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## NRD officials defend hold on new irrigation

by Greg Wees, Norfolk Daily News

It's a major decision affecting all water users in the Elkhorn River basin.

That's how Elden Wesely of Oakland, Neb., chairman of the Lower Elkhorn Natural Resources District, summed up the NRD's temporary hold on new irrigation.

The significance was apparent to the more than 320 people who packed a Norfolk meeting room last week to hear officials from the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources explain their preliminary decision to declare the lower Platte River basin, which takes in the Elkhorn River basin, as being on the verge of outpacing supply, or "fully appropriated."

That means that for now, no new irrigation wells, or expanded irrigation, will be allowed in areas where groundwater and surface water are hydrologically connected. Those areas are along Logan Creek, the Elkhorn River and in most of Madison and Pierce Counties.

In response to the state's announcement, the Lower Elkhorn NRD board last month extended the moratorium across the district, which covers all or part of 15 counties. The moratorium will be in effect for up to six months to protect groundwater supplies.

Rick Wozniak, the NRD's water resources manager, called the six months a cooling-off period to prevent a potential rush of well permit applications. It also will give the NRD board time to decide whether it will allow variances and exceptions to the moratorium, he said. A public hearing is planned.

Last year, well permits were issued in the district to 37 landowners inside the hydrologically connected boundary and to 86 landowners outside. But the new wells haven't been registered yet and can't be turned on until the board determines what its next step will be.

Brian Dunnigan, director of the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources, said the state sought to head off potential conflicts between surface water and groundwater

users.

State water management analyst Jesse Bradley said the decision was based on the best science available: the new Elkhorn Loup Model by the U.S. Geological Survey and data collected from river gauges at Louisville and North Bend and from wells monitored by the NRD.

People haven't seen significant depletion of the Elkhorn River so far, Bradley said. The model predicts a fairly significant impact that will rob junior permit holders of their ability to irrigate 25 years from now.

Area farmers at the meeting weren't convinced that a water shortage could be predicted so far into the future.

"You can make numbers say what you want to say," said Joe Schmit of Osmond. "Is it really the best science?"

Martin Batenhorst of Wisner said 32 years of NRD monitoring of his wells near the Elkhorn River hasn't shown changes in water levels.

"That's better science than river flow that will vary," Batenhorst said.

Jim Christensen, a well driller from Hartington, said some of his customers spent more than \$100,000 to develop irrigation last fall.

"They don't know if they can rent it as irrigated crop ground and are pretty concerned," he said. "Folks have a real problem if they aren't permitted to pump."