

Nebraska Association of Resources Districts

ANNUAL REPORT

2020

Middle Niobrara NRD hosts the ninth annual Niobrara River Run meeting in Valentine July 20-22.

Photo courtesy of Sam Williams, Middle Niobrara NRD.



Jim Eschliman, President
Ericson, Nebraska
Represents Lower Loup NRD

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Last year, a bomb cyclone and flooding – this year, a pandemic and a fire. We continue to face unprecedented scenarios.

The office fire is another reminder that things can change quickly when you least expect. We are grateful no one was harmed and appreciate the outpouring of support. We will use this as an

opportunity to come back stronger.

Ongoing safety challenges with the pandemic meant cancelled events and virtual meetings. I admire the resiliency of NRD staff, who quickly adjusted and made decisions to protect their communities. I want to thank you all – staff and directors – for your commitment, and determination

to find alternative ways to continue our mission of protecting lives, property and the future.

Our in-person gatherings are always a great time to connect, exchange ideas and learn about new conservation methods. I look forward to the time when we can once again gather together.

COMMUNITY CORNER



Gordon Fifth Grade Teacher Lynn Schott, received Eagle Communication's January Teacher of the Month, which is sponsored by the Upper Niobrara White NRD. Schott was surprised in her classroom with a plaque, gift cards and treats for the entire class.



Above: Kiersten Hans of Lewis & Clark NRD won first place and \$200 in the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) poster contest.



Above right: Lower Elkhorn NRD installs interpretive nature signs on the Cowboy Trail near Norfolk.



Barely visible among the towering tires, Kalani Fortina, conservation program specialist with the Papio-Missouri River NRD, shows off the tires collected at the Dodge County Fairgrounds Aug. 28. The recycling event brought 441 vehicles from a 10-county area.



Right: In January, students from Waverly High School partnered with Lower Platte South NRD on a Test Your Well night. The event invites well owners to bring a water sample to test for nitrates and other contaminants.



Little Blue NRD Assistant Manager Tyler Goeschel and Lawrence-Nelson Sixth Grader Caden Culbertson test water for nitrates during a science fair in Nelson, Nebraska.

MEET THE NARD EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

The NARD Executive Committee includes the NARD president, vice president, secretary/treasurer, past president, and chairs from the Legislative and Information & Education Committees. The NARD Board of Directors includes representation from each of the 23 NRDs and meets five times annually to help guide the Association. To avoid duplication of costs, the same members serve on the NARD Risk Pool Board, which governs the health insurance program.

NARD President Jim Eschliman has served on the Lower Loup NRD Board 15 years and on the NARD Board

since 2016. Eschliman also serves on his local co-op board and the Cattleman's Beef Board. After selling his dairy cows in 2018, he considers himself retired and resides near Ericson with his wife, Deb.

NARD Vice President Milt Schmidt has served on the Lower Platte South NRD Board since 2012 and on the NARD Board since 2016. After 35 years with Goodyear, Schmidt retired and went on to work five years for United Way in Lincoln. He continues to volunteer his time for many charities in the Lincoln community.

NARD Secretary/Treasurer Martin Graff has served on the Middle Niobrara NRD

Board 25 years and on the NARD Board since 2018. He farms with his wife, Brenda, and sons near Ainsworth. Off the farm, Graff serves on the East Woodlawn Cemetery Board and is active in the Elks Club helping with youth sports.

NARD Past President Larry Reynolds has served on the Tri-Basin NRD Board 35 years and on the NARD Board since 2012. Reynolds served in the U.S. Air Force eight years and in the Nebraska Air National Guard 18 years. Currently, he farms and helps manage the family's cow-calf operation near Lexington.

James Meisner of

the Twin Platte NRD serves as the Legislative Committee chair, and Jim Johnson of the South Platte NRD serves as the Information & Education Committee chair.

A new NARD Executive Committee will be elected in March 2021.



Incoming President Jim Eschliman, left, thanks Past President Larry Reynolds for his service to the NARD Board.



**Jim Eschliman
President**



**Milt Schmidt
Vice President**



**Martin Graff
Secretary/Treasurer**



**Larry Reynolds
Past President**



**James Meisner
Legislative Chair**



**Jim Johnson
I&E Chair**

MEET THE NRD MANAGERS COMMITTEE

The NRD Managers Committee includes managers and assistant managers from all 23 districts. The committee meets five times annually to coordinate NRD activities with state and federal agencies, conservation partners and other parties to

protect Nebraska's natural resources.

Lewis & Clark NRD Manager Annette Sudbeck is chair and Lower Platte South NRD Manager Paul Zillig is vice chair.

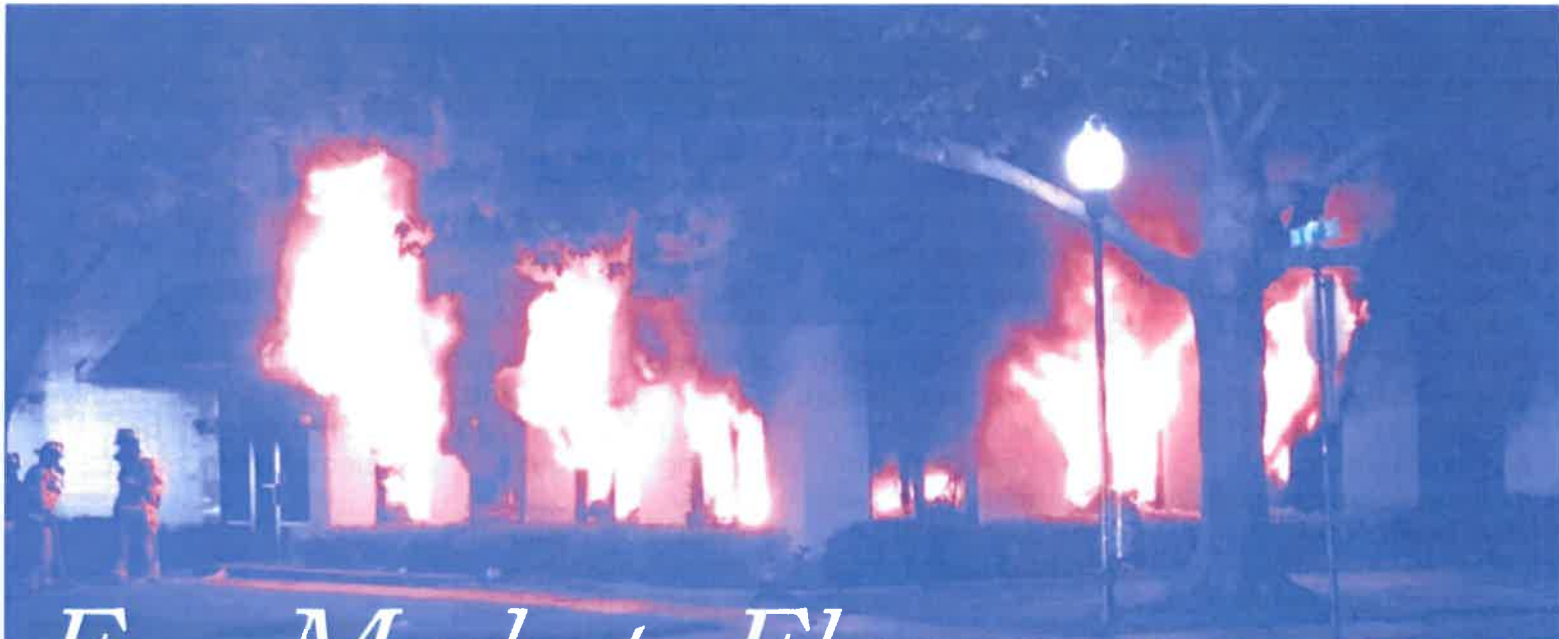
The Managers Committee elects a new chair at the March meeting.



**Annette Sudbeck
Chair**



**Paul Zillig
Vice Chair**



Face Masks to Flames

NARD OFFICES SET ABLAZE DURING PROTESTS

In the early morning hours of Sunday, May 31, the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts' (NARD) office, located at the Universal-Inland Insurance building (601 S. 12th St.), was burned when violence erupted in downtown Lincoln.

Peaceful protests turned violent around 1 a.m. and destruction along Lincoln Mall ensued. Several office buildings along Lincoln Mall from the Capitol to the Hall of Justice were defaced with graffiti and smashed windows with damages estimated at \$10 million.

The lower level of the Inland-Insurance building, where the fire was started, was ravaged by flames. The NARD office on the second floor primarily had smoke and heat damage and were a 85% loss.

"The important thing is that no one was hurt,"

said Dean Edson, NARD executive director. "The material things can be replaced, and this gives us an opportunity to come back stronger."

NARD staff spent two weeks working with salvage and restoration company SERVPRO to document and tag items for insurance. More than 895 items had to be cataloged and priced, denoting a purchase date.

While some hard surface items like file cabinets and bookcases could be cleaned, most items were non-salvageable due to smoke and soot damage.

The NARD Executive Committee evaluated new office spaces that were safe for staff and easily accessible for members. In October, the NARD signed a purchase agreement for an office building near 14th Street and Yankee Hill Road.



The first floor entryway to Inland-Insurance building shows extensive burn damage.



