

Compromise is reached on water funds

By JOE DUGGAN

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LINCOLN — Nebraska lawmakers reached a compromise Tuesday on a bill that would make major investments in rural and metro water projects.

Working out differences that threatened to derail months of work by a statewide task force, the Legislature gave second-round approval to a bill that would distribute \$11 million annually from the general fund for water sustainability. The bill would more than triple what the state spends on water projects.

“This is landmark legislation,” said State Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege, the main sponsor.

Legislative Bill 1098 would establish a scoring system that awards grants to protect drinking water and conserve water supplies for livestock, irrigation, industrial uses, wildlife habitat and recreation. It would likely help fund water research as well as reservoirs, flood control projects and water delivery projects.

Although the fund seeks to

sustain agriculture, the state's largest industry, it also would benefit two major projects in Omaha.

The bill would earmark about \$1 million annually for the multibillion-dollar upgrade of the sewer system in Omaha, a provision encouraged by Omaha Sen. Heath Mello. Sen. Jim Smith of Papillion included partial funding for rehabilitation of the flood-control levee that protects Offutt Air Force Base.

Omaha Sen. Beau McCoy, however, expressed reservations about including money for the Omaha sewer project. He questioned why statewide taxpayers should help bear the cost of a project that a succession of Omaha mayors failed to address.

McCoy, a Republican candidate for governor, said he shared the same objections about the sewer project raised by Gov. Dave Heineman.

Mello countered by saying that the sewer project is the largest water quality and public works project in Nebraska, and therefore it qualifies as a project

of statewide significance.

The bill also included concessions sought by Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha, who wanted to tie funding to more stringent regulation of groundwater pumping by irrigators. The compromise legislation would require basin-wide water use planning by three Natural Resources Districts on the Republican River.

Lathrop said the intent is to move the state toward balancing water use with supply, so Nebraska does not experience the severe groundwater depletions seen in other Great Plains states.

Dean Edson, director of the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts, said NRD managers can live with the compromise bill as a starting point.

The bill also would create an expanded Natural Resources Commission to review applications and dole out funds. The commission would include 27 members — about half elected, the rest appointed by the governor — representing all water interests in the state.