

Resigning ‘water czar’ has footprint in county

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In Hays and Ellis County — as well as most of the western half of the state — David Pope’s legacy will live on.

He’s not dead, mind you, but he is moving on.

Pope, the CEO of state water law and use, will be leaving the Division of Water Resources effective June 18 to serve as the director of the Missouri River Association of States and Tribes, a group he was instrumental in forming to work with the federal government. It might seem a stretch, but virtually every move in Hays and Ellis County has David Pope’s imprint on it.

That’s because his decisions — in at least three instances — dictate how much water in and around Hays can be used each year.

Two intensive groundwater use control areas are in place locally, one in and around Hays in the Big Creek area and one stretching from Cedar Bluff Reservoir to the confluence of the Smoky Hill River and Big Creek in Russell County.

Both brought with them either water use reductions or changes concerning when water can be used. In the Big Creek IGUCA, for example, private water wells now must be registered, and each summer water use is restricted during the hottest parts of the day.

Pope has had his critics, notably at the state level. And while there’s been plenty of criticism when he came into the field as part of an effort to right a lopsided water system, by the time it was over, that criticism had softened.

One of those was in the Walnut Creek area in Rush and Barton counties.

“I’m very proud of that order that was issued in 1992,” he said of the IGUCA that restricted water use for most irrigators. “I think time has shown that order worked. The valley is stable now. Even the opponents said the water table is more stable.”

That was generally Pope’s style, finding a common ground that few people could argue against.

Just last year, the city of Hays sought to reposition its wells along the Smoky Hill River. Despite opposition, Pope granted some of the request but not all.

Few people have harsh words for Pope.

Hays City Attorney John Bird, who has been at the forefront of water issues in Hays, gave high marks to Pope.

“Pope was in one of the toughest positions in state government, and while his decisions were sometimes criticized by parties who came out on the losing end, no one ever legitimately could say that he did not listen to the evidence and apply his understanding of the law to the facts, regardless of who was helped or hurt by the result,” Bird said. “I don’t think we can ask for more than that.”

Wayne Bossert, manager of the Colby-based Ground Water Management District 4, also gave accolades to Pope.

“I was a pretty strong Pope supporter,” he said.

Pope, now 61, said he decided the time was right to retire from the state agency, and the Missouri River position made it simpler.

He will be able to remain in Topeka, working in his new position through e-mail and travel. But even at that, his travels won’t be as extensive as while he was chief engineer.

He’s also going to do some private consulting, but said he will be selective in what he does.

That doesn’t mean it’s easy for him to pack up nearly 28 years of work with the DWR and move on with his life.

He’s got a number of issues still facing him, including the expansion of an IGUCA in Ness, Pawnee and Hodgeman counties. Although hearings in that case have been completed, comments still are being taken through this week.

“I’m going to decide as many of them as I can,” he said.

But some just might not be completed before his final day on the job, he said, just as there have been issues that he was not able to undertake during his time as chief engineer.

“We didn’t find all the solutions,” he said, “but that is more than one lifetime.”