

Nebraska Association of Resources Districts

# ANNUAL REPORT

2021



*More than 65 volunteers came together in Lincoln at Innovation Campus July 27 to judge 41 virtual oral presentations from around the world for the 2021 NCF-Envirothon hosted by Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts.*

*Photo courtesy of Sydney Norris, South Platte NRD*





**Jim Eschliman, President**  
Ericson, Nebraska  
Director, Lower Loup NRD

# PRESIDENT'S LETTER

While the pandemic raged on, 2021 started on a high note for the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts – we moved into a new office and our staff was once again under one roof. By purchasing our own office space that is large enough to host meetings and youth education events, we believe we are positioned for another 50 years of success.

More than five

years of planning came to fruition as we hosted the 2021 NCF-Envirothon in July. For student safety, we hosted the competition virtually with volunteers working behind the scenes in person during the four-day event. I have great respect for the staff and directors who were determined to find alternative ways to make this international event

a success and showcase our NRDs.

We also began to reintroduce our in-person events this year, and I enjoyed connecting with many of you during State Envirothon, Basin Tour and Husker Harvest Days. I look forward to celebrating the NRD 50th anniversary in 2022 and continuing our mission of protecting lives, property and the future.

## COMMUNITY CORNER



Above: Papio-Missouri River NRD General Manager John Winkler (red polo) and local dignitaries celebrate the cost-share project of a Heartland B-Cycle station in Bellevue.

Right: Lower Elkhorn NRD helps families discover area trails, lakes, and wild places while highlighting the unique opportunities nighttime offers with summer moon walk events known as "Stars, Strolls & S'mores."



Left: Lower Platte North NRD Water Manager Daryl Andersen and Assistant Manager Tom Mountford conduct a turbidity test with St. Mary's fifth graders during the 30th Spring Conservation Sensation at Lake Wanahoo.



Above: A Freeman Public School student exams a macroinvertebrate at a Science Field Day at Wagon Train Lake with Nemaha NRD.



Above left: Students attend a water session at the Upper Loup NRD Jr. High Field Day. Above right: A young girl shows off her catfish caught during a fishing clinic at Upper Big Blue NRD's Recharge Lake in June.



Above: The Lied Platte River Bridge near South Bend re-opened July 3. The bridge is the only crossing along the Platte River that connects Omaha and Lincoln by the MoPac trail. Right: Little Blue NRD provides Colorado Blue Spruce trees to Thayer Central Elementary.





# 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 16 years and on the NARD Board

since 2016. Eschliman also serves on his local co-op board and the Cattlemen'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 Orval Gigstad has served on the Nemaha NRD Board since 1993 and on the NARD Board since 1996. A practicing veterinarian for 45 years, he operates the Arbor Valley Animal Clinic in Syracuse.

NARD Secretary/Treasurer Martin Graff has served on the Middle Niobrara NRD Board 26 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 36 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 Meismer 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 2022.



2021 NARD Executive Committee  
Not pictured: Jim Johnson



Jim Eschliman  
**President**



Orval Gigstad  
**Vice President**



Martin Graff  
**Secretary/Treasurer**



Larry Reynolds  
**Past President**



James Meismer  
**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.

Lower Platte South NRD Manager Paul Zillig is chair and Lower Republican NRD Manager Todd Siel is vice chair.

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



Paul Zillig  
**Chair**



Todd Siel  
**Vice Chair**



# New Year, New Building

## WITH SPACE TO HOST, NARD OFFICE BUZZES WITH ACTIVITY

NARD now has a home to call its own. For the first time in NARD's history, the association has moved into its own headquarters.

In the early morning hours of Sunday, May 31, 2020, the NARD office at 601 S. 12th Street was burned when violence erupted in downtown Lincoln.

The NARD Board established an office relocation committee made up of the NARD Executive Board and seven NRD managers. There were several committee meetings to look at multiple properties. It was apparent that equivalent space would be more rent, some as much as 50 percent

higher. The committee reviewed several options to purchase, including buildings with existing tenants to reduce costs.

After a five-month search, a new office building was purchased at 8100 S. 15th Street on Dec. 28, 2020.

The NARD Board used existing reserves built up during the past 23 years from the NARD General Operating, Foundation and Risk Pool funds to make a down payment. The building tenant, the Nebraska Community Foundation, is a natural partner. The goal to keep the payments from NARD and the Risk Pool equivalent to the previous rent was achieved.

"The unexpected loss of the downtown office forced us to decide if we would continue renting or find a space to buy," said Dean Edson, NARD executive director.

"The NARD Executive Committee saw this as an opportunity to make a positive out of an unfortunate situation."

Throughout December drywall was hung, doors were stained, walls were painted, and bricks were laid for a new front entry. Staff moved in Jan. 19, 2021, the same day internet and phone lines were installed.

The south Lincoln location essentially doubles NARD's space to allow for more events and

meetings.

On March 3, NARD hosted the managers meeting at the new building and on March 8, the NARD board meeting – the first of many.

"The old offices didn't have room or parking to accommodate that many, so most Lincoln meetings had to be held outside our offices," Edson said. "Now, our large conference room can host up to 40 people with parking. We gave up our 10-minute walk to the capitol for a 10-minute drive, but our new space is more useful and safer for our staff and members."



The new NARD office is located at 8100 S. 15th Street in southwest Lincoln. NARD offices occupy the south half of the building and the Nebraska Community Foundation rents the north side of the building.



NARD Executive Director Dean Edson, right, welcomes NRD managers to the new NARD office March 3. With more square footage and parking, the NARD staff are able to host a variety of meetings and offer the meeting space to partners, too.

Right: During construction, NARD Projects and Partnerships Director Dustin Wilcox and NRD/ Department of Environment and Energy Liaison Jennifer Swanson measure offices to determine the amount of paint needed.



Left: NARD President Jim Eschliman signs the paperwork for the new office building while Executive Director Dean Edson looks on. The office in southwest Lincoln was purchased Dec. 28, 2020. Staff spent December and early January painting and staining.



Volunteers pack NCF-Envirothon team boxes at the NARD office. The NARD office was the hub for the virtual NCF-Envirothon.



# Urban Natural Resources Challenges

## ANNUAL BASIN TOUR FEATURES PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER NRD

Approximately 75 directors and staff from Nebraska's NRDs met in Omaha for the annual NRD Basin Tour highlighting the Papio-Missouri River NRD June 7-8, 2021.

"It was a pleasure hosting the Basin Tour to demonstrate the natural resources management opportunities and challenges facing the only metropolitan class city in the state," said John Winkler, Papio NRD general manager. "We are an extremely active and diverse district with a great deal of flood control, recreation, conservation, and resource management projects and programs."

Winkler, along with Marlin Petermann, assistant general manager, and Paul Woodward, groundwater management engineer, led the two-day tour showcasing several projects that protect lives and property in the Metro area including unique flood control projects that provide multi-purpose benefits to local communities.

Traditionally, the educational tour includes NRD directors and staff, state agency personnel and political representatives. Senator Robert Clements joined the first day of the tour and was able to learn more about the unique natural resources challenges that face Legislative District 2.

"I enjoyed the very informative tour," said Sen. Clements. "I learned much about flood control projects, which I had not known before."

The tour included several stops and tours of conservation projects underway that protect both urban and rural natural resources. Some of the 2021 tour highlights included:

- 2019 Flooding Impacts
- Glacier Creek Preserve
- Groundwater Management Projects
- Multi-Purpose Flood Control Reservoirs
- Missouri and Platte Rivers Levee Systems
- Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) Project Sites
- Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge & Omaha Floodwall
- Offutt Air Force Base and U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM)

"Basin tours give NRD directors a unique look at the conservation challenges that are being faced around the state," said Jim Eschliman, NARD president. "I enjoy seeing partnerships in action like Papio NRD's work to protect critical infrastructure around Offutt Air Force Base."

The NRD Basin Tour explores a different water basin each year. The hosting NRD showcases conservation projects, partnerships and the local communities in which they live and work.



Papio NRD General Manager John Winkler, left, and Sen. Robert Clements (District 2) discuss flood control on the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge.



From left, Jeff Steffen (LCNRD), Jim Johnson (SPNRD), Jerry Smith (LLNRD), John Winkler (PMNRD), Bill Niedfeldt (NNRD) and Larry Barta (LBBNRD) learn more about levee repairs.



