



News Release

(HOLDREGE, Neb.) -- After an April during which precipitation throughout much of the Platte River Basin was the rule rather than the exception, it was no surprise that a report at The Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District's board meeting Monday contained projections for plentiful amounts of water.

Civil engineer Cory Steinke's briefing to the board on the projected snowmelt runoff and inflows to Lake McConaughy this spring began with higher than normal snowpack accumulation in the mountains of Colorado and Wyoming and ended with a projection that the Platte Basin is likely to see "water coming in from everywhere."

Reports from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation showed current snowpack accumulation in the upper North Platte Basin is 115 percent of average; the lower basin is 165 percent; the Laramie River Basin (a tributary of the North Platte River) is 135 percent; and the South Platte River Basin is 116 percent.

Steinke said that current storage conditions in the Bureau's reservoirs on the North Platte River in Wyoming suggest that they will likely fill from snowmelt runoff and precipitation this spring. Releases have already started at Glendo Reservoir to make room for expected inflows from above the reservoir.

"The water is coming (into Nebraska)," he said. "At this point we're not sure how much or exactly when, but the combination of snowmelt and the recent precipitation in Wyoming suggest that it's likely to be well above average."

At the same time, flows in the South Platte River have already been increasing from a combination of snowmelt runoff and precipitation in Colorado. Steinke said flows at the South Platte's gauge at Roscoe, Neb., were in excess of 3,800 cubic feet per second (cfs), but are above 5,000 cfs further upstream in Colorado.

"Most of the water you see today in the central Platte River is coming from the South Platte," Steinke said. "We expect higher flows in that river to continue for some time."

Lake McConaughy's storage level was at elevation 3,256.9 feet (1.5 million acre-feet in volume; 86.4 percent of capacity) on Monday morning with inflows of about 3,400 cfs, which is about 225 percent of average for this time of year. The reservoir's normal maximum operating level is elevation 3,265.0 feet, but Central adheres to Federal Energy Regulatory Commission guidelines that tie maximum operating levels to calendar dates to reduce the risk posed by high winds and waves that are more likely to occur in the spring. The lake level limit gradually increases until May 21 when the reservoir can reach its maximum operating elevation of 3,265.0 feet.

Steinke added that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is planning to request releases in May from the Environmental Account (EA) at Lake McConaughy. The EA is a block of water set aside for use by the USFWS to benefit habitat for threatened and endangered species in the central Platte River. The EA currently contains about 135,000 acre-feet of water.

"It's likely that we won't see any shortage of flows in the Platte as we move into the summer months," he said.

Also at Monday's board meeting:

- Irrigation Division Manager Dave Ford gave the annual report on groundwater levels within the District. Data from Central's 135 observation wells was used to compare current conditions with groundwater levels last year, ten years ago, and average levels between 1981 and 1985.

Groundwater levels since last spring declined for 33 percent of the wells – mostly in the Phelps Canal area in Phelps and Kearney counties – while most of the remaining wells showed no change or slight increases.

Since 2006, the data is more mixed, Ford said, with increases in about half of the readings, primarily in the Elwood Reservoir area, and decreases measured at 45 percent of the wells scattered throughout the District's irrigated area.

The longer-term readings – since 1981-85 – show general increases in the Elwood Reservoir and E65 Canal areas, with declines of one to six feet more prevalent along the Phelps Canal system.

There are several variables that might explain the results, Ford said, including higher canal conveyance and on-farm efficiencies, including the significant increase in the use of center pivots supplied with water from Central's canals; lower diversions of water into the irrigated area that reflect the increased efficiencies; a number of years – particularly during the first decade of the 2000s during which irrigation customers received less than a full supply of water because of low storage volumes in Lake McConaughy; and weather and precipitation factors. The number of acres irrigated from the system has remained relatively stable over the measured time period.

- Negotiations are continuing on an amendment to a contract with the Governance Committee of the Platte River Recovery Implementation Project regarding Central's contributions of funds toward constructing the J-2 Regulating Reservoir.
- The directors approved expansion of several lots in the Sandy Point cabin area at Johnson Lake.
- The board approved an agreement with Pinnacle Business Consulting Service of Kearney for a project feasibility and economic impact study for the assessment of possible relocation or consolidation involving Central's irrigation and administrative facilities.
- Gothenburg Division Manager Kevin Boyd reported that the dredging operation planned to begin this week at Jeffrey Lake has been pushed back by a week because of inclement weather in Montana, the location of the company providing the dredge.
- The board approved a staff request to move the location of the July 22, 2016 committee-of-the-board meeting to the Lake McConaughy Visitors Center. The change in location was made to coincide with events scheduled to mark the 75th anniversary of the completion and dedication of Kingsley Dam.

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