

KRC Policy Watch & Legislative Weekly E-Update

Briefings and Hearings Overview

by Paul Johnson

This legislative session marches on slowly. The conservative fervor of last session has lessened. The push to turn Kansas agriculture over to corporations has subsided. The rush to change the Kansas constitution to allow the Governor to select Supreme Court justices has cooled. There are a few committee hearings on guns, taxation, utility regulation and abortion that have had large crowds but many committees have had very light agendas.

There have also been informational hearings on the National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF) at Kansas State University, the Kansas Bioscience Authority and KanCare - (the privatization of Medicaid in Kansas). Three weeks have passed and there are roughly nine weeks left in the regular session before a spring break and one week of work in the veto session.

The Kansas Water Debate

The drum beat has begun to build a 360 mile canal or pipeline from the Missouri River in northeastern Kansas to southwestern Kansas. This project is called the Kansas Aqueduct Project and is being spearheaded by Groundwater Management District #3 in Garden City. A Kansas Aqueduct Coalition has now formed and is providing a one-page advocacy sheet coordinated by Chris Wilson - former undersecretary of the Kansas Department of Agriculture.

\$300,000 has been pledged to update a 1982 Kansas Water Transfer plan that was developed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Kansas Water Authority has begun evaluating the technical, legal, political, financial and other aspects of the feasibility of the 'Missouri River Aqueduct' project. A bill may come forward to authorize the state to act on a date certain to reserve for 10 years an annual quantity of 4 million acre feet of the high flows of the waters of Kansas in the Missouri River for the Kansas Aqueduct Project development.

The proposed plan as explained by GMD #3 manager Mark Rude can be viewed at <http://www.gmd3.org/pdf/2013LegislativeIntroToAqueduct.pdf>

The water flow estimate at White Cloud, Kansas on the Missouri River is 29.5 million acre feet annually. The water drawn from the Ogallala Aquifer in southwestern Kansas for irrigation is 2 million acre feet annually. Less than 9% of the water drawn from the Ogallala is rechargeable. 30% of the water in the Ogallala has been withdrawn in the last 60 years and 70% will be gone by year 2050 at present consumption rates. The 1982 study lifted the water towards the west with 16 pump stations and gravity flow between the stations. The cost of this project in 1982 was \$4.8 Billion with annual operating costs in the tens of millions dollars.

There are many concerns with this proposal. Will this new study be done in an unbiased, objective fashion without a preferred conclusion? Kansas has around 35,000 groundwater right permits with the majority of these permits over-appropriated for sustainable use. Should this water overuse be restricted? Will civil fines be increased for irrigators that exceed their water rights? Should such overused water rights be canceled?

Is growing feed grains on irrigated acres the best use of this precious water? Is it best for a healthier diet? 50% of the daily food plate should be fruits and vegetables but only 10% of Kansans meet that goal. Today's 'western diet' is one of sugar, salt and fats. 66% of all grains grown are used for animal feed. Kansas could grow 100% of our fruit and vegetable needs on just 77,000 acres. Kansas has 9 million acres in wheat, 5 million acres in corn, 4 million acres in soybeans and 2 million acres under irrigation.

Are there other alternatives to massive water transfers to supply a healthy economy in the western half of the state? What happens if shifts in precipitation patterns due to climate change alter Missouri River flows? Who will pay for this structure and its maintenance? Initial discussions include how municipalities and industrial use including energy generation, will benefit all along the route and thus will help pay for it. But is encouraging dependence on a far away source with shut-off valves all along the way the best solution to local and regional economies?

There must be a comprehensive debate on the value of water, the rights of future generations and the healthiest opportunities for Kansas' consumers. The Kansas Water Office and Kansas Water Authority are hosting stakeholder meetings across Kansas this Spring as part of the Governor's Vision for the Future of Water in Kansas. Read more at the KWO website [here](#). The aqueduct will likely be part of these dialogues. YOu can read the Frequently Asked Questions about the Vision for the Future of Water [here](#).