At Flanagan Lake, Papio NRD Assistant Manager Marlin Petermann describes the difficulty of staying ahead of development when building flood control structures.





# Conservation Tree Program

## ACREAGE PACKAGES GAIN IN POPULARITY

With the pandemic still looming, NRDs sold 540,000 conservation trees and shrubs in 2021. While the overall number of trees being sold is down over the years, we have seen an increase in the number of people buying trees, as acreage packages become more popular.

NRDs expect to plant more trees in the coming years through the Nebraska Forest and Restoration Partnership and with Executive Travel's tree planting initiative.

Nebraska's NRDs look forward to partnering with the Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) on the Nebraska Forest Restoration Partnership, which brings together the NFS, the NRDs, and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

to address declines in the state's forests and windbreaks. Using a \$4.3 million grant from NRCS, partners will work directly with landowners to increase the scale and pace of forest restoration statewide. This includes planting 1.5 million trees, providing new management of 30,000 acres of declining forests, increasing the health and resiliency of 7,000 acres of vulnerable forests and restoring 250 linear miles of agricultural windbreaks.

Executive Travel, a Lincoln-based travel management company, has committed to planting a tree for every airline ticket they sell with a goal of planting 1 million trees. Through the initiative, the company

hopes to offset the carbon footprint from their clients' airline travel. The NRDs are planning to partner with Executive Travel, who will provide additional cost share to get those trees planted in Nebraska.

Upper Big Blue NRD hosted the annual NRD Forestry Workshop Sept. 8-9. More than 25 attendees from 15 districts participated in the two-day workshop. The agenda included round-table discussions, presentations on disease topics, and partner updates from NRCS, USFS, NFS and the Invasive Species Council. Upper Big Blue



Upper Big Blue NRD hosts the annual Forestry Workshop Sept. 8-9.

NRD also led a half day tour highlighting forestry projects in their district.

Promotion of the NRD Conservation Tree Program continues with advertising on Big Red Wrap-Up during the Husker football season and booths at various events including the Grazing Conference, Husker Harvest Days, Nebraska Ag Expo and the Women in Ag Conference.



Background: Lower Big Blue NRD plants trees southwest of Beatrice.



Middle Niobrara NRD staff plant trees as snow falls. In 2021, MNNRD sold 39,146 trees and planted 25,000 of those while laying 14 miles of weed barrier in 16 days.



Tri-Basin NRD Land Resources Manager Nate Munter installs fittings in a drip system for a 2021 tree planting.



# LOWER PLATTE NORTH WELCOMES STATE ENVIROTHON

High schoolers from across Nebraska – and a few pelicans – descended on Lake Wanahoo for the 29th annual Nebraska State Envirothon April 28, 2021. Ord High School took home the championship along with \$1,500 and represented Nebraska at the National Conservation Foundation (NCF) Envirothon in July.

Envirothon is an environmental education program for high school students that combines classroom learning and outdoor activities. This year's competition was hosted at the Lower

Platte North NRD's Lake Wanahoo near Wahoo.

"Envirothon allows students to get outdoors and learn about natural resources in a hands-on environment," said Jim Eschliman, NARD president. "The activities are designed to help students become environmentally-aware, action-oriented adults, but also exposes them to many exciting career opportunities."

During the state competition, five-member teams were tested on their knowledge of aquatics, forestry, policy, range, soils and wildlife, as well as prepared and

delivered an oral presentation focusing on a current environmental issue.

The 2021 oral presentation theme "Water Resources Management: Local Control, Local Solutions" challenged teams to propose a solution on a complex problem before a panel of judges.

The NARD Foundation awarded scholarships to the top three teams at the state competition:

- **First Place (\$1,500):** Ord
- **Second Place (\$1,000):** Norris
- **Third Place (\$500):** Arthur County

Additional prizes were awarded to the top teams in each testing category:

- **Aquatics:** Norris
- **Forestry:** Pender
- **Policy:** Arthur County, Norris and St. Paul
- **Range:** Ord
- **Soils:** Ord and St. Paul
- **Wildlife:** Norris
- **Oral Presentation:** Concordia

More than 75 teams competed in the regional contests between Feb. 3-5, and 14 teams qualified to participate at the state competition.



Lower Platte North NRD General Manager Eric Gottschalk welcomes State Envirothon teams to the Clint Johannes Education Building.



Ord High School took the State Envirothon Championship and represented Nebraska at the NCF-Envirothon July 25-28, 2021.

# STATE LAND JUDGING HOSTED SAFELY

With safety measures in place, Upper Big Blue NRD hosted the 2020 State Land Judging contest last October near McCool Junction. Special thank you to our NRD hosts and NRCS soil scientists, who helped make land judging possible during a pandemic. The 2021 State Land Judging competition will be hosted by Tri-Basin NRD Oct. 20.



Heartland High School students were named 2020 State Land Judging Champions.



# 2021 NCF-Envirothon Goes Virtual

## NARD FOUNDATION AWARDS ADDITIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS

In the wake of a global pandemic, Nebraska's NRDs were faced with hosting an international natural resources competition virtually. Volunteers embraced the challenge and in July 41 teams – 34 from the United States, four from Canada and three from China – logged on to compete for scholarship prizes at the 2021 NCF-Envirothon.

"After canceling in 2020, we knew we could not sit idly by and wait for clarity on the pandemic," said Jim Eschliman, NARD president. "We decided on a first for the competition – we went virtual."

Making that decision added a degree of certainty for teams and allowed the NARD to proceed to build the competition around a virtual component. Moving online meant finding ways to deliver an experience that was both competitive and meaningful for students.

Using a Lincoln broadcast studio,

components of the virtual event were prerecorded and broadcast as a livestream to students watching around the globe.

### Sunday, July 25 – Opening Ceremonies

Nebraska dignitaries including U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer and Gov. Pete Ricketts welcomed participants to the competition and explained what makes Nebraska a special place to live and work. National Geographic Photographer and Nebraska-native Joel Sartore gave a 45-minute keynote presentation and answered student questions live from the studio.

### Monday, July 26 – Testing Day

Students had a 12-hour window from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. to take five 60-minute online timed tests demonstrating their knowledge of soils and land use, aquatic ecology, forestry, wildlife management and the current issue.

### Tuesday, July 27 – Oral Presentation Day

The teams prepared 20-minute oral presentations on this year's current issue, "Water Resources Management: Local Control, Local Solutions." Utilizing Innovation Campus, more than 65 volunteers were separated into eight breakout rooms with a zoom coordinator, timer and panel of five judges to listen to presentations given live via Zoom.

### Wednesday, July 28 – Top 3 and Awards

Using the combined test and oral presentation scores, the Top 3 were named and students gave their oral presentations again to a new panel of judges, which were live streamed at the broadcast studio. Using Zoom we were able to do live reactions of the teams when their awards were called making the experience interactive and fun for those watching online.

The Envirothon is an agriculture, wildlife and

science competition for high school students, which is traditionally held outdoors to give students a chance to take their classroom learning and apply it in a natural setting. Five-member teams compete to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in aquatics, forestry, soils, wildlife and a current environmental issue. The top team from each state, province and nation partner participate in the annual NCF-Envirothon. The goal of the annual competition is to help shape our future leaders' knowledge in natural resources issues.

Next year's NCF-Envirothon will be hosted by the Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, July 24-30, 2022. The 2022 current environmental issue will be "Waste to Resources."

Place	Team	City, State/Province	Scholarship Amount & Sponsor
1	New York	Esopus, NY	\$15,000 (Smithfield Foods)
2	North Carolina	Denton, NC	\$10,000 (Smithfield Foods)
3	South Carolina	Spartanburg, SC	\$5,000 (Smithfield Foods)
4	Massachusetts	Groton, MA	\$4,000 (NARD Foundation)
5	Florida	Miami, FL	\$3,500 (NARD Foundation)
6	New Mexico	Truth or Consequences, NM	\$3,000 (NARD Foundation)
7	Pennsylvania	Brodheads ville, PA	\$2,500 (NARD Foundation)
8	Ontario	Toronto, Ontario	\$1,000 (Conservation Districts of Iowa)
9	Maryland	Rockville, MD	\$750 (Conservation Districts of Iowa)
10	Manitoba	Swan River, Manitoba	\$250 (Conservation Districts of Iowa)





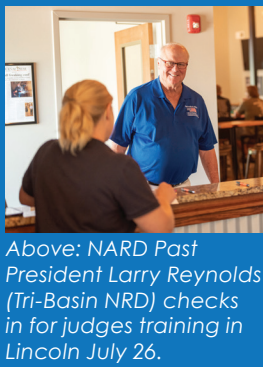


Volunteers pack team boxes filled with goodies from Nebraska including t-shirts, popcorn, beef jerky, Corn Nuts, Kool-Aid and agates (our state rock and gemstone).

