

Iowa Farmer Today

Counties collaborate for water supply

Print Page

By Mindy Ward, Missouri Farmer Today

MARYVILLE --- Northwest Missouri has seen a dramatic drop in its water table over the years, prompting community leaders to find a solution that ensures water quantity and quality.

About two years ago, county government representatives started visiting Tye Parsons, expressing fear there might not be enough water for their rural constituents.

"We discovered it is a relatively widespread issue," says Parsons, director of the Northwest Missouri Regional Council of Governments.

"Some of the towns up here are 'touch and go' as far as will they have enough actual raw water" to provide their communities and users with.

Bob Stiens, an associate commissioner for Nodaway County, says having an abundant water supply is crucial for his area.

Livestock and row-crop farmers experienced firsthand the struggle to find an adequate source of water for their operations.

His operation sits amid the rolling hills atop a glacial drift. According to the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, this area has no high-yield, potable bedrock aquifers available.

Not only is finding an adequate water source difficult, but drilling to reach it is also cumbersome. So, many rural residents resort to hauling water. From 1975 to 1988, Stiens trucked water to his hog and cattle operation.

But, after 13 years, he went in search of water. He found it in the Platte River bottoms and dug a well. However, that well only serves the farm's water needs. For his home, Stiens tapped into a rural water system.

Unfortunately, everyone does not live in an area with that option.



MFT photo by Jeff DeYoung Bob Stiens, left, and Tye Parsons stand along the bank of Mazingo Lake east of Maryville. The lake is one of eight hubs in a new regional water system that will provide for residents in Northwest Missouri.

"I felt that I wanted all rural residents to have rural water available to them," Stiens says.

Nodaway County joined 11 other area counties to establish the Northwest Missouri Water Partnership. The goal of the partnership is to connect all water producers in the region via transmission lines.

Currently, there are 84 water producers, people who sell water, in the region.

Forty of those produce their own, whether from groundwater or surface water. The remaining buy water and resell it.

The partnership identified seven major water-producing hubs which consist of established lakes or areas that can hold vast amounts of water.

However, the first phase calls for the construction of an eighth hub in Atchinson County in the Missouri River bottoms.

The hubs are spread out geographically throughout the 12-county area. Parsons says multiple locations help reduce transportation costs for customers.

Once the multi-phase, multi-year project is complete, residents and the 84 current water systems will be able to tap into a line and pay for water. The first phase could take up to five years to complete.

Parsons still sees a little reluctance on the part of rural residents. He spends his time explaining that being able to turn on a faucet and always have clean water is worth the additional cost.

"Folks get pretty upset when their water bill gets up to \$30 or \$40 a month," he says. "That is the harsh reality.

"Small towns that enjoyed the very low water rates are going to have to increase the rates in order to connect to the wholesale water network."

However, Parsons is finding many residents warming up to the idea because they don't like the alternative.

"The EPA and DNR both have increasingly stringent requirements on drinking water, and it is becoming harder and harder as a small system to be able to afford the processes necessary to meet these new regulations," he says.

Economics make it difficult for small communities to meet these requirements on their own.

Parsons estimates it takes more than \$1 million to build a water plant that could service up to 600 people.

"At that, to pay back a bond, no one would be able to pay it," he says. "It would have people paying an \$80-90 water bill."

Stiens doesn't mind paying for water. He says being able to have instant access to good, clean water is definitely worth the price.

"This project allows our area to ensure enough water for the future. It brings us high-quality water as well."

Copyright © 2008 Iowa Farmer Today