

ELM CREEK RESERVOIR RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

This is being written in response to the many questions and misconceptions that have arisen about the proposed Elm Creek Flood Control Project and especially the Elm Creek Reservoir northwest of the town of Elm Creek that is part of that proposal.

Question #1 – Why propose this option that includes a large reservoir, instead of one of the other three options that just involve bridge or channel work?

Answer – Only the reservoir option has the protection against a 100-year flood and the cost-benefit ratio required to qualify for state or federal assistance.

The reservoir is proposed to be multi-purpose:

1. Flood Control – It will provide 100-year flood protection for areas downstream including the town of Elm Creek.
2. Flow Augmentation to Platte River – It will allow Platte flows to be re-regulated, so the reservoir could be filled when flows in the Platte were higher than needed and then released back to the river when flows were lower than needed.

Some of this “augmentation” could be used in place of regulating irrigators to reduce their irrigated acres by five-percent, ten-percent, or fifteen-percent or whatever might be required in order to get the area from Elm Creek, west, back to a “fully appropriated” status instead of the current “over appropriated” status.

3. Recreation – Recreation was added for two reasons. First, to enhance the benefit/cost ratio and second, to provide the residents of the area, particularly Buffalo County, with needed water based recreational opportunities for boating, fishing, water skiing, etc.

There is a misconception that the Board of Directors has made a decision that only non-wake boating would be allowed; this is not true. The Board has not and will not even be discussing the matter until after they decide whether or not to proceed.

Question #2 – Will the reservoir hold water or will there be seepage problems?

Answer – The reservoir area is underlain with a clay lens that will minimize seepage. There were earlier erroneous reports that “seepage was going to be bad”, “the land from the dam to Hwy 30 would have to be put into wetlands” and “seepage problems would be the worst in Elm Creek”.

The studies indicate that reservoir seepage could raise water tables up to a foot or so under the town of Elm Creek where water table depth currently averages twelve to fourteen feet. Flooding in town, on the other hand, can not only cause water problems in basements, but can also cause water tables to temporarily rise several feet beneath the flooded area causing basements to fill with groundwater.

Even though the proposed project would all but eliminate flooding and high water table problems in basements in Elm Creek, the proposal calls for the installation of several wells on the northwest side of town with a capacity of 200-400 gallons per minute to be assured that groundwater could be held well below basement level.

As for the report that “seepage would be bad” and “the land from the dam to Hwy 30 would have to be put into wetlands”, that is the area that enough seepage could occur to cause a problem unless steps are taken to prevent it. This area south of the dam and north of Hwy 30 is the area that had high water table problems when the Elm Creek Canal was operating, and even now has a water table as little as two-feet below land surface and can have problems during wet periods. The project proposes to install several 200-400 gallons per minute wells in this area to maintain the water level at or below present levels.

Question #3 – Deals with the NRD board members and whether they care about what people want or think?

Answer – It was reported in an earlier article that one of the project proponents claimed that committee chairman Dick Mercer has stated that he didn't care what the people think or want. That's far from the truth. Since we tape all of our board meetings I was able to go back and listen to Dick's remarks and what he actually said was, "The Western Projects Committee had another report from Olsson and Associates on the progress of the Elm Creek Watershed Study."

"It's the opinion of the Western Projects Committee that we take no further action on this matter until Olsson Associates have come up with some definitive answers."

"There were two people here that were residents from the Elm Creek area. They had some questions which are going to be worked on to come up with the answers and when we get a more definitive report and answers to questions then we'll work on scheduling a public forum in the Elm Creek area to get the information out to everybody. And that's where we are at today."

Dick Mercer and all the rest of the board of directors are listening to all the people, those who sign petitions in support, and those who signed in opposition; those that speak out in opposition at meetings and those who contact them in support. The final decision has not been made and won't be made until the board members feel they have enough information on all the most relevant pros and cons of the project, and there are both pros and cons.

On the negative side, we have several landowners who will lose their land and three would even lose their homes, and then there is the cost. This would be one of the most expensive projects ever undertaken by the NRD.

On the positive side, there is the 100-year flood protection for the Elm Creek area, the recreation and fishing opportunities, and perhaps the least understood benefit, the ability to provide a part of the offset water back to the river that is required because the area above Elm Creek has been declared "over-appropriated", saving us from shutting off a larger percentage of everyone's irrigated acres through regulations.

The board members will weigh all of these as well as other pros and cons carefully and when they feel they have enough information to make an informed decision, they will each weigh both sides and cast their vote either in favor of or in opposition to the project.