Volunteers also hand-wrote more than 250 Nebraska tourism postcards and mailed them to individual team members, advisors and guests participating.



Austen Hill, Papio-Missouri River NRD education programs supervisor, and Rataouille, a black rat snake, introduced and moderated questions for National Geographic Photographer Joel Sartore during the NCF-Envirothon opening ceremonies July 25. The NARD worked with Inspimedia in Lincoln to record in their studio and live stream the event to students around the globe.



Below: NARD Director Jim Johnson (South Platte) joins NARD staff Dean Edson and Dustin Wilcox for Envirothon volunteering.

Above: NARD Past President Larry Reynolds (Tri-Basin NRD) checks in for judges training in Lincoln July 26.



From left, Tri-Basin NRD General Manager John Thorburn, Upper Big Blue NRD General Manager Dave Eigenburg, Lower Big Blue NRD Resources Specialist Ryan Thomas and Lower Big Blue NRD General Manager Dave Clabaugh attend judges training.



Lower Elkhorn NRD Information and Education Specialist Julie Wragge, right, and Upper Big Blue NRD Public Relations Manager Chrystal Houston check teams in via Zoom at Innovation Campus July 27.

Below: From left, Little Blue NRD Assistant Manager Tyler Goeschel, Middle Niobrara NRD General Manager Mike Murphy, NeDNR Integrated Water Management Coordinator Carrie Wiese and Nemaha NRD Water Resources Manager Chuck Wingert judge oral presentations July 27.



From left, Olsson Assistant Engineer Mallory Morton, Central Platte NRD Assistant Manager Jesse Mintken, Upper Niobrara White NRD Assistant Manager Lynn Webster and Lower Platte South NRD Maintenance Technician Trent Henry judge oral presentations July 27.



Left: NCF-Envirothon finals judges from left, Lewis & Clark NRD General Manager Annette Sudbeck, Smithfield Foods Sustainability Specialist Alyssa Hamill, NARD President Jim Eschliman, NARD Executive Director Dean Edson, DNR Director Tom Riley and NRCS Interim State Conservationist Britt Weiser.

Right: The Nebraska Host Committee passes the torch to the Ohio Host Committee. Ohio will host the 2022 NCF-Envirothon.





# NRD CONSERVATION AWARD WINNERS ANNOUNCED



Ed Kyes  
**Director of the Year**

With his perfect meeting attendance, educational volunteering and committee activity, Ed is a valuable resource serving on the Central Platte NRD Board since 2001.



Chris Larsen  
**Grassland Conservation**

Chris Larsen of Larsen Land & Livestock has integrated multiple conservation practices on his land near Lexington. He regularly opens his property for education and conservation tours, including acting as the 2021 regional Range Judging site.



Sharla Hanzlik  
**Educator of the Year**

Niobrara High School science teacher Sharla Hanzlik gives her students a hands-on role in natural resources by tackling invasive species with a Purple Loosestrife Program.



Diamond Bar Ranch  
**Tree Planter of the Year**

Since 2000, Robert and Susanne Jones have planted 31,690 trees on their ranch near Stapleton. They continuously plant new windbreaks and improve existing ones.



Curt Arens  
**Community Conservation**

Curt is active in conservation on his own farm in Knox County, but also as an editor for Farm Progress. Much of his writing focuses on family, the importance of innovation and protecting natural resources.



Jeff and Jolene Steffen  
**Soil Stewardship**

The Steffens have implemented a continuous no-till cropping system for 25 years on their farm near Fordyce. They also work to maintain a living root by using cover crops and diversifying their crop rotation.

# HUGHES INDUCTED INTO THE NRD HALL OF FAME



*Ted Hughes*

Ted Hughes served on the Upper Elkhorn NRD board of directors from 1986 to 2020. As an Antelope County farmer, Hughes was interested in the environmental quality of the area and caring for our greatest resource - water. Whether working on land or water issues, Hughes has promoted getting the most conservation rewards out of the fewest tax dollars needed.

Hughes also served on the NARD Board from 1998 to 2020. He was NARD president 2006-2008; vice president 2004-2006 and secretary/treasurer 2002-2004. He played a vital role during the development of the current risk pool insurance program.

Hughes is an Army veteran and active in American Legion Post 172 where he has served as Post Commander. Currently, he serves as the president of the Neligh City Council.

*Due to COVID-19 pandemic cancellations, the 2020 NRD Conservation Award winners and NRD Hall of Fame inductees will be recognized at the 2021 NRD Annual Conference in Kearney Sept. 27-28, 2021.*



# OUTDOOR RECREATION ON THE RISE, NRDS CONTINUE TO INVEST

The pandemic brought renewed enthusiasm for outdoor activities with a record number of people visiting recreation areas for camping, boating, fishing, hiking and more. Visitors have remained high in 2021, and NRDS continue to invest in improvements to rec areas across the state.

"If there is one lesson COVID-19 has taught everyone, its how important good health is to us," said Upper Big Blue NRD Director Ronda Rich. "Being out in the fresh air was truly recommended

and we are thankful that our NRD had these rec areas for families to enjoy the great outdoors. As a board, we are excited to see these areas used and it gives us the momentum to make improvements knowing that they truly are a good use of tax dollars."

This year, the Upper Big Blue NRD has installed new bathroom facilities at Smith Creek and Oxbow Trail Recreation Areas. These restrooms are ADA accessible and future plans include adding ADA parking stalls

and sidewalks. Other planned improvements at these sites include the installation of domestic wells and hydrants, security lights, and outlets at picnic shelters.

Additionally, the board has approved the installation of safety enhancements at Smith Creek, Oxbow Trail, Bruce L. Anderson, and Pioneer Trails recreation areas, including severe weather sirens and tornado shelters. These features will likely be installed in fall 2021 or spring 2022.

Recently, Little Blue NRD added 100 tons

of rock to the road at Liberty Cove to improve accessibility. Located near Hastings, Prairie Lake Recreational Area is receiving 20 new electrical pads along with the addition of new trees, picnic tables and fire rings.

To find a recreation area near you, visit [nrdrnet.org/recreation](http://nrdrnet.org/recreation).



Left: Campers flock to Nemaha NRD's Duck Creek recreation area. In addition to RV camping, tent camping was widely popular at recreation areas this past year.

Right: An Omaha resident uses the recently installed kayak launch at Papio-Missouri River NRD's Big Elk Recreation Area in Papillion, which opened Sept. 24.



Upper Big Blue NRD recently installed upgraded bathroom facilities at Smith Creek (Utica) and Oxbow Trail (Ulysses) recreation areas.

## LOWER PLATTE SOUTH NRD HOSTS MANAGERS RETREAT & TOUR

Managers toured projects throughout Lancaster County and beyond during the annual managers retreat hosted by Lower Platte South NRD in Lincoln Aug. 30-Sept. 1.

Tour highlights included Upper Salt Watershed projects, Salt Creek levee, Deadman's Run flood reduction, wellhead protection areas and Ashland National Guard Camp flood repairs.

Managers had the opportunity to stretch their legs at the Antelope Valley Flood Control Project.

Partnering with the City of Lincoln and the University of Nebraska, the District completed the Antelope Valley Project in 2012. The \$246 million, 600-square-block project along Antelope Creek through central Lincoln had three major components: community revitalization, transportation and flood control. Besides creating a beautiful open waterway through the heart of Lincoln, the project removed several hundred acres and 800 homes and businesses from the floodplain.



During the manager's retreat Aug. 31, attendees toured the Antelope Valley Creek project. At the heart of the project is Union Plaza. Its shining waterway (designed to characterize the Platte River), trails, linear park and nearby retail businesses combine to create an informal gathering place for University of Nebraska-Lincoln students and the general public. The flood control component of the project has shown its worth, proving the waterway can contain the runoff from a 100-year frequency storm, needing only minor cleanup. "Colossus," the brick head sculpture designed by New York artist James Tyler, is dedicated to former Lower Platte South NRD General Manager Glenn Johnson.



