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## **NEBRASKA IRRIGATION -- Water frontier reaches end**

News that a recent increase in irrigated acreage has lifted Nebraska to No. 1 in the nation merits a two-sided reaction.

The news is positive for farmers, whose crops benefit. But it's sobering when one considers whether Nebraska will be able to manage its long-term water usage in a sustainable fashion.

A recent edition of Cornhusker Economics, issued by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension Office, says that irrigation has been increasing in the state for several years. Meanwhile, it is declining in many major irrigation areas around the country.

Nebraska added 560,000 acres of irrigated land between 1997 and 2002 and 930,000 acres between 2002 and 2007. In all, the state now has more than 8.5 million acres under irrigation, and three-fourths of it is watered with efficient center-pivot irrigation systems.

Areas that have reduced irrigation in recent years include California, which used to be the top irrigator. A multi-year drought and heavy and increasing demand for water by the state's large cities have contributed to California's declining status.

The Cornhusker report sounds a sober note for Nebraska's future, noting that "the state has essentially reached its maximum (water) development limits."

The analysis continued, "Major portions . . . are already designated as either fully appropriated or overappropriated."

The report suggests that Nebraska's water legislation will mean significant limitations on further groundwater development. In short, it concludes, "there is no more development frontier."

How Nebraskans, their Legislature and their state government decide to manage water now and in the next few years will determine much of the state's future. Irrigated and dryland agriculture, continued development of ethanol plants, the ongoing health and

prosperity of communities large and small — all of these depend on the decisions being made and actions being taken now.

Much of the state's irrigation water comes from the Ogallala Aquifer, but the three main rivers and their tributaries contribute significant amounts, too.

The Republican, Platte and Niobrara Rivers have reaches that are either fully or overappropriated, and the situation shows no signs of improving any time soon. State laws approved in an effort to regulate surface and groundwater use are still fairly new and their effect is only beginning to be felt.

A report from the U.S. Geological Survey and the Nebraska Water Science Center notes that since 1980, water levels in several Great Plains states sitting on the aquifer, including parts of Texas and Kansas, had declined by more than 100 feet. The Ogallala Aquifer isn't limitless, either, although Nebraska sits over a particularly rich mound of water.

One of every six irrigated acres in the United States is in Nebraska. The problem to be solved: Maintain all of the advantages implied while allocating the state's water resources in a way that's fair and sustainable. That will require forward-looking political leadership and a serious-minded, cooperative spirit by the public.