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State backtracks: Platte water supply not 'fully appropriated'

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LINCOLN -- New restrictions on water use across a large swath of Nebraska from Omaha to the western Sand Hills are not on tap this year after all, state officials said Monday.

The surprise announcement by Gov. Dave Heineman and the state's water czar reversed a preliminary determination in December that could have led to sweeping restrictions on future water use across a third of Nebraska's landscape.

It marks the first time state officials have backtracked on an initial decision required each year on the status of water across Nebraska, both in streams and under ground.

Heineman said the reversal by Brian Dunnigan, director the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources, "demonstrates the system works."

"This decision was based on sound science," Heineman said.

Dunnigan said new information spotlighted errors in rainfall and other data used to calculate how much underground water farmers would pump to irrigate crops. The errors led to overestimating how much the pumping would hurt flows in the lower Platte River, he said.

In the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources' technical jargon, the lower Platte River basin was "fully appropriated." Now it's not.

The state agency's preliminary designation in late 2008 was met with widespread opposition during four public hearings in February and March.

A year ago, the department determined that the lower Platte wasn't fully appropriated. That decision changed late last year when state water officials said a new computer model illustrated a long-term negative impact that irrigation wells in the Elkhorn and

Loup watersheds would have on water flows in the lower Platte.

If the designation held, any additional water consumed in the basin would have to be offset by cutting use of basin water elsewhere.

Rural water users challenged the need to restrict their ability to pump groundwater. Metropolitan Omaha and Lincoln water managers wondered about the potential for future trouble in tapping water from wells in the Platte valley.

Results of a study commissioned by nine local natural resources districts challenged the state's findings in a report released at the final hearing in Fremont. An earlier report, compiled on behalf of center-pivot irrigation system manufacturers, said that not allowing farmers to convert nonirrigated cropland to irrigated would cause more than a combined \$1.4 billion in lost production and property taxes over two decades.

The water restrictions would have affected everyone from suburban Omahans building ponds on rural acreages to farmers irrigating crops.

They would have been similar to constraints already imposed in much drier western Nebraska in an attempt to restore stream flows and stop the decline of underground water supplies.

The preliminary designation for the lower Platte triggered a temporary ban on new groundwater irrigation wells and stopped farmers from expanding the number of irrigated acres in their operations.

There are about 42,500 wells in the basin. Irrigation wells make up about 58 percent of the total. Public water supplies use 2.5 percent of the wells. Other wells are for industrial, livestock and private uses.