NARD Office Manager Jeanne Dryburgh searches through files with a flashlight documenting damages.



NARD staff stand in front of the damaged office building in downtown Lincoln June 5. From left, Dustin Wilcox, Megan Grimes, Dean Edson, Jennifer Swanson and Jeanne Dryburgh.



SERVPRO moves out NARD office furniture to determine if it can be cleaned and salvaged.



NARD copy room counters covered in soot show areas where papers were stacked during the fire.

PANDEMIC STRIKES, DISTRICTS ADJUST OPERATIONS

One year after Nebraska's major flooding, communities were not reaching for sandbags but face masks.

A strain of the coronavirus known as COVID-19, which stands for coronavirus disease 2019, spread worldwide causing a pandemic. To decrease exposure, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended social distancing, and schools followed suit closing buildings and turning to distance learning.

Adhering to CDC guidelines and advice on the state and local levels, Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) adjusted operations. Many district offices restricted walk-in traffic and opted for appointment-only meetings, employees worked remotely or in rotating shifts and public events were canceled. Governor Pete Ricketts issued an executive order allowing board meetings to be held virtually via video and conference calls.

Several NRDs also stepped in to assist with the public health crisis.

Tri-Basin NRD worked with Two Rivers Public Health Department by transporting, storing and distributing medical supplies and personal protective equipment. Tri-Basin NRD General Manager John Thorburn noted that the district had the staff, equipment and facilities to help distribute supplies allowing the Two Rivers staff to focus on the public health response.

"At the best of times, the partnership between the Tri-Basin NRD and Twin Rivers is excellent; at the worst of times, it is essential," said Jeremy Eschliman, health director with Twin Rivers Public Health Department. "We are stronger together."

After purchasing a former fire station adjacent to their office in early 2020, Lower Platte South NRD's Board of Directors voted April 9 to allow the City of Lincoln to use it for decontaminating personal protective

medical equipment during the COVID-19 outbreak.

"On very short notice we had nearly every director able to remotely join the emergency video conference board meeting," said Larry Ruth, Lower Platte South NRD chairman. "We gave unanimous support to make the former fire station available to the City of Lincoln to fight the pandemic. We're glad to be able to help."

Unfortunately, the pandemic also postponed or canceled many NRD events including the annual Washington, D.C. Conference, Nebraska State Envirothon, Adventure Camp about the Environment, NCF-Envirothon, annual Basin Tour, the annual fall NRD Conference and many water-related educational events.



Nebraska-produced ethanol gets made into hand sanitizer to be used statewide.



Nebraska Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Debra Hansel, combat medic, collects a nasopharyngeal sample from a packing plant employee at a testing site in Dakota City, Nebraska, April 28. Photo courtesy of the Nebraska Army National Guard.

Below: Tri-Basin NRD employees work with Two Rivers Public Health Department to store and distribute medical supplies.



Lower Platte South NRD rents a large space to accommodate social distancing of board members July 22. Due to a mask mandate in Lincoln, all attendees wear a face covering to prevent virus spread.



The NARD Benefits Committee meets via Zoom April 24. Most NRD board and committee meetings between April and July were held virtually to protect public health and reduce the spread of COVID-19.

MOA SIGNING CONTINUES CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP

Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) collectively signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Jan. 28. This agreement is a renewal of a long-standing commitment between the NRDs and NRCS that reaches back to the Dust Bowl days.

"For more than 80 years Nebraska's NRDs and the NRCS have been working side-by-side to provide natural resource management assistance to Nebraskans," said David Eigenberg, Upper Big Blue NRD general manager. "We are committed to continuing our conservation efforts with NRCS to protect lives, property and the future."

In 1935 President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Soil Conservation Act. The law's main purpose was to reduce soil erosion.

A driving force behind

the Soil Conservation Act was the severe drought that was occurring in the Great Plains. Beginning in 1932, persistent drought conditions caused widespread crop failures leaving soil exposed and vulnerable to wind. This period was prone to dust storms that would block out the sun.

The Soil Conservation Act formed the Soil Conservation Service, which today is called the Natural Resources Conservation Service. It didn't take long for the newly formed Soil Conservation Service to learn that they needed ways to extend conservation assistance to more farmers. There needed to be a locally led approach. And so the idea for the conservation district was born.

In 1937 the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) drafted the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law, which President Roosevelt sent to the governors

of all states. This law created Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

In 1938 the Papio Soil Conservation District became the first conservation district in Nebraska. By 1972 the Nebraska Unicameral created the NRD system, which combined the responsibilities of the 154 special-use districts into a modern network of 23 Natural Resources Districts established along river basins.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service has 77 county offices in Nebraska divided into management areas that mimic NRD boundaries. This allows the NRD and NRCS staff to work together on the same, locally identified natural resource concerns. Today, Nebraska's unique NRD system of locally controlled, tax-funded, watershed-based conservation is widely admired throughout the nation.

"The signing of this agreement is a symbol of our commitment to

continue the legacy of our conservation partnership established more than 80 years ago," said NRCS State Conservationist Craig Derickson. "It was true back in the Dust Bowl that the issues facing agriculture couldn't be solved alone. That's still true today. By working together, we are able to accomplish more for farmers and ranchers in Nebraska."

"Through partnerships like this, we help Nebraska farmers and ranchers remain productive and profitable while ensuring our natural resources are protected for generations," said Annette Sudbeck, Lewis & Clark NRD general manager.

Each of the 23 NRDs signed an agreement with NRCS, which reinforces the partnership between the agencies and will be in effect until mutually modified or terminated.



Upper Elkhorn NRD signs NRCS Memorandum of Agreement.



Lower Republican NRD signs NRCS Memorandum of Agreement.



Background: A seedling emerges from weed barrier in the Twin Platte NRD. Photo courtesy of Sydney Norris.

Top left: Little Blue NRD plants seedlings near an existing windbreak.

Bottom left: Valentine Middle School students plant Husker Harvest Day trees along the Cowboy Trail with Middle Niobrara NRD Sept. 29.

Conservation Tree Program

SPRING PLANTING CONTINUES AMID CORONAVIRUS

It took creativity and dedication to get more than 517,000 conservation trees and shrubs in the ground this year.

Tree sales closed and planting started as the pandemic was on the upswing and quarantine began. Districts found ways to distribute trees in socially distanced ways. Many districts offered curbside pick up or scheduled times with customers.

Districts continue to experiment with planting container trees, which has led to more success and increased survival rates for some

species. Bessey Nursery is adding additional greenhouse space and the capacity to grow additional container trees for NRDs.

The pandemic also meant adjustments for promoting the Conservation Tree Program.

In March, Nebraska Educational Television (NET) put out the documentary "Nebraska Roots: Native Trees and Plants," which featured a new 30-second informational video about the NRD Conservation Tree Program. The tree video was also featured on

other NET programming throughout the spring.

Traditionally, NRD volunteers give away 3,500 Colorado Blue Spruce trees at Husker Harvest Days (HHD) and answer forestry questions to promote the program. The event went virtual this year and the 3,500 trees were redistributed for hands-on educational plantings in the Middle Niobrara NRD and wildfire reforestation plantings in the Upper Niobrara White NRD. In addition, the HHD virtual experience included a NRD tradeshow page featuring tree and

conservation videos.

Advertisements for the Conservation Tree Program also will run in the September and November issues of Nebraska Farmer.

The announcement that the Big 10 will allow football is also good news for NRD trees. During NET's Big Red Wrap Up sports talk program, we will again run a 30-second informational video to promote the NRD Conservation Tree Program. Traditionally, tree sales start in November, which is positive timing for the promotion video.

NEBRASKA'S YOUTH PLANT HOPE DURING VIRUS

During Arbor Day weekend, Nebraska's youth participated in a Tree-A-Thon and collectively planted more than 12,700 trees in more than 60 communities across the state. From Alliance to Omaha, students worked with their local Natural Resources District (NRD), afterschool providers, and public and private schools to find safe and creative ways to continue to uphold Nebraska's proud history of planting trees.

"Social distancing won't stop us from creating positive community change by planting a legacy of hope in our community," said Amy Vernon, York Afterschool Program director.

COVID-19 kept school doors closed, but NRD staff got creative and found safe ways to distribute tree seedlings and learning experiences to youth and their families. Tree seedlings, primarily Ponderosa Pines and Burr Oaks, were distributed through

school meal programs, delivered to doorsteps, picked up at curbside cruises and even handed out by school mascots.

York Afterschool Program partnered with the Upper Big Blue NRD to deliver trees at locations where free lunches were being provided. Twin Platte NRD provided trees to the North Platte Kids Klub afterschool program, which organized a drive-through Tree-A-Thon where school mascots gave away small goodie bags of individually wrapped snacks, a tree craft and approximately 150 trees. Lewis & Clark NRD distributed trees

to 14 areas schools and businesses along with pencils and tree handouts.

Traditionally, Papio-Missouri River NRD gives away more than 3,000 trees at Omaha events in April. Due to cancellations, Papio's educators were left with an abundance of trees. When smaller communities outside their district were unable to source trees, Papio stepped in to help distribute trees across the state.

Norfolk Afterschool Program partnered with the Lower Elkhorn NRD and Mayor Josh Moenning to safely distribute a record 1,500 trees throughout their city

using their weekly curbside cruises to maintain social distancing.

