



Commentary

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If Yankton takes our water, what price will we pay?

By Berk Brown

Countless times a day, someone in Nebraska will walk into a local convenience store, plunk a dollar down on the counter and purchase a 500-milliliter bottle of drinking water. If you're looking for a cheaper alternative to the most abundant resource on the planet, take a leisurely drive up Highway 81 to the northern-most reaches of Cedar County.

It's there, just before you hit the Meridian Bridge to Yankton, S.D., that you will be able to get your hands on five million gallons of water for the same four quarters it takes most Nebraskans to get their hands on 16.9 fluid ounces of the stuff. Think it's too good to be true? It's not, if you're the City of Yankton.

Yankton agreed recently to spend more than \$100,000 to test wells - on land it owns in Nebraska - in an attempt to find a water source to produce five million gallons per day. That Nebraska water would then be pumped across the state line and serve the residents in South Dakota. And since Yankton paid roughly \$303 in property taxes in 2007 for the approximately 40 acres of land it owns in Cedar County, you can see how they are getting a much better deal on their water than you and I.

Yankton is serious about pursuing the plentiful amounts of water Nebraska has within the Lewis and Clark Natural Resource District. According to published reports, Yankton is on the cusp of investing upwards of \$13 million in the coming years to meet needed improvements to its water system. And, oh by the way, Yankton also has done legal research on the matter in apparent anticipation of resistance from the Cornhusker State.

This should be cause for concern among Nebraskans for several different reasons. First and foremost is the Lewis and Clark NRD's willingness to go along with Yankton's plan. At this point, Lewis and Clark has not taken an official

Summary

If Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman has called water the biggest long-term issue for Nebraska, then why are we about to stand by as Yankton, S.D., looks for ways to pump five million gallons of water a day out of our state?

Is letting this happen really in the best interest of all Nebraskans? Can we afford losing this much water?

No, we can't, and action is needed sooner rather than later.

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Some 25 years ago, it would have seemed foolish to think convenience stores could enjoy significant sales of 500 milliliter bottles of water for a dollar. A decade or two down the road, how foolish will we look for selling Yankton 5 million gallons for even less?

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To advance alternatives that foster limited government, personal responsibility and free enterprise for Nebraska.

How will time judge Lewis and Clark – and Nebraska – if the NRD starts to approach fully-appropriated levels while Yankton keeps piping five million gallons of water a day over to its side of the Meridian Bridge?

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stance on the matter and seems OK with Yankton's contention that the water it hopes to pump out of the state is actually under the influence of the river.

The simple question here is whether or not it is in the best interest of residents of the NRD and the state – now and in the future – to turn a blind eye to this.

Make no mistake, Lewis and Clark has plenty of water. There are no fears – at the moment – of the words “fully appropriated.” Of course, as we've learned in this state, drought, over-irrigation and fulfilling legal requirements can put a serious strain on water supply. How will time judge Lewis and Clark – and Nebraska – if the NRD starts to approach fully-appropriated levels while Yankton keeps piping five million gallons of water a day over to its side of the Meridian Bridge?

NRD's use local property taxes to fulfill the broad responsibilities of protecting our natural resources with the idea that local districts are best suited to respond to local needs. However, when it gets to the point where these local decisions could have negative ramifications on our entire state, you have to begin to wonder why we allow this to happen.

It is time for decisions to be made with an eye on the future instead of just the present. While letting Yankton take five million gallons of water a day may not seem like a big deal now, can the same be said in the decades that follow? Once Yankton starts pumping water out of the Nebraska wells, it isn't going to be easy to ask them to stop.

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