



News Release

(HOLDREGE, Neb.) -- Groundwater levels within The Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District's irrigated area have shown widespread declines on the heels of two consecutive years of below-normal precipitation and high irrigation demand, according to data presented during Central's June board meeting.

Irrigation Division Manager Dave Ford presented maps that show groundwater levels from Central's network of more than 120 observation wells in Gosper, Phelps and Kearney counties. Since last spring, readings had declined in 87 percent of the wells, with 73 percent showing an average decline of 1.6 feet, while 14 percent showed an average decline of almost four feet.

"After two relatively dry years, I don't think anyone was surprised to see those kinds of readings," Ford said.

The observation wells showed similar results over the past 10 years, which included a series of very dry years, along with a couple years when precipitation was plentiful.

Since 2004, 41 percent of the wells showed an average decline of 1.4 feet; 20 percent declined by an average of 4.2 feet; and 12 percent showed declines of 7.6 feet.

Comparing present levels with the average groundwater levels for the years 1981 to '85, also showed declines in about 74 percent of the wells. Declines were more pronounced in the eastern part of Central's service area where 27 percent of the observation wells were down by an average of 7.1 feet and 11 percent had an average decline of 12.5 feet. The eastern part of Central's service area has also experienced a reduction in the number of irrigation service contracts over the years, Ford said.

In addition to the impacts of precipitation – or lack thereof – several other factors help explain the changes in groundwater levels, Ford said. Among those factors are more groundwater wells, conversions from gravity irrigation to pivots, reductions in diversions into the area for irrigation deliveries, and greater emphasis on irrigation efficiency.

Central has monitored groundwater levels for several decades and partners with the Tri-Basin Natural Resources District on efforts to sustain groundwater supplies in the area.

Also at Monday's meeting:

- The board approved a water service agreement, subject to legal review, with the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources and the Tri-Basin Natural Resources District to divert excess natural flow from the South Platte River into Elwood Reservoir over the next several weeks for groundwater recharge purposes as part of integrated management planning. The agreement provides for a volume of water not to exceed 10,000 acre-feet. Excess water is expected to be available over the next few weeks because of high snowmelt runoff and precipitation in Colorado's South Platte River Basin.
- Civil engineer Cory Steinke reported that Lake McConaughy continues to gain in elevation after apparently reaching its spring peak in early April. The reservoir's elevation as of Monday morning was 3240.5 feet. The reservoir had reached elevation 3239.1 feet a month ago and then began to decline until unexpectedly high inflows caused a rebound in lake levels.

Heavy snowfall and precipitation above Glendo Reservoir in Wyoming occurred after the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation had moved water from its upper North Platte River reservoirs in preparation for the irrigation season in the Nebraska Panhandle. The precipitation and runoff raised Glendo Reservoir's storage level into the flood pool, which prompted releases down the North Platte River.

Inflows have been above normal for the past two weeks and are expected to continue for a while longer, Steinke said. In addition, snowpack runoff and precipitation in Colorado's South Platte Basin are raising flows in the South Platte River in Nebraska, enabling Central to divert water from that river instead of making releases from Lake McConaughy.

As a result, Steinke said, Lake McConaughy could continue to rise for two or three more weeks, a welcome change from the last two years when the reservoir began to decline in early April (in 2013) and early May (in 2012).

- Steinke also reported that Central and its consultants have met recently with road departments from Gosper and Phelps counties and with a representative from the Nebraska State Historical Preservation Office regarding plans to construct regulating reservoirs south of the Platte River. Meetings are also scheduled this week with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to discuss wildlife habitat issues related to the planned reservoirs.
- Matt Williams of Gothenburg, a candidate for the District 36 seat in the Nebraska Legislature, attended the meeting and briefly spoke to the board members during the public input portion of the agenda.

Williams said his family has long been associated with irrigated agriculture in the Platte Valley (his grandfather, Harry L. Williams, was involved in the process to bring irrigation projects to the Platte Basin in the 1930s and was on the Platte Valley Public Power and Irrigation District's board of directors), and that sustainability of the area's water supplies would be one of his priorities in the Legislature.

"We need to find that level of sustainability, even given the competing interests for water, to ensure that we never find ourselves in a position of not having enough water to meet our needs," Williams said.

- The board approved a \$13,656 work order to purchase a solar-powered pump and livestock water tank to replace a windmill and tank at the Jeffrey Island wildlife habitat area that were destroyed during a recent wind storm.
- The directors approved a \$98,838 work order to replace an open lateral with a buried pipeline on the E65 Canal system north of Loomis.
- The board accepted bids for 24-inch PVC pipe from Kroy Industries, Inc., for \$33,497 and for 42-inch PVC pipe from Diamond Plastics Corp., for \$242,899. The pipe will be used during a project to replace a 1,300-foot-long steel flume on the Phelps Canal in Kearney County next fall.
- The board approved 21 water right transfer requests covering 758.7 acres served by the Phelps, E65, E67 canals and the Supply Canal.

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