"Increasing our tree canopy, in both public and private spaces, benefits everyone," Moenning said. "Trees save money on heating and cooling costs, mitigate runoff and infrastructure degradation, improve air quality and help beautify the city."

Although the circumstances were not ideal, Natural Resources Districts stepped up to provide a hands-on educational experience for students while they isolated at home during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Tree-A-Thon was a collaboration with a coalition of nonprofits and public institutions including Beyond School Bells and afterschool providers, the Arbor Day Foundation, Natural Resources Districts, Audubon Nebraska, Nebraska Forest Service, Nebraska Department of Education and the University of Nebraska.



Mascots at North Platte's Kids Klub Afterschool Program wear masks to greet students picking up trees donated by the Twin Platte NRD.



Alex and Lily with the Loup City Afterschool Program named their tree "Piney" during the Arbor Day weekend Tree-A-Thon.



The Norfolk Afterschool Program provided students with trees from Lower Elkhorn NRD and Zinnia seeds for students without yards.



Upper Big Blue NRD Forester Kyle Yrkoski hands a tree to York Teacher Carmen Fowler during a Tree-A-Thon pick up at York Public Schools in April.

The Race to Recreation

CAMPING AT REC AREAS CAUTIOUSLY REOPENS

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, many Americans were constrained indoors since mid-March and as the weather warmed people wanted out.

Due to an abundance of caution, many NRD recreation areas along with the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission delayed camping. Overwhelming demand prompted recreation areas to open for camping by mid-May with warnings to practice social distancing and good sanitation.

While most of the state was closed for campers, Nemaha NRD chose to stay open.

"It was crazy and nothing like I've ever seen before," said Bob Hilske, Nemaha NRD general manager.

"We could've had one employee just answering phone calls about our recreation areas. One tent camper thought our pit toilets were still closed, so he brought his own wooden outhouse along for his family."

When additional NRD recreation areas opened, campers flocked to the sites eager for an outdoor experience after being cooped up inside for months.

"There was a line of campers at Big Indian [recreation area] starting at 7 a.m. when we didn't open until 10 a.m.," said Dave Clabaugh, Lower Big Blue NRD general manager. "It looked like the Kinkaider land rush with campers instead of wagons."

Camping at Nemaha NRD: A Comparison

	2019	2020
Annual Permits Sold	1,053	2,872
Total Permit Sales	\$30,295.26	\$44,956.31
Camping Fees Collected	\$20,825.04	\$40,572.46

*2020 numbers as of Sept. 1



Above left: A family sets up their tent at Lower Loup NRD's Davis Creek Recreation Area near North Loup. Above right: Omaha resident Drew shows off his bass caught at Lower Platte South NRD's Timber Point Lake WMA near Brainard.

Middle Niobrara NRD staff Zac Peterson and Dana Krueger tube the Niobrara River. Valentine river outfitters reported an increase of more than three times the business compared to 2019.



Campers line up to enter Big Indian Recreation Area in the Lower Big Blue NRD May 20.

Inset: Nemaha NRD announces pandemic closures at Duck Creek Recreation Area near Auburn.

WELCOME NEWEST NRD HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES

NRD Board Member

Nominated by the Upper Republican NRD, the late W. Eugene Haarberg served on the board of directors since the District's inception in 1972 until 2000.

A lifelong Chase County farmer, Haarberg first served as a representative of Class II cities working with the Legislature to establish the framework for the NRDs including establishing the Groundwater Management and Protection Act that gives NRDs the authority to regulate groundwater.

Under Haarberg's leadership, the Upper Republican NRD established allocations, water metering and well-spacing requirements to conserve water.

"Gene's NRD career is unique and noteworthy, because he was a key participant in the most substantial NRD developments," said Jasper Fanning, Upper Republican NRD general manager.



*W. Eugene Haarberg
Imperial, Nebraska*

NRD Employee

Leon "Butch" Koehlmoos, former general manager of the Lower Loup NRD, retired in 2017 after 39 years. During his tenure, he and his board worked through many monumental water quality and quantity decisions.

Under Koehlmoos' management, Lower Loup NRD designated its first groundwater quality areas, and a study known as the Elkhorn-Loup Modeling Project sought to determine the effects on future groundwater development. This included process development for granting variances and certifying irrigated acres.

"Because of Butch's leadership, the district is able to maintain a balance between water use and water supply," said Russ Callan, Lower Loup NRD general manager. "We are thankful for his work to protect groundwater, upgrade flood infrastructure and improve our local NRD recreation areas."



*Leon "Butch" Koehlmoos
Ord, Nebraska*

NRD Supporter

Doug Bereuter served the Nebraska Legislature from 1974-1978. He was a supporter of the legislation that created the NRDs.

In 1978, Bereuter was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and went on to serve 26 years in Congress, the longest serving congressman in Nebraska's history.

He was instrumental in helping pass federal legislation that opened the door for federal funding assistance through the Water Resources Development Act.

Lower Platte North NRD's Lake Wanahoo dam is named for Bereuter as a thank you for his dedication to natural resources.

"Rep. Bereuter is driven by service and a love for Nebraska," said David Eigenberg, Upper Big Blue NRD general manager.

"He has served Nebraska for decades and played a pivotal role in the inception of the NRD system."



*Doug Bereuter
Alamo, California*

NRD CONSERVATION AWARD WINNERS ANNOUNCED



Terry Martin
Director of the Year

An engineer by training, Terry Martin has been a valuable resource serving on the Upper Republican NRD Board since 2013 and on the NARD Board, too.



Star Cattle Company
Grassland Conservation

The Star Cattle Company is a family operation that started in 1912 and includes the late Mike Star and his wife Jeanie with sons Robert (Jill) and Jason (Kayla) and daughter Jacqueline (Nick) Sass. The family has integrated multiple conservation practices on their grazing lands near North Platte.



Boyd Bowder
Educator of the Year

St. Paul Ag Instructor Boyd Bowder shares his love of nature with his students and trains his students to compete in range judging and Envirothon.



Terry Hoit
Tree Planter of the Year

Terry Hoit has planted more than 10,250 trees and shrubs to enhance his farm near Red Cloud. His philosophy for healthy trees is "Keep the weeds out."



City of Norfolk (Josh Moenning)
Community Conservation

Norfolk Mayor Josh Moenning challenged his city to plant 2,020 trees in 2020. The city received 1,500 trees from the Lower Elkhorn NRD and an additional 250 from the Arbor Day Foundation. They plan to plant 300 more on city public land to meet their goal.



Dan & Melinda Stelling
Soil Stewardship

Over the past 40 years, Dan Stelling has used innovative techniques to conserve soil and water in his farming practices. He is known for his impressive use of cover crops.

LAND JUDGING MOVES FORWARD IN OCTOBER



Above: Land Judging South West Region (Tri-Basin NRD); Right: Land Judging East Central Region (Lower Platte North NRD)

Special thank you to NRD regional hosts and NRCS soil scientists, who helped make land judging possible during a pandemic. Health and safety adjustments included masks, hand sanitizers and staggered start times, which allowed for social distancing between schools.

Land judging challenges high school students to gain a better understanding of soil structure and land evaluation. Students are tested on their knowledge of physical features of the soil land management practices needed for proper stewardship.

A GLIMPSE OF ACTIVITIES IN THE *natural resources districts*



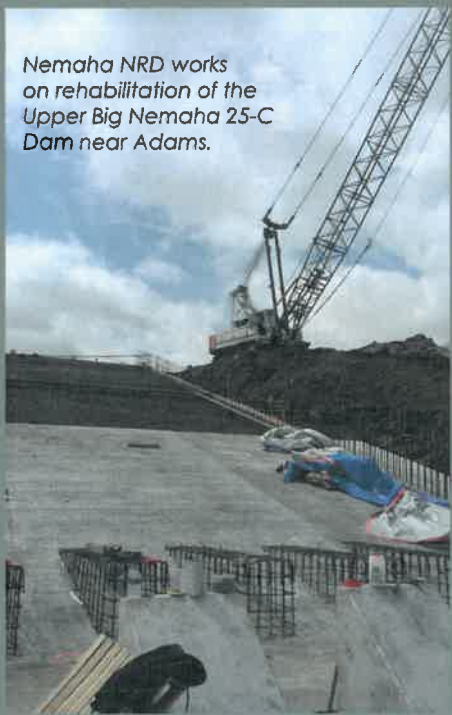
From left, Lower Elkhorn NRD Natural Resources Technician Todd Stewart and Interns Erika Hinz and Dillon Hupp plant 375 Black Hills Spruce trees in the Norfolk well field in April.



Left: Upper Elkhorn NRD General Manager Dennis Schueth, middle, and Bazile GMA Project Coordinator Connor Baldwin, right, conduct water testing in the Bazile Creek Watershed.



Tri-Basin NRD Interns Zachary Temple and Grant Edgcombe experience a prescribed burn at the Platte Republican Diversion (PRD) pasture near Smithfield.



Nemaha NRD works on rehabilitation of the Upper Big Nemaha 25-C Dam near Adams.



Above: Upper Loup NRD Resources Technician Shane Young smooths cement for a walking path at the new Arboretum in Theford near the District office.



