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LOWER PLATTE BASIN

Water woes to continue

Eastern Nebraska irrigators, natural resources districts and water users may have dodged a poorly aimed bullet this week, but the state Department of Natural Resources can't stave off serious restrictions on new uses of Platte River water for long. That much is obvious, even to opponents of the DNR's designation of the lower Platte River basin as "fully appropriated." That term means all of the water in the stream has been claimed by someone — cities and towns, irrigators, industries and others — and anyone who wants water must get it from a current user. The agency reversed itself and rescinded the temporary designation this week.

John Miyoshi, executive director of the Lower Platte South NRD in Wahoo, said he and other water officials want to stave off restrictions for as long as possible; they plan to slow irrigation development to help accomplish that. Farmers use about 95 percent of the groundwater pumped in the state.

The resources department issued the preliminary ruling last year. The water statistics on which the state based its ruling were challenged by eight natural resources districts in the basin. Those NRDs had figures that contradicted the DNR statistics. The agency backed down, an unprecedented step. The DNR agreed that, indeed, some of its numbers were incorrect.

The margin is as thin as a razor blade, however. Given the pressures on the lower Platte, it's clear that this same problem will rise again, and we won't have long to wait. There is no escaping the fact that Nebraska's water resources must be carefully husbanded and fairly shared among all the people of the state for all legitimate uses.

Communities and irrigators are worried that the lack of new water could shut down investment; irrigators wouldn't be able to expand the number of acres they water and communities would find it difficult to drill new wells without buying water rights from existing users. Omahans are not as exposed, however; officials have said that the Metropolitan Utilities District's new Platte West water filtration plant has plenty of

capacity for growth in the foreseeable future.

But there is reason both for concern and for anticipatory action. Irrigators, businesses and towns that want to expand in the future should begin planning now for the inevitable time when the Platte will be fully appropriated.

It is coming, and it is coming fast.