# NCF-ENVIROTHON INSPIRES GROUNDWATER SOLUTIONS

*Envirothon Current Environmental Issue Seeks to Address Water Quality*



**Jennifer Swanson**  
NRD/Dept. of Environment  
& Energy Liaison

Each year, more than 25,000 high school students across the United States, Canada and China compete in their local Envirothon program with the goal of making it to the National Conservation Foundation (NCF) Envirothon international competition. The NCF-Envirothon tests the students in the areas of aquatic ecology, forestry, soils/land use,

wildlife and a current environmental issue.

This year's current environmental issue was "Water Resources Management: Local Control, Local Solutions." The goal of the current environmental issue was to educate students from across the globe about Nebraska's unique Natural Resources Districts and how we manage our natural resources.

The students were presented the real-life scenario of the Bazile Groundwater Management Area in northeast Nebraska with instances of high nitrates in the groundwater. They were provided background information on the area, including major land use, township

nitrate concentrations and current rules and regulations. The teams were asked to present one set of groundwater rules and regulations with four phases and come up with three new practices that are not currently being used to address the nitrate problem.

Recommendations from student teams included:

- Nitrogen coagulation treatment
- Require permits for use of nitrogen fertilizer
- Prohibit nitrogen fertilizer application of more than 50 lbs. per acre
- Required livestock exclusion, vegetative treatment systems and pasture

management of animal feeding operations (AFOs)

- The NRD would set the recommended nitrogen application rate

We wanted the teams to understand what makes Nebraska different from other U.S. conservation districts. Teams were challenged to come up with innovative solutions and to take into consideration the social, economic and political impacts of their decision making, similar to what NRD board of directors and staff do daily.

Hosting the NCF-Envirothon was a great opportunity to showcase Nebraska's unique NRD system and how we manage our natural resources for future generations.



Nebraska's NCF-Envirothon team from Ord presented from a conference room on UNL's East Campus, which was live streamed to a panel of judges at UNL's Innovation Campus. There were 41 teams from across the globe giving presentations on water quality.



The 2021 NCF-Envirothon champions were New York. The team was from The Mount Academy in Esposus, New York, along the Hudson River.



# PARTNERSHIPS CRITICAL TO NRD SUCCESS

*NRDs continue to demonstrate the value of public-private partnerships*



**Dustin Wilcox**

NARD Programs and Partnerships Director

As NRDs prepare to celebrate their 50th anniversary next year, there will be many opportunities to reflect on all that has been accomplished to protect lives and property in the state. Along with that reflection, there will also be many opportunities to acknowledge the partnerships that have contributed to the success of the NRDs.

As Henry Ford quoted so well, "Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; but working together is success." and undoubtedly the ability of the NRDs to work together has been and will continue to be critical to the overall success of the NRDs.

Across the state, NRDs have relied on

joint partnerships to protect resources. Many agreements and partnerships, like those of NCORPE and the Niobrara River Basin Alliance, have continued to pursue and implement joint projects that protect water users across river basins.

Equally important are the partnerships NRDs have been developed and maintained with local, state, federal and private partners.

Recent efforts by the Twin Platte NRD working to track water usage reflects partnerships with producers to jointly protect resources. Tabletop drought response exercises in the Lower Platte demonstrate partnerships with local stakeholders.

Similarly important are the partnerships NRDs have maintained with state partners. There is no better example than the partnerships between the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (NeDNR) and local NRDs. In addition to data sharing and joint modeling efforts, every NRD has now

partnered with NeDNR on the development and implementation of Integrated Management Plans.

Partnerships with federal agencies also continue to play a role in the success of NRD efforts. While working to secure funding and construct levees that protect Offutt Air Force Base, the Papio-Missouri River NRD has demonstrated just how critical these partnerships are.

NRDs have also demonstrated the value of public-private partnerships. A new project by the Upper Big Blue and Central Platte NRDs that enhances cost-share payments for producers implementing conservation practices with measurable goals, demonstrates what

can be accomplished when NRD efforts to protect resources are aligned with the conservation goals of for-profit corporations.

Partnerships require coming together and keeping together, which isn't always easy. But as the past has demonstrated, healthy partnerships that work together can overcome even the most difficult conservation challenges. Whether it's partnerships between the 23 NRDs, with local citizens and organizations, the state, federal organizations or with the private sector, the association is here to assist in fostering partnerships that enhance the NRDs' efforts to collectively protect lives, property and the future.



Lower Loup NRD Water Modeling Coordinator Cam Conrad explains a drought map he created for a stakeholders meeting Sept. 9. This is the District's first step in their Drought Mitigation Plan.



# PROGRAMS THAT MAKE A *difference*

## UPPER NIOBRARA WHITE

In recent years, UNWNRD observed rising groundwater levels in southern Sheridan County that allowed for the expansion of irrigated acres as well as a water relocation analysis that was completed in December 2020. The water relocation analysis was a joint venture between UNWNRD and the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources to study the impacts and feasibility of groundwater recharge and relocation to areas with declining groundwater levels.

## NORTH PLATTE

As NPNRD faces drier occurrences as indicated by the U.S. Drought Monitor, the focus is on drought. In addition, the District is working with producers on the use and overuse of nitrogen, and encouraging producers to sign up for Encouraging Producer Innovation through Conservation (EPIC), which encourages reduction of consumptive water use.

## SOUTH PLATTE

The District is in the second increment of the Integrated Management Plan. Excess flows/groundwater recharge, water allocations and decertifying irrigated acres help incrementally meet SPNRD's goal of fully appropriated and offsetting post-1997 depletions. The Sidney Groundwater Quality Management sub-area was changed from Phase 2 to Phase 3 with more stringent requirements to help lower nitrate levels. Oliver Reservoir Recreation Area in Kimball County reached record campers.

## UPPER REPUBLICAN

In 2021, the District continued conservation efforts that aid interstate water agreement compliance including the permanent retirement of irrigated land with high impacts on stream flow, real-time availability of water usage information, crop water usage and soil moisture technology that aid irrigation decisions, and development of a groundwater model to inform water-policy decisions.

## MIDDLE NIOBRARA

The District continues to implement Phase 3 and 4 projects in the Long Pine Creek Watershed. MNNRD is involved with two Emergency Watershed Protection and five Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations projects. The Sandhills Interactive Natural Resources Complex (SINREC) creation is underway with monitoring wells drilled, pivot installed and interior design concepts developed.

## UPPER LOUP

The ULNRD is in the process of establishing a Drought Management Plan. In spring, the District finished the Thedford Fire Hall Arboretum project with 90 percent survivability of more than 60 species of trees and shrubs. Additionally, a natural resources field day was hosted Aug. 25 for 8th grade students.

## TWIN PLATTE

In 2019, TPNRD began a Water Data Program as part of the second increment of the Integrated Management Plan (IMP). The District partnered with Grower Information Services Cooperative (GiSC), Paige Wireless, and Olsson to obtain accurate water-use data for growers and for the groundwater models needed for the required robust review in the IMP. The program provides daily data for the grower that can lead to less water use.

## MIDDLE REPUBLICAN

MRNRD is using a WaterSMART grant from the Bureau of Reclamation to update telemetry meters on all district wells. The goal is to provide all producers with real-time information on water use, soil moisture and others useful information. The NRD will control the data providing producers a password-protected log-in to view their specific water data.

## LOWER NIOBRARA

To expand groundwater monitoring, the District is installing six monitoring wells to help monitor water levels. The District allowed up to 100% of the well casing to be removed to lower nitrate levels. District well No. 2, L-10, is being sealed off in order to pump water with less nitrate.

## LOWER LOUP

The District will complete a groundwater recharge project southeast of Columbus in 2021. The project will utilize water from the Loup Power Canal to recharge groundwater in the Lost Creek Basin. The District is developing a Drought Mitigation Plan and continues to work with the communities of North Loup and Sargent on flooding issues.