Upper Republican NRD installed the Rock Creek drop structure near Parks to reduce channel erosion due to water releases from the Rock Creek augmentation project.

Right: Lower Big Blue NRD uses a slip-lined tube to divert spring rains at the Plum Creek structure east of Liberty.

Lower Right: Nebraska Senate Candidate Tonya Storer speaks with the Upper Niobrara White NRD Board.



In Deuel County, South Platte NRD is using a reuse pit recharge program to manage South Platte River excess flows for groundwater recharge, mitigating downstream flooding and improving stream depletions.



Before



After



THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE!



Above left: Lower Niobrara NRD makes FEMA repairs on the West Knox Rural Water System, which was damaged during the 2019 Bomb Cyclone. Above right: Sue Lackey, Conservation and Survey Division, records data from samples collected with a geoprobe in Cedar County.



Above left: Repairs are made on Lower Platte South NRD's Homestead Trail Bridge south of Lincoln. Above right: Russell Oakland, Lower Platte North NRD lead water resources specialist, installs a solar-powered METOS weather station.



Papio-Missouri River NRD's new flood mitigation reservoir, Big Elk Lake, takes shape in Papillion. The lake will be fed by West Papio Creek.



Above left: Twin Platte NRD staff sign up growers for GIS during an open house in Brady. Above right: Upper Big Blue NRD collaborates on interseeder research, making cover crops accessible for local producers.

20 YEARS

- Lisa Bartels, Nemaha
- Eric Gottschalk, Lower Platte North
- Lawrence Gronewold, Lower Big Blue (director)
- Eric Hanson, Twin Platte (director)
- Alicia Haussler, Central Platte (director)
- Shelly Lippincott, Central Platte
- Julie McBride, Lower Loup
- Scott Sobotka, Lower Big Blue
- Joe Wahlgren, Twin Platte (director)

25 YEARS

- Martin Graff, Middle Niobrara (director)
- Gary Kruse, Lower Loup (director)
- Bob Lorenz, Lower Big Blue (director)
- Dave Saalfeld, Lower Platte North (director)
- Carey Tejkl, Lower Elkhorn
- John Thorburn, Tri-Basin

30 YEARS

- John Albert, Lower Platte South
- Jill Breunig, Lower Platte North
- Bill Carhart, Twin Platte
- Peggy Griffin, Lower Loup
- Connie Hansen, Lower Platte South
- Judy Ridenour, Upper Loup (director)
- Steven Sandberg, Upper Niobrara White (director)
- Cindy Spillinek, Lower Platte South
- Beth Walsh, Upper Elkhorn

35 YEARS

- Larry Reynolds, Tri-Basin (director)

40 YEARS

- Vickie DeJong, Lower Elkhorn
Serving 41+ years and will retire Sept. 2021
- Joe Hergott, Little Blue (director)
- Dean Krull, Central Platte
- Mike Nesbitt, Upper Republican
- Marilyn Schumacher, Lewis & Clark

45 YEARS

- Darwin Anderson, Lower Loup (director)
- Vivian Frasch, Lower Niobrara

IN MEMORIAM

- Lawrence Zavadil, Lewis & Clark (45 years)
Served as both an employee and director
- Ron Wiens, Lower Big Blue (director) (20 years)

PROGRAMS THAT MAKE A *difference*

••• UPPER NIOBRARA WHITE •••

The District is sponsoring projects with the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program to repair 2019 flood damage. UNWNRD uses an NRCS Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) grant to address flooding and groundwater recharge in the Box Butte Creek Watershed. The District overcame pandemic challenges and facilitated a successful curbside pick-up to distribute 75,000+ trees.

••• NORTH PLATTE •••

The District is working with producers (by appointment) to sign up for the Encouraging Producer Innovation through Conservation (EPIC) programs, which encourages reduction of consumptive water use. Currently, NPNRD is putting drought at the forefront of conversations as the District faces drier occurrences as indicated by the U.S. Drought Monitor. Due to the pandemic, the NPNRD's educational events, classroom visits and activities at the geothermal greenhouse were shut down in mid-March and will not be rescheduled for the foreseeable future.

••• SOUTH PLATTE •••

The District is in the second increment of the Integrated Management Plan (effective Sept. 11, 2019) and Basinwide Plan (effective Sept. 17, 2019). In Deuel County, SPNRD uses a reuse pit recharge program to manage South Platte River excess flows. Currently, 13 pits are being used for groundwater recharge, mitigating downstream flooding and improving stream depletions. Water allocations and decertifying irrigated acres help incrementally meet SPNRD's goal of fully appropriated and offsetting post-1997 depletions.

••• UPPER REPUBLICAN •••

In 2020, the URNRD used District and State funds to permanently retire irrigation on approximately 3,800 acres with high impacts on stream flow. The District is also progressing toward the installation of telemetry units on all irrigation flow meters water usage will be available to users in near real time.

••• MIDDLE REPUBLICAN •••

The District took great strides with cutting-edge technology from soil moisture monitoring to innovative remote meter reading transducers in the majority of the monitoring wells. Engineering Hydrologist Alex Boyce is installing new monitoring wells with help from a Nebraska Environmental Trust grant and the University of Nebraska.

••• MIDDLE NIOBRARA •••

MNNRD implemented a large, two-tiered rock riffle structure and bank stabilization project covering six acres on the impaired Sand Draw Creek. Along with UNL Conservation and Survey Division, the District drilled seven monitoring well test holes to expand water quantity/quality opportunities. In 2020, MNNRD sold 107,500 trees and planted 25,500 of those while laying 20 miles of weed barrier in 19 days. Strong participation from landowners allows MNNRD to have one of the state's top conservation tree programs

••• UPPER LOUP •••

The District completed fall plantings for their Arboretum Project and will hold an open house to showcase progress. ULNRD also participated in the Nebraska Bumble Bee Atlas Project surveying different habitats and bumble bee species in Grant County. The District's current focus is a Drought Management Plan.

••• LOWER LOUP •••

The District is working with Sargent and North Loup communities to find solutions to ongoing flooding issues. LLNRD is collaborating with other agencies, several communities, and the public to develop the Mud Creek Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) plan. The District's Board approved up to 2,750 new irrigated acres for 2021.

••• TRI-BASIN •••

The District is assisting Two Rivers Public Health Department and Phelps County Emergency Management Agency by transporting, storing, and distributing medical supplies and PPE. The supplies are needed by local health facilities and service agencies to protect patients and employees from COVID-19. The pandemic demands a "whole of government" response to effectively protect constituents, and TBNRD is proud to help protect citizens in south-central Nebraska.

••• LOWER REPUBLICAN •••

The District has instituted a pilot program for select irrigators connecting their mechanical flow meters to their allocation balances via telemetry. Producers can log in from their smart device or computer to view their flow meter data and allocation information in real time.

••• LOWER NIOBRARA •••

The District started adding more monitoring wells to collect groundwater data in the area. FEMA accepted the 2019 Bombardier levels are at an all-time low. FEMA accepted for new

2020

NRD PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

LEWIS & CLARK

In 2019, the Bow Creek Watershed, located in the heart of the LCNRD, was designated a surface water quality priority due to high levels of E. coli bacteria. The area received EPA 319 and NET grants to hire a watershed coordinator, conduct interviews with producers as part of a UNL agriculture capstone class, and initiate demonstration farms to identify problems and solutions while balancing economics.

PAPPIO-MISSOURI RIVER

Following the 2019 flood, the District pushes forward with Missouri River levee repairs. PMRNRD will complete construction of Zorinsky Basin 2 by fall 2020, the last of the four planned water quality basins intended to protect Zorinsky Lake from sediment. PMRNRD continues to make progress in Papillion with WP6 and Big Elk Lake (WP7) flood mitigation reservoirs, opening in 2021.

UPPER ELKHORN

As part of the Groundwater Management Plan Phase III and with the help of a NET grant, the District collected soil samples on 100 fields and 17 triggered >40 pounds of residual nitrogen. These fields will be monitored for the reduction of residual nitrogen. The year brought the highest static water level readings on record for the UENRD.

LOWER ELKHORN

LENRD received NRCS Watershed Flood Prevention and Operations (WFPO) funding to complete the Maple Creek Watershed Plan evaluating potential flood prevention, watershed protection and agricultural water management projects. The District is also moving ahead with the Battle Creek Watershed Improvement Project Work Plan – Environmental Assessment (Plan-EA) to address flood reduction.

LOWER PLATTE SOUTH

The District nears plan completion for the Deadman's Run Flood Reduction Project to remove 500 Lincoln homes and businesses from the floodplain, which is a partnership between LPSNRD, the Corps and the City of Lincoln. Through the federal SWIF program, updates continue on Lincoln's 13-mile Salt Creek Levee. The Corps has repaired 14 sites along the levee damaged by the 2019 flood. Repairs to the Lied Platte River Bridge are also nearly complete.

CENTRAL PLATTE

The District received NRCS funding to complete environmental assessments to address flooding concerns in Elm/Turkey Creek, Spring/Buffalo Creek and Lower Wood River Watersheds. The District's surface water canals continue to deliver water for irrigation, divert excess flows for retimed recharge and store unused irrigation water in Lake McConaughy, which meets CPNRD's SMP and Nebraska's New Depletions Plan goals.

