



PHOTO COURTESY OF RAWLINS COUNTY SQUARE DEAL

Exhibits filled the gymnasium at Rawlins County High School in Atwood April 3-5 for the Northwest Kansas League Art Show. Colby's Liz Erickson won best of show for her acrylic work. Results of Colby High students and category are as follows: Blue ribbon: Evan Mainus, boxes, watercolor and acrylic; sil-

ver, Jennifer Horinek, ceramic; Brandi Stupka, book box, collage; Brett Harter, ceramic bust; Lissa Mazanec, blue bowls; Lindsey Bugbee, watercolor building, acrylic/pencil; Caitlyn Henry, red ceramic; Cody Mead, green ceramic; Eric Ohlrogge, watercolor, mixed media; Grant Jennings, swimmer.

Lawmakers signal support for water plan

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — One day Dale Helms was an irrigator. The next day he was mostly a dry-land farmer dependent on what falls from the sky.

After planning and paying for irrigated crops as he has in the past, Helms' farming operation near the Republican River was turned upside down with the recent news that some of the water he planned to sprinkle on his crops instead would be purchased and sent down the river to Kansas.

"It just threw a wrench in things," Helms said.

Despite the hassle and a possible financial hit, the likely consequences of not taking a blow makes Helms favor a multimillion dollar measure before the Legislature. It will likely increase his taxes and force him toward more dryland farming.

State officials and others fear that without a plan to send Kansas the water it is owed, Nebraska could face financial penalties or have irrigation in the basin shut off by a judge, and Helms agrees.

"I'm just hoping we can keep this whole basin from being shut down," said Helms, of Holbrook. "If we don't step up to the plate and take care of this ... it's not going to do us any good after we're shut down."

The same sentiment was shared by many state senators who spent all day Tuesday debating a historic, tax-heavy measure described by some as pain that must be inflicted on taxpayers to avoid possible catastrophe in the irrigation-reliant river basin.

The bill did not get a first-round vote, but lawmakers signaled support for a central piece of the plan. It would allow natural resources districts in the basin to increase their property tax levies by 10 cents and impose a new \$10 per-acre fee on irrigated land. Coupled with millions from the state's general fund, the roughly \$16 million a year the new fees and taxes could generate would be used to buy and save the water Nebraska needs to send to Kansas to comply with the compact.

"We don't have a guarantee" the plan would put the state in compliance, said Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege, "but we have a nightmare if we think in terms of doing nothing."

While taxpayers statewide would have to pitch in \$3 million this year to lease water held in Harlan County Lake by the Bostwick Irrigation District, \$2.7 million for a water cash fund that could be used to help the basin, and \$2 million in state funding for removal of water-consuming vegetation along the river, residents of the basin would pay more than 70 percent of the total costs in the long term, Carlson said.

Natural resources districts would use dollars from the new taxes to pay off bonds that they would have new powers to issue should the bill pass. The bonds would finance the purchase of irrigation water to send to Kansas, augment the river with groundwater and slash water-sucking vegetation along the river, among other things.

The districts also could impose 180-day bans on digging new wells and the addition of new irrigated acres.

While there is support for the resource districts to try to pay their way into compliance with the 64-year-old state compact with Kansas and Colorado, some urban senators were concerned that city dwellers might bear too much of the burden, with no guarantee natural resource districts would impose the new fees and taxes.

Sen. Tom White of Omaha said he's concerned his constituents will definitely have to contribute money, while NRDs would be able to impose the taxes and fees but would not have to.

"We are being asked for sure, now, to put our money in," White said.

An amendment to the bill approved Tuesday also would guarantee that basin taxpayers wouldn't pay for compliance with the compact indefinitely. The amendment from Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial would prohibit resource districts from issuing bonds after 2022.

While urban senators expressed some reservations, several signaled overall support for the bill.

"All of us should pitch in to deal with the problem," said Sen. Bill Avery of Lincoln. "It's a statewide problem."

On the Net:
Nebraska Legislature: <http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov>

Sprawl, costs hurt California egg industry

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — Karen Courtemanche might be getting new neighbors, and she hears their stench is unbearable.

Courtemanche lives a mile and a half from the site of a proposed 900,000-chicken farm, but she and other residents aren't putting out any welcome mats.

"I'm sorry, we just don't want them here," said Courtemanche, who lives in Lathrop, a city of about 15,000 residents some 60 miles south of Sacramento.

As California's agricultural heartland becomes increasingly suburban, the state's egg production has fallen to its lowest level in 50 years. Residents like

Courtemanche — as well as developers of a nearby 11,000-home subdivision under construction — don't want the stench of egg farms near their homes.

The higher costs associated with consumer pressure for more humane, cage-free eggs is another factor, experts say.

"The state has grown and grown, and urban encroachment is something that significantly impacts any farmer," said Doug Kuney, a poultry expert with the University of California, Riverside. "As the farmer fights off development, development fights off animal agriculture and all that comes with it."

Fruit growers wait

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Frigid weekend weather caused frost that damaged crops across the Southeast, raising fears that peach, apple, blueberry, strawberry and wine grapes were harmed.

Cost estimates for the damage were expected later in the week, and Georgia's agriculture commissioner said he might ask for federal aid depending on how badly crops were affected.

"We know there is significant amount of damage through most of state, but it's too early to give what the final analysis will be," said Tommy Irvin, Georgia's agriculture chief.

In South Carolina, the nation's second-largest peach producing state after California, farmers prepared for the worst.

"I don't think there'll be a good peach out of South Carolina this year," said Raymond Cook, who grows 60 acres of peaches each season. "It's the worst I've ever seen."

South Carolina Agriculture Commissioner Hugh Weathers said he was trying to remain optimistic so retailers would not be alarmed. "By the middle of the week we'll know just how severe it is," he said.

In Blount County, Ala., about 30 miles north of Birmingham, farmer

James Witt said his fields of plums, peaches and pecans were completely lost. Crop damage in Chilton County ranged from 30 percent to 80 percent, depending on elevation, said Bobby Boozer, an area horticulturist.

In West Virginia, Alan Gibson's apple orchard had suffered early season weather damage from hail. After three days of freezing temperatures, he predicted a total loss on the 3,000 trees in his small, pick-your-own orchard in Harpers Ferry.

In Georgia, fruit has shriveled and leaves are turning black, said Frank Funderburk, an agricultural extension agent in Peach County, the heart of Georgia's peach-growing region.

"We're waiting to see how things turn out when we get some warm weather," Funderburk said.

South Carolina raised 100 million pounds of peaches last year but when temperatures dipped into the 20s in 1996, the state produced just 6.6 million pounds, according to Rhonda Brandt, director of the federal agriculture department in South Carolina.

Growers from West Virginia to North Carolina to Texas spent the weekend trying to save their crops as temperatures dipped into the 20s.

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