## TRI-BASIN

The District is working with the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (PRRIP) and the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (NeDNR) to construct seven wells to recover and retine excess Platte River flows delivered to Cottonwood Ranch, a PRRIP property in northwest Phelps County. This project will help PRRIP reduce shortages to Platte River target flows needed to support habitat for endangered Whooping Cranes and Piping Plovers. The Cottonwood Ranch Streamflow Augmentation Project will help NeDNR and Platte Basin NRDs achieve the goals of the Platte River Cooperative Agreement.

## LOWER REPUBLICAN

LRNRD approved and implemented their fifth generation Integrated Management Plan (IMP) effective Sept. 27, 2021. The IMP incorporates updates needed due to recent changes in RRCA procedures, in-state accounting methods, and to be consistent with the goals and objectives of the Republican River Basinwide Plan. The district was awarded two NRCS Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations grants for Turkey Creek and Thompson Creek with the primary focus on agricultural water supply development.



# 2021

# NRD PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

water monitoring, LNNRD is installing wells through an NET grant for quality/quantity. In 2021, the District installed over 1,000 new irrigated acres. District staff in West Knox Rural Water NNRD are perforating the upper part of the aquifer in order to get water from the lower part of the well.

## LEWIS & CLARK

The District, in partnership with NDEE, NET, NGPC and NRCS, kicked off the Bow Creek Watershed project to address high levels of *E. coli*. Watershed Coordinator Becky Ravenkamp works with producers to identify and implement conservation practices to improve soil health, water quality and farm profitability. In addition, water quality data was gathered from a dozen sites in the watershed and analyzed for *E. coli*, nutrients, total suspended solids and atrazine.

## PAPPIO-MISSOURI RIVER

The Papio NRD has reached substantial completion of repairs to the Missouri River Levee System that protects Offutt Air Force Base. Portal Lake Recreation Area (WP6) and Big Elk Lake (WP7) in Papillion are complete and open to the public. Three additional flood mitigation reservoirs (WP1, WP2 and WP4) are in the beginning stages.

## UPPER ELKHORN

The UENRD continues to sample more than 600 irrigation wells for nitrates and measures approximately 360 wells for static water levels. Newly installed flowmeters have been added to the monitoring list bringing flowmeter numbers up to 380+ readings. Checking a larger number of flowmeters produces a more accurate average inches of applied irrigation water for each subdistrict.

## LOWER ELKHORN

The District received NET funding to expand groundwater monitoring in Pierce County. Maintaining safe drinking water is a top priority for LENRD. The Bazile Groundwater Management Area (BGMA) also received NET funding for year three of the demonstration sites for the groundwater nitrate reduction project. This project is a vital step forward in stabilizing, and eventually reducing, nitrate levels within the BGMA. The district also launched [www.nitrateinwater.org](http://www.nitrateinwater.org).

## LOWER PLATTE SOUTH

LPSNRD continues to replace aging infrastructure including NRCS rehabilitations on two dams. After March 2019 flood damage, the Lied Platte River Bridge was re-opened in July, with help from the Papio NRD and Nebraska Game & Parks. Monolith Materials sought permits for three wells as part of an expansion near Hallam. A 12-month process resulted to determine whether adequate groundwater was available before the permit was approved.

## CENTRAL PLATTE

CPNRD is partnering with the Illinois Corn Growers Association to implement Precision Conservation Management (PCM) with Frito Lay growers on the District's west end. The PCM specialist will help farmers secure financial and technical assistance to adopt and expand conservation practices while evaluating their impact to the environment and profitability. PCM is funded by the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

## LOWER PLATTE NORTH

The District continues flood damage reduction on the Wahoo Creek Watershed with funding help for three of 10 sites from the Regional Conservation Partnership Program and Water Sustainability Fund. Planning and design of the remaining seven sites are funded through the NRCS Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations program. The Lake Wanhoo Recreation Area added an additional 4.5 miles of primitive trails, and the Shell Creek Watershed monitoring group reached a 20-year milestone of testing the water.

## UPPER BIG BLUE

In 2021, UBBNRD hosted a series of stakeholder meetings to solicit feedback on the Water Quality Management Plan for the target area of the Beaver Creek watershed and Recharge Lake. Strategies for reducing the amount of atrazine, nitrogen and phosphorus were discussed during three months, concluding with an open house event to present ideas to district residents. The recommendations of the stakeholder group will guide programs offered and grant funding sought by the District to improve water quality in the future.

## NEMAHA

After a two-year closure, a portion of Steamboat Trace Trail is now open. The 2019 floods broke levees, and not only covered the trail with water, but deposited silt, downed mature trees, and completely washed out a section of the 22-mile trail located between Nebraska City and Brownville. NRD crews repaired the segment from Peru to Nebraska City to minimum-maintenance standards and hope to open additional portions this fall.

## LITTLE BLUE

LBNRD expanded its groundwater management to focus on nitrate concentrations by sampling 300+ irrigation wells by Sept. 30. The District is finishing up the two-year Water Quality Zone Assessment and data collected will be compared to 2015 data to assess the effectiveness of nitrate management efforts. In partnership with NRCS, the District has been working with landowners in the Big Sandy watershed to improve water quality with cover crops, terraces, irrigation water management and buffer strips to reduce soil erosion.

## LOWER BIG BLUE

LBBNRD has secured \$1.2+ million in grant funding the last year. Two grants from NET provide additional cost share for flowmeters. A third grant provides funding to address nutrient loading and runoff concerns in the Turkey Creek watershed. The district also received NRCS Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations funds to study the Little Indian Watershed. Little Indian is a pilot project of the P.L.566 flood control program, which helped build dams across the U.S. Many structures date back to the 1950s.



# A GLIMPSE OF ACTIVITIES IN THE *natural resources districts*



Left: Tri-Basin NRD Interns Zach Temple and Hamsa Ganapathi visit the Johnson Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) to check the water monitoring equipment.  
Below: Papio-Missouri River NRD collects more than 47,000 pounds of e-waste in Dakota City.



Above: Upper Big Blue NRD hosts a Water Quality Management Plan community open house in York

Right: In partnership with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Upper Republican NRD is working on a project to predict crop water use with an Eddy Covariance System.



Left: Bill Hiatt, Central Platte NRD resources conservationist, at the Wood River Flood Control Project prescribed burn.



Above: In December 2020, work was completed on the Upper Big Nemaha 25C dam concrete spillway.



Above: South Platte NRD hosts a public hearing March 18, 2021, to update the district-wide Groundwater Management Area plan rules and regulations.



Above: Upper Niobrara White NRD works with the Nebraska Forest Service to reforest the Pine Ridge area after 2006 and 2012 fires. A 15-person crew from Idaho hand plants Ponderosa Pine on the rough terrain. They can plant 20,000 trees in a day.  
Right: Lower Platte South NRD establishes saltwort (*salicornia rubra*), an endangered plant species in Nebraska, at the Marsh Wren Saline Wetland in north Lincoln.



Lower Niobrara NRD expands groundwater monitoring with six new wells using Nebraska Environmental Trust grant funds.





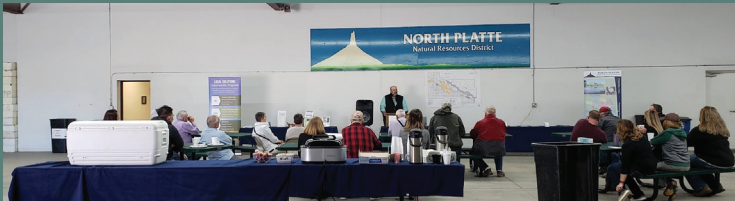
Congressman Adrian Smith visits the Bazile Groundwater Management Area (BGMA) and City of Creighton Water Department to learn more about nitrate in groundwater. From left, Rep. Smith; Steve Morrill, Creighton mayor; Annette Sudbeck, Lewis & Clark NRD general manager; Joslynn VanDerslice, Upper Elkhorn NRD water resources manager; Whitney Gappa, BGMA coordinator; Terry Julesgard, Lower Niobrara NRD general manager; Lindsay Nelson, Creighton city administrator; Kevin Sonnichsen, Creighton water commissioner and fire chief; and Mike Sousek, Lower Elkhorn NRD general manager.



Lower Platte North NRD continues work to repair the Lake Wanhoo stilling basin. This damage was sustained during the 2019 floods.



Lower Big Blue NRD nears completion on Little Indian 15-A, north of Pickrell. The project included adding a second emergency spillway, raising the height of the dam and installing a new tube.