LOWER PLATTE NORTH

LPNDRD partnered with the Shell Creek Watershed Improvement Group, Colfax County and Union Pacific Railroad to improve a Shell Creek area with a history of flooding. Plans include replacing a railroad bridge to allow for improved water flow. The Shell Creek Water Quality grant allows the District to promote creek bank stabilization, vegetative practices, channel improvement and continued soil and water quality improvements.

UPPER BIG BLUE

The District has partnered with the Nature Conservancy and others on projects to improve soil health and show benefits of conservation practices. Project GROW, the District-managed soil health demonstration plot, is in its fourth year and continues to produce measurable impact while reducing the amount of residual nitrogen that has the potential to enter the City of York wellhead. Additionally, the District's Private Dams Program saw increased popularity this year, as several landowners applied for renovations and improvements.

NEMAHA

The District started rehabilitation of the Upper Big Nemaha 25-C Dam near Adams. Construction includes adding a large, concrete chute through the middle of the dam to address dam safety requirements. Federal funding will cover 65% of the \$2.5 million project, which is anticipated to be completed in December.

LITTLE BLUE

LBNRD expanded its groundwater management focusing on nitrate concentrations by sampling 450+ irrigation wells and 100+ domestic wells by September 2020. The District started year one of the two-year Vadose Zone Assessment. The data collected will be compared to the LBNRD's 2015 nitrate data and used to assess the effectiveness of nitrate management efforts in the District.

LOWER BIG BLUE

LBBNRD began a major rehabilitation project on Cub Creek Recreation Area southwest of Plymouth. The project will remove 100,000+ cubic yards of sediment, reshape the shoreline, add jetties, place fish habitat and add a swimming beach. Electrical camping pads and other amenities will be added in the future. The District also continues to install slip liners, which have proven to be a cost-effective alternative for repairing aging tubes.

EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED

Resource management: pushing through today while preparing for tomorrow



Dustin Wilcox
NARD Water Resources
Specialist

The year brought many reminders of the importance of preparing for the unexpected, which included reminders on the unexpected variability of water supplies. For a second consecutive year Mother Nature brought extreme water supply conditions. Fortunately, Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) don't just expect the unexpected, they actively work with conservation partners and the public to plan and prepare for it.

There are many systems across the nation organized to manage water supplies, but unfortunately many only target managing for expected normal conditions. That is not the case for

Nebraska's NRDs. Nebraska's system recognizes that managing for normal conditions doesn't always work. Instead NRDs protect water supplies by planning and preparing to mitigate impacts of extremes.

Nebraska's climate and water supplies change quickly, they always have, and seemingly always will. As Nebraska transitioned from the wettest August on record in 2019 to the driest on record in 2020, the past 18 months have revealed just how critical expecting the unexpected is for water management in Nebraska.

During 2019, the spring and summer brought runoff, groundwater recharge, stream flows and water supplies that exceeded many modern records. While this record event was unlikely and could have been easily unexpected, Nebraska's NRDs had been expecting and planning for it for years. Thanks to that preparation, many lives and properties across the state were protected by

NRD projects and structures.

On the heels of last year's record water supplies, the common concern often discussed at the start of 2020 was that of repeat flooding, and the NRDs were expecting and prepared for it. What wasn't as commonly discussed was concern for drought, but nonetheless the NRDs were expecting and prepared for it.

That preparation proved invaluable as by the end of summer more than 80% of the state was experiencing drought conditions. Despite these severe conditions, groundwater management and integrated water management plans implemented by NRDs and their partners at the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources worked to

protect existing water users statewide.

As the extremes often demonstrate there is more work to be done. NRDs are actively working with partners and the public to explore ways to secure the necessary funding to protect communities still vulnerable to flooding. NRDs are also working with partners and stakeholders to find additional methods of sustaining water supplies and protecting existing water users from droughts.

As we head into 2021 hoping for an average year, there is no doubt in my mind that the NRD system is the best for expecting and ensuring we are prepared for the unexpected.



Lower Platte North NRD makes repairs on Clear Creek in May, which was breached during the 2019 flood.

MOVING FORWARD, ACCEPTING CHANGE

"It's not the strongest, but the most adaptable that survive." – Charles Darwin



Jennifer Swanson
NRD/Dept. of Environment
& Energy Liaison

Adaptable, being able to adjust to new conditions. If 2020 has taught us anything it is that we need to be adaptable. But that is nothing new to the Natural Resources Districts (NRDs). We've been practicing adaptive management for years and I truly believe that's what makes us such a unique and strong governance system.

In 2019, we adapted to extreme weather events across the state and historic flooding. Through it all the NRDs fulfilled their mission to protect lives, property, and the future. Hundreds of flood control structures built by the NRDs were tested to max capacity and performed at their full potential. Once the flooding was over,

the NRDs sprang into action repairing damaged structures, and planning and implementing new projects to address future flooding issues.

In 2020, drought conditions prevailed, and statewide precipitation was the driest on record going back to 1895. Once again, the NRDs adapted to these extreme weather conditions in order to manage groundwater recharge and protect our drinking water supplies.

Along with extreme weather events we've also had to learn to adapt to the pandemic – how we do our job, run meetings and offer trainings in order to continue to fulfill our mission.

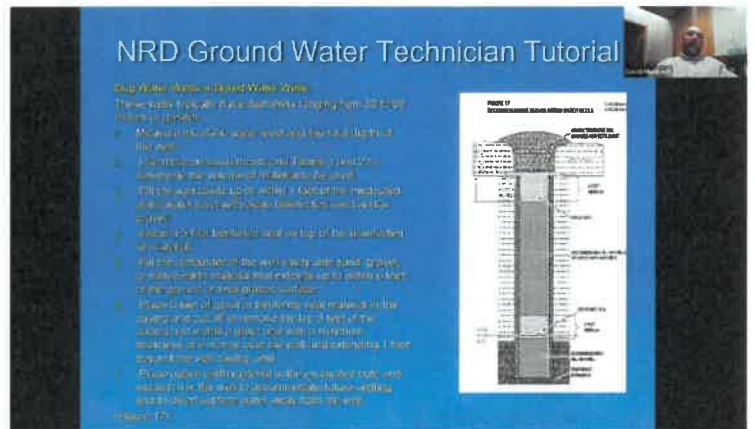
Each year the NARD hosts two trainings to certify NRD groundwater technicians, who then safely and accurately inspect chemigation systems, measure and record static water levels, inspect and service flow meters, and perform water sampling practices and techniques. The districts rely on these technicians' data collection to make

sound management decisions and to protect our groundwater supply.

In recent years, there have been numerous discussions to offer an online Groundwater Technician Training, but there has been hesitation to switch. Change can be hard, and sometimes changes are not implemented until they are forced upon us. Thanks to COVID-19, a change was forced and we successfully completed our first

online Groundwater Technician Training. We are working with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services to continue to offer this training virtually in the future.

So, it's not the strongest that survive it is the most adaptable. The NRDs' strength is the ability to adapt to constant change while continuing the mission to protect lives, property and the future.



David Miesbach with the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy presents a session during the online Groundwater Technician Training June 18.



Little Blue NRD Resources Technician Jed Bergen conducts a chemigation inspection on a center pivot.

SECOND SESSION OF 106TH LEGISLATURE

The second session of the 106th Legislature adjourned sine die Aug. 13, the 60th day of the scheduled 60-day session.

The session was suspended March 25 over pandemic safety concerns and reconvened July 20.

The next regular session is scheduled to begin Jan. 6, 2021.

Senators passed 150 bills this session. In addition, several bills were incorporated by amendments, which brings the total to 285.

Property taxes continued to be a key issue, and senators reached a compromise during the final days of the session.

LB 1107: Adopt the ImagiNE Nebraska Act, Key Employer and Jobs Retention Act, Renewable Chemical Production Tax Credit Act, Customized Job Training Act, Nebraska Transformational Projects Act, and Nebraska Property Tax Incentive Act and change and provide other related provisions (Scheer)

The Legislature gave final approval to the bill on a 41-4-4 vote Aug. 13. The Governor signed the

bill outside the Capitol in a special ceremony Aug. 20.

The bill was amended to provide a compromise of three main issues for the session – property tax relief, business tax incentives and funding for the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

The new property tax relief program would create a refundable income tax credit based on the amount an eligible taxpayer paid in property taxes to their school district

during the previous year, not including those amounts levied for bonded indebtedness or a levy override.

Property tax relief through state income tax credits begins with a \$125 million allocation and moves to \$375 million by no later than 2025. This is in addition to the current \$275 million in property tax relief supplied through a state property tax credit cash fund.

ImagiNE Nebraska, the business tax

incentive program, creates a cap on authority for business incentives. The base authority would be \$25 million for 2021-22, \$100 million for 2023-24 and \$150 million for 2025. Beginning in 2026, the director would adjust the base authority every three years to an amount equal to 3% of the state's General Fund net receipts for the most recent fiscal year. Unused base authority would carry forward to the following year, but base authority prior to 2026 could not exceed \$400 million.

The third portion of the compromise package is a pledge of \$300 million in future state funding support for a \$2.6 billion project at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. The UNMC proposal is dependent on federal designation of a new national disaster response center at the campus in Omaha and \$2 billion in federal funding.

