In June of 2009, an extremely lucrative contract was quietly signed between the Cure Land Co. LLC and the Republican River Water Conservation District (RRWCD). It was then delivered to the Yuma County recorder's office in Wray without fanfare or much public notice.

Only recently has this document surfaced for further public review. And it should prove beyond a doubt what a growing number of people in northeastern Colorado have been saying for years: The RRWCD is broken beyond repair.

The greatest natural resource of northeastern Colorado is the Ogallala Aquifer. Comparable in size to Lake Erie, this vast underground water reserve supports hundreds of communities and businesses, all anchored by a booming agricultural industry. This finite resource must be protected and conserved rather than sold, rented or given away without a fight.

Apparently that message has been lost on the RRWCD, which has steadily amassed a debt fast approaching $100 million while continuing to make questionable decisions on taxes, contracts, construction projects and a myriad of other financial issues.

What follows is a brief description of the district's 2009 water deal with the Cure family.

Despite what many residents believed was a $49.1 million water deal for the Cure's 58 irrigation wells north of Wray in 2008, a deal we were told would satisfy Republican River Compact compliance, the RRWCD board signed another contract with the Cures in 2009 that, among other things, guaranteed the Cures the right to continue irrigated farming operations from those same wells until such time the State of Kansas agreed to credit Colorado's pipeline delivery of water into the North Fork of the Republican.

Didn't we purchase those wells for water conservation and compact compliance?

But there's more. During the first year of this supplemental contract in what can only be described as a sweetheart deal, the RRWCD agreed to charge the Cures only $1,000 for the full

use of those previously purchased wells. Then the Cures were given an annual fixed water rate of roughly $450,000 over the next 16 years.

More, the RRWCD contractually agreed to lobby the federal government at our expense for an additional $17 million in CREP payments on behalf of the Cures for payments these wells clearly were not qualified to receive, based on the criteria of the federal CREP Program itself. More, the supplemental contract stipulates that the Cures can continue to irrigate from those wells until Kansas accepts delivery of water from the Ogallala Aquifer from our side of the border.

News flash to the RRWCD: It's the same aquifer you are depleting in order to dump water into a dry streambed that will meander 200 miles through Nebraska before it reaches Kansas for what we hope will be counted toward compact compliance. Ever heard of evaporate and seepage?

It's also important to note that between 1995 and 2011, the Cures have received more than $10 million in federal tax subsidies through the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Combined with the windfall they have received from local taxpayers through the RRWCD, the Cures have now pocketed well over $55 million in public money. And they want more.

About that pipeline constructed by the RRWCD: The project should have been christened the "Albatross" shortly after the ribbon-cutting ceremony and after all those fine speeches delivered by dignitaries who congratulated each other for doing such a fine job of managing this region's greatest natural resource. Unfortunately, no one mentioned the massive debt that was piled on the rest of us. Why spoil the party, right?

So just how ridiculous has this situation become? A spokesman for the Sandhills Groundwater Management District, which controls the spigots on those 58 wells, assured me that the pipeline will never be used until Kansas agrees that every single gallon of water will be credited toward compact compliance. So far that's the only water district in the state that has shown any common sense.

Meanwhile, Kansas remains silent, and it tries to keep a straight face while watching the three-ring circus unfolding to the west.

During the public comment portion of the RRWCD's meeting last week, the board's legal counsel, David Robbins, was asked several times about the wisdom of signing a 17-year water contract, even though Kansas has never indicated that it would credit compliance through the pipeline.

Has anyone at the RRWCD, he was asked, considered the possibility that water is a commodity whose value will most certainly rise over the next decade, according to virtually every resource manager and commodity broker in the nation?

And what about your contractual agreement to run interference for the Cures in Washington, D.C., lobbying for yet another pile of taxpayer money?

"It is what it is," Robbins replied smugly.

What it is, Mr. Robbins, is an absolute disservice to the residents of northeastern Colorado, as we watch a non-elected group of Big Shots squander the only natural resource we have out here. What it is, Mr. Robbins, is massive debt that local citizens and landowners cannot afford. What it is, Mr. Robbins, is the appearance of yet another backroom deal that ultimately benefits only one farming operation in northeastern Colorado with millions and millions of taxpayer dollars.

That's exactly what it is, Mr. Robbins. And some type of oversight of the RRWCD is desperately needed.

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