North Platte NRD hosts a producer round table and Arbor Day open house April 30.

# THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE!

## 20 YEARS

- McKenzie Barry, Lower Platte South
- Russ Callan, Lower Loup
- Kelly Cole, Central Platte
- Tyler Collier, Lower Loup
- Don Holtgrew, Lower Niobrara (director)
- Marie Krausnick, Upper Big Blue
- Ed Kyes, Central Platte (director)
- John Lemon, Upper Republican
- Mike Murphy, Middle Niobrara
- Russell Oaklund, Lower Platte North
- Karen Rezac, Lower Platte North
- Dennis Schilz, Twin Platte (director)
- Larry Schultz, Lower Loup
- Mike Sousek, Lower Elkhorn
- Scott Theis, Lower Big Blue
- Jim Thompson, Papio-Missouri River (director)
- Jerry Wiese, Central Platte (director)
- Robert Wiseman, Twin Platte (director)

## 25 YEARS

- Fred Conley, Papio-Missouri River (director)
- Ed Drozd, Lower Loup
- Tammy Fahrenbruch, Tri-Basin
- Dave Landis, Lower Platte South (director)
- Marla Milliken, Lower Platte North

## 30 YEARS

- Larry Baumeister, Lower Niobrara (director)
- Glen Bowers, Twin Platte
- Bill Christensen, Lewis & Clark NRD (director)
- Joseph Citta, Jr., Lower Loup (director)
- Dean Large, Upper Republican (director)
- Gary Loffis, Lower Elkhorn (director)
- Duane Sugden, Nemaha (director)
- Jim Meisner, Twin Platte (director)
- Galen Whittrock, South Platte

## 35 YEARS

- Nancy Brisk, Upper Big Blue
- Terry Keller, Papio-Missouri River
- Al Langdale, Lower Platte South
- Tom Mountford, Lower Platte North
- Dennis Schueth, Upper Elkhorn

## 40 YEARS

- Darlene Hensley, Papio-Missouri River
- Cheryl Hornickel, Lower Loup
- Mark McDonald, Nemaha
- Vernon "Junior" Speers, Nemaha

## 45 YEARS

- Dan Ray, Lower Loup

## IN MEMORIAM

- Tom Brauer, Lower Niobrara (director)
- Edwin Filips, Lower Niobrara (director)
- Tommy Higgins, Lower Niobrara (director)
- Dana Krueger, Middle Niobrara
- Scot Lennemann, Lower Republican
- Tim Storm, Middle Niobrara



# FIRST SESSION OF 107TH LEGISLATURE

The first session of the 107th Legislature adjourned sine die May 27, the 84th day of the scheduled 90-day session. Senators reconvened Sept. 13, 2021, for a special session to address redistricting following the release of the 2020 census data. The U.S. and state constitutions require the Legislature to redraw various governmental district boundaries every 10 years in response to population changes reflected in the U.S. Census.

The second session of the 107th Legislature will convene Jan. 5, 2022. There are 60 scheduled legislative days in the second year of the biennial session.

This session, senators introduced 684 bills and passed 200 bills (three by veto override). This year, the NARD tracked 47 bills and took a position on 18 bills. The following are a few key bills of interest to natural resources.

## **LB 406e: Create the Lower Platte River Infrastructure Task Force and Provide Funding (McDonnell)**

The Legislature gave final approval to the bill on a 41-

0-8 vote May 19. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed by the Governor May 26. LB 406e creates the Statewide Tourism and Recreational Water Access and Resource Sustainability (STAR WARS) Committee of the Legislature, and the Legislature appropriated \$2 million for FY 21-22 to carry out the purposes of the committee. Studies shall be conducted on:

- The need to protect public and private

property, enhance economic development, and promote private investment and the creation of jobs along the Platte River and its tributaries from Columbus, Nebraska, to Plattsmouth, Nebraska. The study of the Lower Platte River shall not include a study of any dam on a Platte River channel but may include infrastructure options that

maintain the integrity of the main channel of the Platte River. The committee may study dams relating to tributaries of the Platte River and levees in such area.

- The need to provide for public safety, public infrastructure, land-use planning, and economic development in the Lake McConaughy region of Keith County, Nebraska.
- The socioeconomic conditions, recreational and tourism opportunities, and public investment necessary to enhance economic development and to catalyze private investment in the region in Knox County, Nebraska, that lies north of State Highway 12 and extends to the South Dakota border and includes Lewis and Clark Lake and Niobrara State Park.
- The studies for Lake McConaughy in



Middle Republican General Manager Jack Russell and Assistant Manager Sylvia Johnson are featured on the April 2021 edition of the Irrigation Leader magazine.



# ENDS SINE DIE SIX DAYS EARLY

Keith County and Lewis and Clark Lake and Niobrara State Park in Knox County shall evaluate the outcomes and the economic benefits of proposed development and improvements to residents, the local region, and state tourism.

**STAR WARS** committee members include senators Tom Brandt, Robert Clements, Michael Flood, Tim Gragert, Dan Hughes, John McCollister, Mike McDonnell, Anna Wishart, Mike Hilgers and Bruce Bostelman. The special legislative committee will terminate Dec. 31, 2022.

## **LB 83e: Change the Open Meetings Act to provide for virtual conferencing (Flood)**

The Legislature gave final approval to the bill on a 43-0-6 vote April 15. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed by the Governor April 21. The bill was amended to add language to the bill that ratifies actions taken by public bodies in reliance on Governor's executive orders issued during the pandemic. The

law allows for virtual conferencing for no more than one-half of the meetings during a calendar year, and also allows for virtual conferencing if an emergency is declared pursuant to the Emergency Management Act. This applies to a specific list of entities including Natural Resources Districts.

## **LB 148e: Transfer Certain Environmental Safety Programs to the Department of Environment and Energy (Bostelman)**

The Legislature gave final approval to the bill on a 47-0-2 vote March 25. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed by the Governor March 31. The law transfers the following powers and duties from the Department of Health and Human Services to the Department of Environment and Energy: relating to testing of water samples; issuance of licenses and permits, fees, water well contractors, recreation camps, swimming pools, mobile home parks and drinking water. Under a memorandum of agreement, NDEE had



*NARD Past President Larry Reynolds, right, helps plant a tree at the State Capitol Arbor Day ceremony April 30, 2021. Sen. Julie Slama (District 1) and dignitaries from the Nebraska Forest Service, Arbor Day Foundation and Nebraska City Tourism were also in attendance.*

already been running these programs for three and a half years.

## **LB 285e: Change Provisions Relating to Adjusting Boundaries for Elections and Change and Eliminate Provisions Regarding Elections for Various Purposes (Brewer)**

The Legislature gave final approval to the bill on a 45-0-4 vote May 21. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed by the Governor May 26. The bill makes several changes to election laws including secure data-sharing to facilitate participation in the Electronic Registration Information Center and improved voter file accuracy. The bill also adjusts provisions relating to write-in candidates and modifies certain

filing deadlines for candidates and certain political subdivisions. The bill included an amendment to change the deadline for this year only for redistricting due to late arrival of census data. The new redistricting deadline is Dec. 30, 2021.

## **Budget Bills**

The state budget is structured on a year two-year basis. It is passed in odd-numbered years and adjustments are made during legislative sessions held in even-numbered years. The legislature passed LB 380e on a 47-0-2 vote April 20. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed by the Governor April 26. LB 380e appropriates funds for the expenses



# FIRST SESSION OF 107TH LEGISLATURE CONTINUED

of Nebraska State Government for the biennium ending June 30, 2023.

For natural resources programs, the budget highlights include:

## **Water Well**

### **Decommissioning**

\$70,000 in cash funds for both FY 21-22 and FY 22-22.

## **Natural Resources**

### **Water Quality Fund**

\$1,187,500 in Cash Funds for both FY 21-22 and FY 22-22.

## **Department of Natural Resources (NeDNR)**

For operations, the legislature appropriated \$20,134,950 in FY 21-22 and \$20,108,208 in FY 22-23, which includes a one-time appropriation of \$225,000 to support development of the flood mitigation plan. The budget maintains current levels at \$1,806,112 and \$50,000 in Cash

Funds for both FY 21-22 and FY 22-22 for the Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Fund. Initially, the Nebraska Water Sustainability Fund was appropriated \$10,865,033 for both FY 21-22 and FY 22-22 with any unexpended balances existing on June 30, 2021, to be re-appropriated. An amendment (AM 946) made an adjustment to increase the appropriation to the Water Sustainability Fund by \$475,000, this removes an earmark to NeDNR that is offset by an equivalent Cash Fund increase of \$475,000 to NeDNR operations. The \$475,000 supports maintenance and study of the South Platte River.