LB 148: Change requirements for public hearings on proposed budget statements and notices of meetings of public bodies



NRD managers – Dennis Schueth, Upper Elkhorn NRD; Mike Sousek, Lower Elkhorn NRD; Terry Julesgard, Lower Niobrara NRD; and Annette Sudbeck, Lewis & Clark NRD – featured on the cover of the March 2020 Irrigation Leader magazine for work in the Bazile Groundwater Management Area. Cover photo by Sydney Norris. Twin Platte NRD.

HALTS IN MID-MARCH, RESTARTS IN JULY

(Groene)

The Legislature gave final approval to LB 148 by a 45-0-4 vote on Feb. 6, and it was signed by the Governor Feb. 12.

NRDs were opposed to this bill. The bill adds the following requirements on all local governmental entities:

- It requires that the public hearing on a proposed budget statement be held separately from any regularly scheduled meeting of the governing body and not be limited by time.
 - The bill also requires that the governing body make a presentation outlining key provisions of the proposed budget statement, including, but not limited to, a comparison to the prior year's budget statement.
 - There shall be at least three copies of the proposed budget statement available to the public.
 - Any member of the public desiring to speak on the proposed budget statement shall be allowed to address the governing body and must be given a reasonable amount of time to speak.
- The bill also changes

the public notice requirements for all governmental entities.

LB 858e: Change provisions of the Municipal Cooperative Financing Act (Hughes)

Senators gave final approval to LB 858e by a 47-0-2 vote July 31. It included an emergency clause and was signed by the Governor Aug. 6.

The purpose of LB 858e is to reorganize, update and simplify the basic governance of MEAN – Municipal Energy Agency of Nebraska. It changes provisions relating to the qualification removal, terms, and votes by the board of directors. It authorizes another Joint Action Agency comprised of municipalities to join MEAN, so long as the agency is comprised of municipalities similar to MEAN.

The bill also addresses several items that are already authorized for other power districts in Nebraska, such as capping of bonds at \$200 million, submitting expenditure reports to the board, and harmonizing financial dates. It streamlines authority and permits



Gov. Pete Ricketts provides a daily press briefing on COVID-19 encouraging Nebraskans to follow direct health measures to stay safe.

MEAN to sell assets from time to time to other public agencies such as power districts, power plants, municipalities, and electric generation plants. It also provides for due process to a municipality facing expulsion or suspension.

This bill also includes provisions of three other bills:

- LB 367: Eliminate provisions relating to fund transfers and change a termination date under the Nebraska Litter Reduction and Recycling Act.
- LB 855: Eliminate legislative confirmation for certain members of the Niobrara Council.
- LB 856: Extend sunset of the Petroleum Release Remedial Action Cash Fund.

LB 1003e: Provide annexation powers to cities of the second class and villages for relocation due to catastrophic flooding (Walz)

The Legislature gave final approval to LB 1003e on a 42-1-6 vote July 31. The bill includes an emergency clause and was signed by the Governor Aug. 6.

The bill allows any city of the second class (>800 and <5,000 population) or a village (<800) to annex any lands, lots, tracts, streets, or highways when such annexation is for the purpose of relocating part or all of such city or village due to catastrophic flooding.

This bill also includes provisions of eight other bills:

- LB 795: amends the Enterprise Zone Act to provide that unemployment

SECOND SESSION OF 106TH LEGISLATURE SUMMARY CONTINUED

criteria to determine eligibility for designation as an enterprise zone is based on an average rate of unemployment as determined by either the most recent federal decennial census or American Community Survey five-year estimate.

- LB 799: Clean-up bill for statutes governing cities of the primary class.
- LB 801: Series of clean-up changes to the Community Development Law related to tax-increment financing (TIF).
- LB 821: Allow the planning commission for a city of the first class, city of the second class or village to cancel a quarterly meeting if there is no business pending before the committee.
- LB 885: Amend the Civic and Community Center Financing Act to change requirements for grants under

the Act for the preservation, restoration conservation, rehabilitation or reuse of a historic building or district.

- LB 957: Allow the mayor of a city of the first class or city of the second class to be deemed a member of the city council for purposes of establishing a quorum when the mayor's presence is necessary to establish a quorum.
- LB 984: Require that vacancies on certain municipally appointed boards, authorities and agencies be filled no later than six months after the date of vacancy.
- LB 993: Allow cities with a population between 10,000-25,000 under the City Manager Plan of Government Act to expand the size of their city council from five to seven members and transfer relevant provisions to the City Manager Plan of Government Act.

LB 1054e: Define the required beginning date and change deferral of payment

provisions under certain retirement plans (Kolterman)

The Legislature gave final approval to LB 1054e on a 48-0-1 vote. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed by the Governor July 24.

The bill mirrors changes in federal law for retirement plans. Primarily the bill increases the mandatory withdraw from 70.5 years of age to 72 years of age for those turning 70.5 after Jan. 1, 2020.

Budget Bills

The state budget is structured on a two-year basis. It is passed in odd-numbered years and adjustments made during legislative sessions held in even-numbered years.

Senators gave final round approval to the LB 1008 and LB 1009 by votes of 43-3-3 and 46-2-1. Both bills included emergency clauses and were signed into law by the Governor Aug. 6.

When the Legislature suspended the session in March, the Committee's proposal would have left \$133.8 million to fund bills passed this year. After the state's Economic Forecasting Advisory

Board met July 23 that dropped to \$89 million.

Sen. Stinner offered an amendment during Select File debate (adopted 33-0) that would require any unallocated and unexpended coronavirus relief funds as of Nov. 15, 2020, be re-offered through a grant process to meet remaining unmet needs. In addition, if allowed by federal law, any unallocated or unexpended funds received pursuant to the federal 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act would be transferred to the Cash Reserve Fund on or before Dec. 26, 2020. The \$1.25 billion of CARES Act funds Nebraska received in April must be expended by Dec. 31, 2020 or be returned to the federal government.

The budget bills were introduced by Speaker Jim Scheer at the request of Gov. Pete Ricketts.

LB 1008: Provide, change and eliminate provisions relating to appropriations (Scheer at the request of the Governor)

The bill proposes

Background Photo: Birdwood Creek area northwest of Hershey managed by Star Cattle Company, 2020 NRD Grassland Conservation Award winner. Photo courtesy of Sydney Norris, Twin Platte NRD.

changes to appropriations for FY 2019-20 and FY 2020-21 that were adopted last year. In addition, 35 bills were referred to the Appropriations Committee, most simply appropriating monies for a specific purpose. Many of these were previous requests that were unfunded due to lack of available funds. Of those, 19 have been incorporated into the Committee's proposed budget in some manner. This includes LB 1026, which originally proposed a \$2.5 million General Fund appropriation to the Daugherty Water for Food Institute. The amended version of LB 1026 includes a \$500,000 General Fund appropriation in FY 2020-2021 to the University for the Daugherty Water for Food Institute financed by a transfer from the Water Sustainability Fund to the General Fund.

For natural resources programs, the budget highlights include:

Department of Natural Resources

(DNR): receives an increase of \$175,000 in FY 2019-20 and \$425,000 in FY 2020-21 for Program No. 334 – Soil and Water Conservation. The increases are

for two studies, and the funding would come from a transfer from the Water Sustainability Cash Fund to the Department of Natural Resources Cash Fund.

The Missouri River Basin Flood Management Studies request is \$125,000 for each fiscal year. The agency will participate in a series of Missouri River Basin studies to improve the flood control system of the lower Missouri River Basin, including tributaries, therefore protecting water supplies, important infrastructure and agriculture. The State of Nebraska will collaborate with the states of Iowa, Kansas and Missouri, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to complete the studies.

The South Platte and Platte River Basins studies include a cash fund appropriation increase of \$50,000 in FY 2019-20 and \$300,000 in FY 2020-21 to the Soil and Water Conservation Program. The technical studies involve hydrologic, conjunctive management and modeling tool evaluations, and other environmental and economic investigations along the South Platte and

Platte River Basins. These studies will consider planned upstream water development projects and the possible impacts upon Nebraska water uses. The proposal also adds \$3.8 million to Program No. 314 – Critical Infrastructure Facilities – to assist with repairing the underground tunnel on the Fort Laramie Canal, which collapsed July 2019. The increase funding for this program would come from a transfer from the General Fund.

Programs No. 303 (Small Watersheds Flood Control Fund) and No. 307 (Resources Development Fund) will remain operational despite no new appropriations.

The Resources Development Fund has six projects at various stages. While no new appropriation has been requested, there is \$2,693,133.62 re-appropriated for completion of the projects. DNR's contract with each sponsor terminates 50 years from project closeout, therefore this fund will likely remain operational for some time.

Although the Legislature swept funding from the Small

Watersheds Flood Control Fund (SWFCF), it has not been discontinued and remains operational for future needs. There are several identified watershed studies currently being funded by NRCS, which will likely result in future SWFCF funding requests by districts. DNR is currently anticipating those funding needs will be no sooner than FY 2024-25 biennium.

Game & Parks

Commission: budget includes a \$187,000 increase in FY 2019-20 for repairs on the Cowboy Trail from the 2019 floods. This is estimated to be the state's share of the \$7.7 million in damage to the trail, of which FEMA is expected to pick up \$5.8 million.

