Wildlife, Sportsmen May Benefit From Water Funding Task Force

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By STEVE DONOVAN / Ducks Unlimited

The inaugural meeting of the Water Funding Task Force was held Friday in Lincoln. Passed by the Nebraska Legislature this spring, LB517 created the task force and gave it the monumental assignment of developing long-range water policies and plans for all of Nebraska.

The bill and the work of the task force offer exciting opportunities for fish and wildlife resources, and the many thousands of Nebraskans who enjoy hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities.

While a major focus of the work will be developing sustainable water policies that protect Nebraska’s agriculture-based economy, the end products also should provide outstanding benefits to fish and wildlife populations, and the significant impact on our economy derived from hunting, fishing, boating, tubing, bird watching and other outdoor activities.

Sen. Tom Carlson, chairman of the Legislature’s Natural Resources Committee, deserves a lot of credit for developing and introducing this legislation. Carlson is concerned that without proper planning and development of important water projects, we might face a more severe shortage of water than Nebraskans faced during the drought of 2012.

“We can’t put ourselves in a position where we’re water bankrupt,” he told a group gathered at a recent meeting.

Water has huge effects on Nebraska’s economy.

“If we don’t have water sustainability, we will have no economic sustainability,” Carlson said in his introductory remarks during a legislative hearing on the subject.

Carlson is fond of pointing out that Nebraska is a huge water exporter. Much more water leaves the state to the east and south than enters the state from the west and north. This fact has been exacerbated over the years by a number of factors, including wetland drainage. Carlson and many other supporters of water projects think we need to figure out new and creative ways to retain more water in Nebraska to provide benefits to agriculture, recreational interests, hunters, municipalities, power companies and other water user groups.

The potential benefits to wildlife habitat are not lost on Andy Bishop, coordinator of the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, a group of organizations and private landowners dedicated to preserving and enhancing important wetland habitats in Nebraska’s Rainwater Basin.
According to Bishop, ample opportunities exist to restore wetland habitats that keep water in the state, benefiting wildlife and recharging groundwater used by nearby farmers to irrigate vast fields of corn and soybeans. Bishop points to the Nelson Waterfowl Production Area in Hamilton County as an example. This 200-acre wetland does not naturally have an outlet. However, early settlers in the area dug a tunnel through a nearby hill to connect the basin to a small stream that flows into the West Fork of the Big Blue River and ultimately drains out of Nebraska.

“If we simply plug that one drain tile, we can stop the export of this water, provide 200 acres of wildlife habitat and retain approximately 200 to 300 acre-feet of water in Nebraska that is currently draining out of the state,” Bishop said.

Much of the retained water will seep into the water table and benefit local farmers, who watched the water table drop precipitously during last year’s severe drought that kept center pivot irrigation systems running constantly. According to Bishop, that one project could be replicated dozens or even hundreds of times throughout the state, providing huge benefits to wildlife, outdoor enthusiasts, farmers and others whose livelihoods or passions depend on water.

Carlson and the rest of the members of the new task force face a Dec. 31 deadline to report back to the Legislature their recommendations for a strategic plan to prioritize future water-related projects and activities, including recommendations for how to fund the future projects. The task is daunting, but the potential rewards are worth the hard work that lies ahead. Hunters, fishermen and other outdoor enthusiasts have a lot to potentially gain from this work.

Scott Smathers, executive director of the Nebraska Sportsmen’s Foundation, was one of the members of the task force appointed by Gov. Dave Heineman.

“I am thrilled to be appointed by the governor to this task force,” Smathers said. “We have a tremendous opportunity to create water policy that will benefit fish and wildlife habitat for generations to come.”