O何RM- Remapped 

Have you ever read about an action by a state agency and thought “Who over there speaks for my interests?” Many Oklahoma citizens have expressed concern about their lack of representation on the Oklahoma Water Resources Board. Currently five board members are appointed to represent regions (one for each of our five congressional districts) and four are at-large members. So in theory every Oklahoman is represented by at least five members of the Water Board, based on geography.

But interests are more than just sharing a location. Those nine board members are also chosen to represent the various water uses in the state (recreational, industrial, irrigational, municipal, rural residential, agricultural, and soil conservation). However, this was not enough for many.

Congressional districts are large and diverse. Citizens from the southeast part of the state were concerned that no board member was from their area. Almost unnoticed at the end of the 2013 legislative session, the passage of Senate Bill 965 addressed these issues by restructuring the Water Board. Last week Gov. Fallin signed the bill, which will transition Water Board members’ appointments to represent nine districts of the state as their terms expire over the next seven years.

This bill pitted rural areas against large metro areas who were concerned that their current three votes on the board would be weakened.

Rural areas and grassroots water groups (which are mostly rural) support the measure because it will increase their representation. Powerful business groups such as the State Chamber supported it as a way to stop the formation of regional planning groups; something they have fought during the past two legislative sessions.

The change is not expected to change how the Water Board functions. But it may give a stronger voice to areas such as the northwest as they resist Oklahoma City’s use of water from Canton Lake.

The bill also adds oil and gas as one of the represented uses. In light of the recent increase in drilling activity, this may be the most important change of all to the membership.