Daugherty Water for Food Institute: budget includes \$500,000 from General Fund for FY 2020-21 to support water and agricultural research and existing collaborative initiatives to implement best practices in water conservation.

LB 1009: Provide for transfers of funds, repeal a fund, and change use of a fund (Scheer at the request of the Governor)

Senators gave final approval with a 46-2-1

LEGISLATURE CONTINUED

vote on July 31, and the Governor signed the bill into law Aug. 6.

The bill provides proposed changes to transfer funds, and the following are related to natural resources:

- **Water Sustainability Fund:** includes a transfer of \$175,000 for FY 2019-20 and \$425,000 for FY 2020-21 to the Department of Natural Resources Cash Fund for the studies outlined in LB 1008; transfer of \$500,000 to the General Fund on or before June 30, 2021, on such dates and in such amounts

as directed by the budget administrator at the Department of Administrative Services.

- **Critical Infrastructure Facilities Cash Fund:** modifies the fund to be used for costs related to temporary repairs to the main canal and tunnels of an interstate irrigation system, which experienced a failure. The change in LB 1008 provides \$3.8 million to assist with repairing the the Fort Laramie Canal, which collapsed in 2019.

LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTIONS

2020 resolutions of interest to NRDs

LR 288: Legislative resolution regarding Missouri River Management (Slama and others)

Sen. Slama introduced the legislative resolution and outlined the severe impacts Missouri River flooding has caused across southeast Nebraska, with flooding stretching from March through December and more than 420,000 acres of farmland not planted. She also outlined concerns over the Peru Levee failure and the U.S. Army

Corps of Engineers' refusal to fund the estimated \$325 million in necessary repairs.

The legislative resolution proposal is a non-binding legislative resolution outlining that the Nebraska Legislature respectfully urges Congress and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to prioritize flood control as a top priority for the management of water systems under their authority in the Missouri River Mainstem Reservoir System Master Water Control Manual for the Missouri River Basin.



Tri-Basin NRD, Lower Republican NRD and Central Platte Rangeland Alliance conducted a prescribed burn to control Eastern Redcedar on the Platte Republican Diversion pasture west of Smithfield on April 20, 2020. By August the pasture was already looking lush and green (inset).

NARD FOUNDATION HIGHLIGHTS YOUTH EDUCATION

The NARD Foundation builds partnerships to engage young Nebraskans to learn more about natural resources. Through these educational programs, your commitment and generosity inspires and grows the next generation of Nebraska naturalists.

In FY 2019-20, \$22,500 was dispersed to support multiple educational programs.

Due to the pandemic, the NARD was not able to hold annual fundraisers including the Ron Bishop Memorial Golf Tournament and the fall conference live and silent auctions. Please consider visiting nrdnet.org to make a donation.

Special thanks to each of you that participate in NARD Foundation events and partner

with organizations, foundations and the private sector.

Learn more about a few of the programs supported by the NARD Foundation:

Nebraska FFA

The Foundation sponsors the Nebraska FFA Natural Resources Speaking Leadership Development Event, Building Communities Chapter Award, Environmental & Natural Resources Career Development Event, Outdoor Recreation Proficiency Award, and State Officer Development.

This April, students and FFA chapters were recognized during a virtual FFA Convention.

Nebraska Envirothon

An environmental competition for high school students designed to test knowledge in seven areas of ag and

natural resources. Top teams receive cash prizes and paid registration to compete at the international NCF-Envirothon.

ACE Camp

Adventure Camp about the Environment (ACE) is a three-day natural resources camp hosted at Halsey. Targeted at middle school students, campers learn about natural resources during a fun summer camp experience.

NAYI

Annually, the Foundation supports the Nebraska Agriculture Youth Institute and participates in the career fair. This year's events were online, and we participated via video discussing areas of environmental study and related careers.

Nebraska LEAD

The LEAD program provides young adults with skills and experiences needed to become leaders and advocates for agriculture. Many LEAD graduates go on to serve on NRD boards.

Ag Day on the Hill

Nebraska college students attend National Ag Day in Washington, D.C. to learn about federal policy, trade, agriculture and natural resources.

The Great Park Pursuit

This program, hosted by Nebraska Game & Parks, encourages active lifestyles and increased awareness of outdoor opportunities at recreation areas across Nebraska. Pursuit locations often include NRD recreation areas.

NCF-Envirothon Coming in 2021

The 2020 NCF-Envirothon was canceled due to the pandemic. The NARD and NRDs will now host the international environmental competition in Lincoln July 25-31, 2021.

Although the competition may look a little different this coming summer, we look forward to this exciting opportunity to connect students to Nebraska's beauty and allow them to learn more about Nebraska's NRDs.



NARD staff from left, Megan Grimes, Dustin Wilcox, Jennifer Swanson and Jeanne Dryburgh golf at the Nebraska Farm Bureau Foundation fundraiser. The NARD Foundation helps support Ag in the Classroom.

NRD WELLNESS PROGRAM PROMOTES HEALTHY LIVING

NARD, WorkWell Inc. and the Nebraska Safety Council offer an employee wellness program to promote a safe and healthy work environment. The wellness program provides tools and resources to NRD employees and board members to help them be successful in making healthy lifestyle choices.

The wellness program was created as an addition to the existing Risk Pool Health Insurance Program. NARD board members and NRD managers saw the creation of a wellness program as a way to keep insurance premiums low and continue to save tax-payer dollars. NARD aids the 23 NRD wellness delegates to coordinate individual wellness programs. The main objective is to create a fun, friendly, non-intimidating wellness program that challenges employees to meet their district's wellness goals.

NARD and the NRDs offer a variety of wellness opportunities and challenges for all fitness levels. Unfortunately, many of our traditional

events like the one-mile walk and 5K fun run were canceled due to the pandemic.

Many of the local district wellness programs promote community involvement through a variety of activities including: toy drives, collections for local food banks and health screenings.

Participants in the wellness program have shown improvements in their health, including weight loss, increased physical activity, healthier eating habits, increased health screenings and flu shots. Because of the success of the NRD wellness program, many of the NRDs have received the Governor's Excellence in Wellness Award.



GET THE SCOOP: EMPLOYEE RETIREMENT PROGRAM

Thanks to the hard work of the NARD/NRD Employee Benefits Committee, the NRD Employee Retirement Program continues to grow and make improvements. The NRD Employee Benefits Committee meets four times annually to review details of the program and suggest changes in investment options to the NARD Board, which governs the program. The committee includes the NARD Executive Committee and 13 NRD employees

representing all areas of the state.

As of June 30, 2020, the NARD 414(h) retirement fund equity grew by \$2,855,426 to \$41,906,160. The defined contribution program allows

each employee to determine their own investments, providing flexibility for the employee to determine the amount of risk and potential rate of return they feel most comfortable with. Because it is a defined contribution program and not a defined benefit plan, there is no financial liability to the local NRDs or the NARD.

As of June 30, 2020, the voluntary NARD 457 program equity grew by \$345,914 to \$4,894,068. The program allows NRD employees to set aside additional pre-tax income for retirement and has the same investment options as the NARD 414(h) plan.

Mark Geist and Jonathan Beukelman of UBS Financial Services provide the investment platform for the plans. Since they have been involved, the NARD investment levels have increased almost four-fold. Benefit Plans Inc. of Omaha provides the reporting and compliance work for the plans.



NARD HEALTH INSURANCE RATES BELOW NATIONAL AVERAGE

The Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD) has operated a licensed health risk pool for NRD employees since FY 2006-07. The program is governed by the NARD Risk Pool Board, which includes NARD Board members. The NARD Risk Pool Stop/Loss Committee meets five times annually to review details of the program and suggest changes. The Committee includes the NARD Risk Pool Executive Committee and 13 NRD employees representing all areas of the state.

During the last 13 years, the average annual NARD health insurance premium increase has been 4.6% while the national annual average has been 11.7%. This is very rare in the insurance industry. If premium changes followed the national average, premiums would almost be double what they are today. In FY 2014-15, premiums decreased by 2.5% since the previous fiscal year netted a \$1.2 million gain. The board used additional reserves to keep premium increases down and pay claims in FY 2015-16 through 2017-18. At the end of FY 2015-16, the program showed a loss of approximately \$600,000, using more than half of the profits from FY 2013-14. The NARD Board set the rate for FY 2019-20 with a goal to break even. Relying on reserves, the Risk Pool ended the fiscal year with a loss of \$91,000.

The NARD Risk Pool Stop/Loss Committee and Risk Pool Board set rates again this year targeting a break-even year. The change for medical for FY 2020-21 is a 7.5% increase for all coverages. There will be no change on dental premiums.

The 2020 national average increase for health insurance is 8.3%, which is more than the rate increases for the NARD plan. NRD employee involvement in wellness activities and programs reduces healthcare costs to local NRDs and taxpayers.

As part of the Affordable Care Act, there is a federal premium tax based on the number of employees and family members enrolled in the plan. These taxes will be more than \$30,000 in FY 2020-21, and the NARD Risk Pool Board has opted to pay it from reserves rather than assess each employee or district for the tax.