Amendment that transferred \$11 million from the General Fund to the Water

Sustainability Fund in both FY 21-22 and FY 22-22.

## **Department of Environment and Energy (NDEE)**

\$62,487,792 for FY 21-22 and \$62,487,792 for FY 22-23 for Administration, Water Quality, Land Quality and Air Quality programs. For the Drinking Water Facilities Loan Fund, \$8.5 million for both FY 21-22 and FY 22-23 was appropriated.

## **Game & Parks Commission (NGPC)**

For Wildlife Conservation, \$38,105,038 for FY 21-22 and \$38,567,910 for FY 22-23; for Habitat Development, \$11,482,781 for FY 21-22 and \$11,506,611 for FY 22-23; for Planning and Trails Coordination, \$1,770,827 for FY 21-22 and \$1,794,710 for FY 22-23.

Within the capital construction funds, NGPC also received appropriations for facility improvements, deferred maintenance, state recreation area improvements, emergency repairs, and aquatic habitat enhancement and restoration.

## **Nebraska**

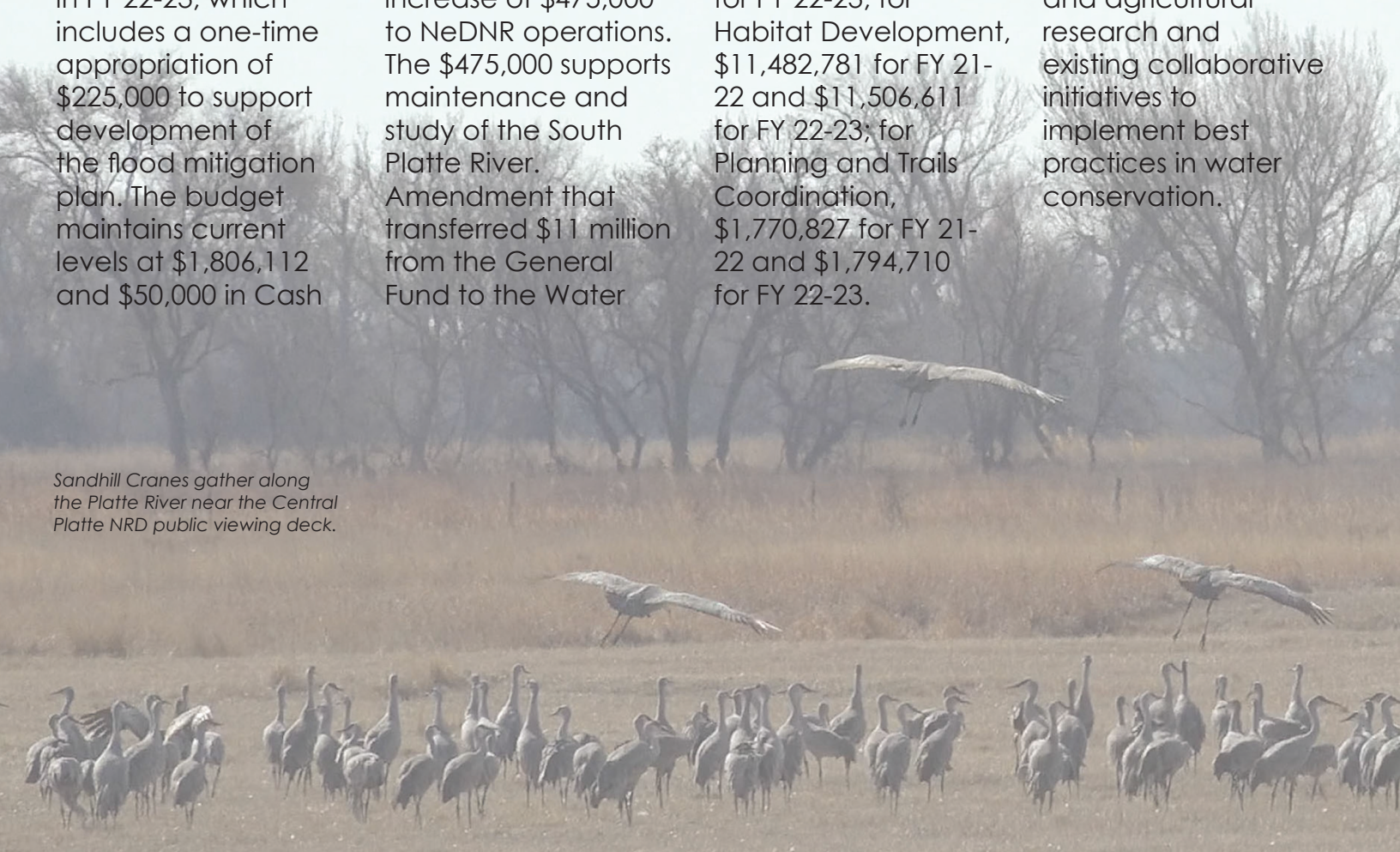
### **Environmental Trust**

\$20,676,142 for FY 21-22 and \$21,182,946 for FY 22-23.

### **Daugherty Water for Food Institute**

\$500,000 from General Fund for both FY 21-22 and FY 22-23 to support water and agricultural research and existing collaborative initiatives to implement best practices in water conservation.

*Sandhill Cranes gather along the Platte River near the Central Platte NRD public viewing deck.*





# 2021 LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTIONS OF INTEREST TO NRDS

## **LR 5: Accept the findings and recommendations of the Healthy Soils Task Force Submitted to the Governor and the Agriculture Committee (Gragert)**

On May 21, Senators approved a resolution dealing with healthy soils after adopting the Agriculture Committee amendment (AM 197). The amendment removes the term “accepts the report” and replaces it with the term “acknowledges the report”. The legislature essentially supports and encourages a voluntary grassroots effort to accelerate means to protect and enhance Nebraska’s soil.

## **LR 23: Study the progress of Natural Resources Districts in fulfilling their originally**

**intended purpose relating to flood control, soil erosion, irrigation run-off and groundwater quantity and quality (Erdman, Briese)**

## **LR 24: Examine the structure and funding of the Nebraska Environmental Trust (Slama)**

## **LR 83: Examine the appointment process by which members of boards, commissions and similar entities created by law are filled (M. Hansen, J. Cavanaugh, M. Cavanaugh, Hunt and Wayne)**

The Legislature’s Executive Board of the Legislative Council is charged with conducting the study, which includes examining the process by which individuals are appointed, identification of

potential barriers when filling vacancies, analyzing potential efficiency changes that could be made to the process, and exploring procedural changes that could result in more diversity within such entities.

## **LR 117: Examine the extent of surface water irrigation in the state, condition of surface water irrigation projects and infrastructure, understand the status and projected costs of infrastructure rehabilitation projects, and evaluate the anticipated effects relating to completion or delay of those projects (Bostelman)**



Central Platte NRD Director Ed Kyes, left, and Lower Niobrara NRD General Manager Terry Julesgard hand out trees at Husker Harvest Days.

## **LR 147: Examine the transfer of state-owned property to local political subdivisions (J. Cavanaugh)**

**LR 152: Evaluate the need for laws that would allow the Department of Environment and Energy to expeditiously respond to emergency situations that threaten the health of agricultural land, water and air quality, livestock, and other plant and animal life**



# LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTIONS CONTINUED

from toxic or harmful products that are part of or created by pesticide-treated seed or grain (Bostelman)

**LR 188: Examine issues related to adopting reward-based conservation programs that provide incentives to landowners and operators to adopt conservation practices (J. Cavanaugh)**

The study shall include, but not be limited to, an examination of:

1. Mechanisms to provide property tax relief for those individuals who voluntarily implement conservation practices that provide soil, water, and habitat conservation benefits;
2. The benefits provided by such mechanisms, including increased irrigation



*NRD Information and Education (I&E) staff tour Wessels Living History Farm near York during their June quarterly meeting.*

- efficiency, reduced regulatory oversight, and improved groundwater and surface water quality; and
3. How to best structure a reward-based conservation program that recognizes and builds on the important role played by counties and the natural resources districts in setting local priorities.

