll take money."

Schwarz said task force members have expertise in water questions and provide an early forum in debating and refining issues before they land in the statehouse.

Don Kraus, general manager of Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District, said no one can seriously say that the state's water problems are solved. The proof, he said, was this week's announcement by the state that the lower Platte River basin -- covering a third of Nebraska -- was on the verge of running out of water to meet demand.

"So we need to deal with how to permit development under these conditions, yet protect existing (water) uses," Kraus said.

Jack Maddux, a Wauneta rancher, said the task force has played an important role in addressing Nebraska's water challenges.

"Look back at 2002 and all the animosity and disagreement we had at the beginning. Now we have some semblance of agreement, but it's been a long, slow, successful process," he said. "We need to keep going . . . until all the major issues are resolved."