

# Conversations Conferences



on Nebraska  
Environment  
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## Water Wars—Ten Years of Funding Will Not Be Enough

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It is not often that I have agreed with the *Lincoln Journal–Star* Editorial Board on issues of green, environmental protections, or sustainable development issues. However, their editorial, “Keep the faith with voters” (Tuesday, January 25, 2011) was spot-on. The Legislature and the Natural Resources Committee, through Senator Deb Fischer’s L.B.229 to reallocate \$7.0 million per year for 10 years from the Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund (NETF) and give it to the Platte River Recovery Program is an immoral, if not illegal abrogation of original voter intent for the use of lottery funds.

The Platte River, and all of the state’s rivers, watersheds and stream flows are clearly vital and endangered natural resources. The history of the use and allocation of NETF funds presents significant evidence of effective research and applied projects for the protection and conservation of these natural systems. However, the Board of Directors of the NETF has a state-wide responsibility to assess the overall and comprehensive environmental needs and to do the best they can, with limited resources, to balance the distribution of funds among regions, sub-ecosystems, and toward future assurances of the sustainability of all the natural resources—not just a single focused issue such as water.

Before gutting a unique and affective program for stimulating innovation and public commitment to the quality and sustainability of the whole human and specie environment of Nebraska, the Legislature should consider other alternatives for lessening the water wars with our neighbors and among consumers within the state, and for overcoming the failure of public policy and consumer behaviors:

- We can pray for an extended period of precipitation, as contrasted to the recent dry periods. But be careful what you wish for – we could end up with an “Australian magnitude of flooding”. Then, the government will still be vulnerable, but for the lack of flood controls for the protection of crops and properties.
- We can employ more technology to fix the down-stream deficiencies. We could drill multiple point-sources in the Ogallala aquifer and pipe water into the rivers to compensate for the over-appropriation of up-stream users. But, which Legislator and what Governor will have the political courage to accept responsibility for depleting the water table in Nebraska’s underground “gold”. One side advantage of this strategy might be that we could also have the Trans Canada pipeline since the water table would be too low to be in danger of an oil spill.
- We can expect our Legislature to craft better public policies to assure more equitable and conservation-based consumption of a limited and vital resource. More science-based understanding of the ecology of our river basins, watersheds and stream flows, and understanding of the interdependencies between ground-water and surface water is needed to under gird new

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public policies. (Isn't it ironic that one of the key sources of funding for such research and knowledge is the annual competitive grants program of the NETF?)

- The Legislature could put a “high penalty” tax on consumers, be they private or public, who over-consume water resources, i.e., agricultural users, community users, industrial users such as ethanol refineries, or any others who contribute to “over-appropriated water resources”. These funds could then be used to placate the “disadvantaged” consumers.
- The Legislature could resolve to “slow this rush to throw money” at a problem that has been at least two hundred years in the making, while establishing new resolve to take longer term and visionary approaches (perhaps multiple approaches) to a very complex, but absolutely vital natural resource issue. In this context we need to remember the “code of the West: whiskey if for drinkin’—water is for fightin’ over”.

More fight and less quick fixes are called for. Maybe the NETF Board should consider action similar to the University Board of Regents—sue the Legislature for the right to control the Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund?

Remember the inscription above the entrance to our Capitol, “*The Salvation of the State is Watchfulness in the Citizen.*” This conference, Conversations on Nebraska’s Essential Resources and Sustainability, most likely would not be funded by the Legislature, but it has been funded by the NETF and other watchful sponsors. Where else and when would YOU have the opportunity to engage in open and transparent considerations of such public and environmental benefits?