The program operated as it was set up to do – working off reserves built up in the “good years” to cover losses in the “bad year.” The program has built reserves of \$5.6 million to allow for annual premium changes to be limited. Mid-American Benefits provides the third-party claims processing, and Milt Willnerd of Willnerd and Associates works with the NARD to ensure all state and federal reports are filed correctly and in a timely fashion.

The program is audited annually by independent auditors. In addition, the program is audited by the Nebraska Department of Insurance (NDOI) every four years. The program has been audited three times by the NDOI, most recently in May 2018. There were no recommendations for changes from NDOI.

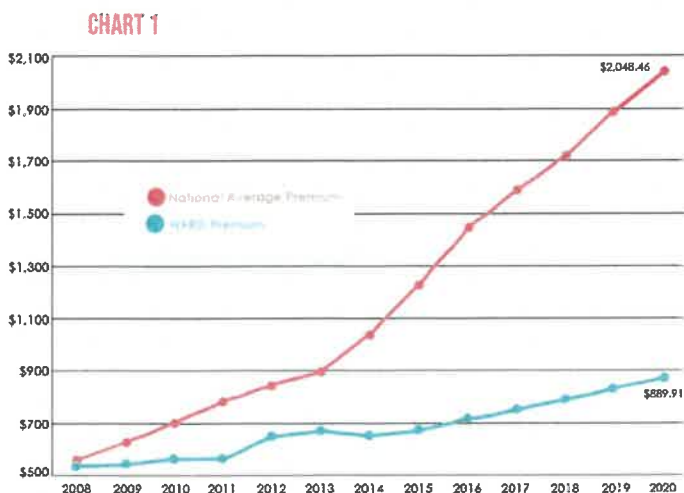
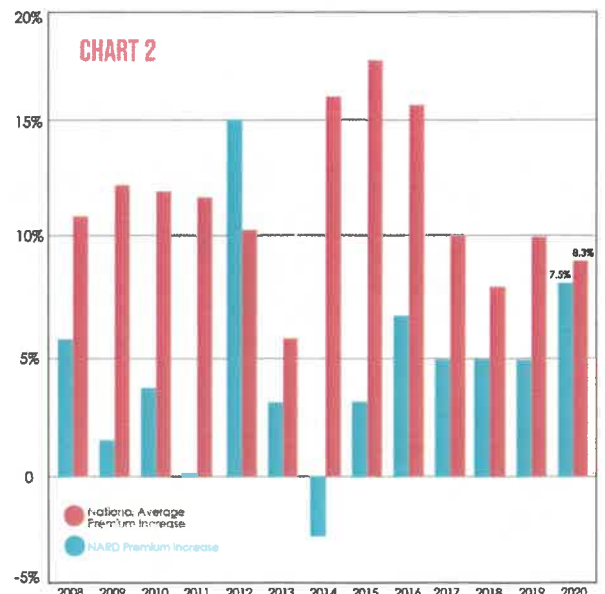


Chart 1: Shows the actual NARD insurance premium compared with the national average.

Chart 2: Shows the NARD annual premium increase (percent) compared to the national average premium increase.



Hilske to Retire in February

CITY BOY MAKES 39-YEAR CAREER AT THREE RURAL NRDS

Nemaha NRD General Manager Bob Hilske retires in February 2021 finishing out his 39 year-career, which spans three of Nebraska's NRDs.

Growing up in suburban Omaha surrounded by new developments and farmland, Hilske was fascinated by farming. He earned his Bachelor of Science in agriculture majoring in natural resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"When I graduated, I knew I wanted to work at a NRD and thought it would be a fascinating career," Hilske said. "I sent my resume to all the NRDs hoping for an opportunity."

In March 1982, he got his opportunity as the groundwater section assistant manager with the Little Blue NRD. Hilske started out reading meters, doing field work and working on irrigation scheduling.

Later, he ran cost-share programs and participated in some of the first information and education (I&E) work being done by NRDs.

"Working with landowners and teachers is really rewarding," Hilske said. "I had to decide if wanted to do more education work or go into management, which was my original plan."

He decided on management and joined the Middle Niobrara NRD in 1986. It was a controversial time as the Niobrara River faced designation as a federal wild and scenic river. Hilske went to Capitol Hill in 1989 to testify before a congressional subcommittee against the designation – the NRD's position. In 1991, the bill was signed into law and the Secretary of Interior appointed Hilske chairman of the Scenic River Advisory

Committee.

Setting up the process for administrating and managing the scenic river was very tense at times.

"I was working with the National Park Service and also trying to appease those opposed to the designation," Hilske said. "Many thought I was too 'middle ground,' but my philosophy was that it was the law and we needed to make the best of it."

After 16 years in Valentine, Hilske headed east accepting the general manager position with the Nemaha NRD in 2002. Two major challenges awaited him – the board just purchased new ground for an office and they had big plans for the Duck Creek Watershed.

The Duck Creek project involved two flood structures and a recreation area – there was a plan but no funding. During the next 16 years, Hilske worked to raise funds, file permits and complete construction on the \$8 million project, which finished with the opening of Duck Creek Recreation Area in 2018.

"The project was bigger and more



Nemaha NRD Manager Bob Hilske to retire in February 2021.

challenging than many expected," Hilske said. "Many thought it was a pipe dream that would never be built, so it was rewarding to see it completed."

Hilske acknowledged that early managers just scratched the surface of what NRDs could accomplish and advises new managers to find a way to make the job their own and go beyond being a caretaker of what's been established to create unique solutions.

Hilske has been to 48 of the 50 states, in retirement it's likely his feet will be warmed by Hawaiian sand and cooled by Alaskan snow to complete his bucket list. Photography, golfing and helping his brother at the Cellar 426 winery near Ashland round out his retirement plans.



At the 1989 NARD Washington D.C. Conference, Bob Hilske, right, enjoys drinks with, from left, Ken Berney, Lower Elkhorn NRD; Dennis Schueith, Upper Elkhorn NRD; Craig Gottschalk, NRD; and Paul Mann, Upper Elkhorn NRD.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S LETTER



Dean Edson
Executive Director

The NARD staff is honored to work for NRD directors and staff by aiding with legislation, tree programs, water management, youth programs, benefit programs and public relations.

For the 23rd consecutive year, we have balanced our budget and added to reserves, which is a testament to involvement from NRD board members and staff. The NARD manages the health insurance risk pool and retirement programs, which continue to grow and benefit NRD staff.

The Association also manages the NARD Foundation, which has grown significantly in the last 23 years thanks to fundraisers and member involvement. What started out small in 1997 with \$4,100 has grown to more than \$16,000 in annual funding for educational programs. Last year's NARD Foundation events raised nearly \$21,000.

While the pandemic is limiting our ability to hold fundraising events this year, the programs we

support continue. We remain committed to supporting the Foundation. Several individuals, companies and districts have stepped up to donate to the Foundation so we can continue to provide funding to these important programs. While we are not requesting sponsorships for Foundation events, we are actively accepting donations and respectfully request you consider a donation in lieu of this year's annual conference events.

COVID-19

The pandemic has presented challenges for us all including navigating daily changes in health directives. The districts responded and continued conducting business and providing programs to landowners.

The health and safety of our staff, board members, vendors and partners is our primary concern so we canceled many events including: the Washington, D.C. Conference, Basin Tour, Ron Bishop Memorial Golf Tournament, silent and live auctions,

and the NARD annual meeting. Unfortunately, this will result in lost income affecting our bottom line. The NARD has cut spending to help offset losses.

Riot and Fire

After the downtown Lincoln protests, our current office will not be rebuilt, so it is certain we must move. More than 85% of our office contents have been declared non-salvageable. We are working through the insurance adjustment process. We worked with a salvage company to identify and price out more than 895 items – everything from conference tables to staples. A list of items valued at \$258,000 was submitted and we await a decision. It will be a long wait on insurance reimbursements.

Office Relocation

Relocating to a temporary space was impractical without furniture, equipment and supplies to put into the space.

An Office Relocation Committee made up of the NARD Executive Committee and seven NRD managers held

meetings to look at multiple properties. It is apparent that equivalent space will be more rent.

The Committee has selected a few locations to purchase with existing tenants to reduce costs. This would include using reserves built up in the past 23 years in the General Operating, Foundation and Risk Pool funds to make a down payment. The goal is to keep the payments equivalent to the previous rent. The Board voted on an office building Sept. 29, and a purchase agreement was signed Oct. 8.

Moving Forward

To say the least, 2020 has been a challenging year. The NARD staff looks at these challenges as opportunities to learn and grow. Optimism will win out and we will survive this.



Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts

Protecting Lives • Protecting Property • Protecting the Future

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SAVE THE DATE – 2021 EVENTS

Jan. 6, 2021 | 90-day Nebraska Legislative Session Begins

Jan. 26-27, 2021 | NRD Legislative Conference (Lincoln)

Feb. 6-10, 2021 | NACD Annual Meeting (New Orleans, LA)

March 15-17, 2021 | NARD Washington, D.C. Conference

April 28, 2021 | Nebraska State Envirothon (Lake Wanhoo - Wahoo)

June 7-8, 2021 | NARD Basin Tour

June 6-9, 2021 | Adventure Camp About the Environment (Halsey)

July 25-31, 2021 | NCF-Envirothon Nebraska (Lincoln)

Sept. 26-28, 2021 | NARD Annual Conference (Kearney)

nrdnet.org

