

Testimony on House Bill 1020
House Appropriations – Education and Environment Division
Loren DeWitz, Chairman, North Dakota Irrigation Association
9:15 a.m., January 11, 2020

Mr. Chairman and members of the House Appropriations Committee, my name is Loren DeWitz. I serve as Chairman of the North Dakota Irrigation Association. The Association is made up of irrigators, irrigation equipment dealers, businesses and other interests who support irrigation and irrigation development.

North Dakota has approximately 300,000 acres of irrigation used in the production of a variety of crops including corn and cereal grain crops, livestock forage, and high value crops such as potatoes, sugar beets, and onions. The French fry plants at Grand Forks and Jamestown rely almost exclusively on irrigated production for their raw potatoes. The sugar beets raised in the western part of the state are also irrigated. Agriculture Statistics data show that on a state-wide basis, three to four dryland acres are needed to equal the gross returns from one irrigated acre.

Corn is the number one irrigated crop, with over one third of the irrigated acres planted to corn each year. Over 50% of our corn production goes into livestock, adding value to the livestock produced in North Dakota. Irrigated production also adds stability to our livestock industry by producing consistent yields even in dry years. A substantial part of the corn production goes to the ethanol plants at Casselton, Hankinson, Richardton, Spiritwood, and Underwood. The ethanol industry is a significant part of the state's economy and provides important jobs to the communities. Distiller grain, a byproduct of the plants, is a desirable feed supplement for the livestock industry.

Recent data shows 58,000 acres of irrigated soybeans in ND. The high value crops produced under irrigation include 25,700 acres of potatoes, 10,600 acres of sugar beets and 1,100 acres of onions.

Irrigation provides the opportunity to grow the higher value crops where top yields and exceptional quality are necessary. High quality, coupled with high yielding potatoes, has made the French fry industry successful in the state. The acreage of onions in the state is smaller than the other crops but this crop may have an important role in the future as markets are developed. Other fruit and vegetable crops can be produced and processed in the state and the development of the markets for these crops is needed. Irrigation does and can diversify and strengthen the agricultural economy of the state.

North Dakota has a substantial potential of increasing irrigation. Approximately 300,000 additional acres in the Missouri River corridor has the water and soils suitable for irrigation. The Missouri River would be the water source for much of the land. In other parts of the state an additional 200,000 acres have the soils that are irrigable and the water for successful irrigation.

The North Dakota State Water Commission (SWC) was created in 1937 to help develop irrigation. The SWC was authorized to provide financial assistance to irrigation districts to construct infrastructure for the conveyance of water to the land. It continues to support irrigation development being done by public entities like the Garrison Diversion Conservancy District and Irrigation Districts as well as support to individual irrigators. Besides expansion across the state, additional irrigation is being developed using water from the McClusky Canal as authorized by the Dakota Water Resources Act. This Act authorizes 51,700 acres for development being led by the Garrison Diversion Conservancy District. We appreciate the state's support of this, and other irrigation projects.

A new development in recent years is the ability to identify, and more accurately define, aquifers with airborne electromagnetic imagery. This will help both the Water Commission and the irrigators in developing sustainable irrigation.

Over the years, the SWC and the State Engineer have done an excellent job of defining and regulating our water resources. The North Dakota approach is to utilize our resources to the fullest, but not allow depletion, like we have seen in some other areas of the country. We are now seeing some areas where there is substantial irrigation development that is approaching the limit of what can be developed with depletion. The Division of Appropriation has had to make some difficult decisions, and have held some permits in abeyance until they gather more data from that area.

We ask your support of HB 1020 to help provide funding to expand and strengthen irrigation in North Dakota. The Irrigation Association supports targeting at least \$1 million, but anticipates that up to \$5 million could be reserved during the biennium to help develop North Dakota's irrigation potential.