**LR 192: Review methods of water augmentation for preserving or enhancing stream flows, redirecting excess water, recharging groundwater aquifers, or complying with compact and interstate agreements with an intent to develop statutory definitions and determine how water**

**augmentation relates to section 46-252 of the Nebraska Revised Statutes and other permitting processes (Groene)**

**LR 196: Study the potential applications for block-chain technology in agricultural operations (Blood, Brandt, J. Cavanaugh, Day, DeBoer, Flood, Friesen, Halloran, B. Hansen and Morfeld)**

**LR 223: Study to examine how to slow or stop the spread of Emerald Ash Borer (Wishart)**

**LR 226: Examine ways in which the Legislature provides oversight to hold state agencies accountable to implementation of laws, and if legislation should be enacted to improve that oversight process (M. Cavanaugh)**

**LR 233: Review issues relating to the collection of agricultural data in precision farming (Friesen, Albrecht, Bostelman, DeBoer, Geist and Hughes)**



*Lindsay Corporation donated a 121-foot center pivot irrigation system for Middle Niobrara NRD's outdoor training center. The pivot will be set up with a chemigation system, flow meter, and technology control panels to provide hands-on training for groundwater technicians across the state.*



*Upper Big Blue NRD recently took over a 39-acre property near Hampton called Teal View Wetland Education Area, which is still being restored. The Upper Big Blue NRD is partnering with other agencies to protect this spot and use it to educate the public on the importance of wetlands in Nebraska. The Teal View property was purchased through the Ducks Unlimited revolving lands program, which takes ownership of properties temporarily while they are being restored, then gives them to entities like the NRDs to manage for public benefit or sells them to private owners who will maintain them as wetlands.*



# NARD FOUNDATION SUPPORTS 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.

Special thank you to contributors that stepped up to donate \$24,620 when we were not able to host our annual fundraisers due to the pandemic.

Learn more about a few of the programs supported by the NARD Foundation: **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. The 2021 Nebraska State Envirothon was hosted at Lower Platte North NRD's Lake Wanahoo. Nebraska was also proud to host the 2021 NCF-Envirothon, with 34 states, four Canadian provinces and three teams from

China competing virtually. The top three teams, received scholarships from Smithfield Foods, Inc. The NARD Foundation provided \$13,000 in scholarships for teams finishing fourth through seventh.

## **NAYI**

Annually, the Foundation supports the Nebraska Agriculture Youth Institute and participates in the career fair. The event returned to in-person programming on East Campus in 2021.

## **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.

## **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, FFA students participated in a hybrid virtual FFA Convention.



From left, Derek Kane, Nebraska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit; Adam Smith, Nebraska Forest Service; and Megan Grimes, NARD, speak on a career panel during the Nebraska Ag Youth Institute (NAYI) in July.

## **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.

## **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.

## **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.

## 2020-2021 FOUNDATION DONORS

### **Natural Resources Districts (NRDs)**

- Papio-Missouri River (\$8,000)
- Tri-Basin (\$3,400)
- Lower Loup (\$2,000)
- Nemaha (\$1,500)
- Lower Republican (\$1,200)
- Central Platte (\$1,000)
- Upper Elkhorn (\$1,000)
- Lower Niobrara (\$500)
- South Platte (\$400)
- Lewis & Clark (\$300)
- Upper Loup (\$200)

### **Partner Organizations**

- Settje Agri-Services & Engineering, Inc. (\$1,000)
- JEO Consulting Group (\$500)
- Union Bank and Trust Company (\$500)
- Zulkoski Weber (\$250)

### **Individuals**

- Terry Martin (\$500)
- Dean Edson (\$500)
- Scott Berndt (\$300)
- David Carlson (\$300)
- Larry Reynolds (\$300)
- Annette Sudbeck (\$200)
- Nancy Brisk (\$100)
- Gary Eberle (\$100)
- David Eigenberg (\$100)
- Jeanne Dryburgh (\$100)
- Roger Houdersheldt (\$100)
- Dennis Schueth (\$100)
- Dustin Wilcox (\$100)
- John Miller (\$70)



# 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 continue to be on hold 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.



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## 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, 2021, the NARD 414(h) retirement fund equity grew by \$14,455,121 to \$56,361,281 in FY 2020-21. 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, 2021, the voluntary NARD 457 program equity grew by \$1,773,170 to \$6,667,238 in FY 2020-21. The program allows NRD employees to set aside additional pretax 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 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 14 years, the average annual NARD health insurance premium increase has been 4.8% 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 2020-21 with a goal to break even. Relying on reserves, the Risk Pool ended the fiscal year with a loss of \$397,000.

The NARD Risk Pool Stop/Loss Committee and Risk Pool Board set rates again this year targeting a break-even year. The change in medical for FY 2021-22 is a 5% increase

for all coverages. The dental premiums also increased by 5% primarily due to doubling the orthodontic benefit to \$3,000.

The 2021 national average increase for health insurance is 7.1%, 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 2021-22, 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 \$4.3 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, and is currently undergoing an audit for 2021.

Chart 1

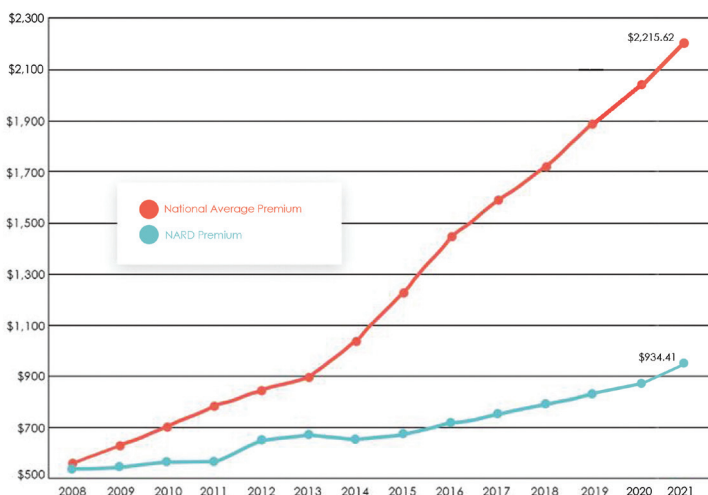


Chart 1: Shows the actual NARD insurance premium compared with the national average.

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





# MASTER CONSERVATIONIST WINNERS



*Russ & Kay Edeal  
Loomis, Nebraska*

The 2021 Agriculture Master Conservationist is Russ Edeal. Russ has worked diligently to conserve water. He practices no-till and has dryland corners, which saves soil moisture and increases soil health. Utilizing the NRD Conservation Tree Program, he has regularly planted trees and shrubs for more than 50 years.

Russ has been a leader in conservation for 50+ years. He served on the Phelps County Conservation District Board from 1967-1972 when they formed the NRD system. He went on to serve on the Tri-Basin NRD board from 1972-2006 and the NARD board from 1986-1988.

The Master Conservationist program was established in 1983 to recognize those who excel in soil and water conservation and protection.

## Retirements and Farewells

We said farewell to many this year – some were well wishes for retirement and others sympathetic words for the departed. Retirements this year resulted in a collective loss of hundreds of years of experience. We wish our directors, employees and partners a fond farewell as they depart for new journeys and adventures in retirement.



NARD President Jim Eschliman congratulates Ted Hughes on his retirement. Hughes served on the Upper Elkhorn NRD from 1986-2020 and the NARD Board 23 years.



NARD President Jim Eschliman congratulates Diana Wendt on her retirement. Wendt served on the Lower Niobrara NRD from 1993-2020 and the NARD Board 13 years.



Left: Lower Republican NRD staff rally around Water Resources Technician Scot Lennemann (black polo). After a battle with cancer, Lennemann passed away May 3, 2021.

Below: NRCS State Conservationist Craig Derickson retired December 2020.

Right: Nemaha NRD General Manager Bob Hilske retired February 2021. His 39-year career spanned three NRDs.



NARD President Jim Eschliman congratulates Milt Schmidt on his retirement. Schmidt served on the Lower Platte South NRD from 2012-2020 and the NARD Board 4 years.



Right: Lower Elkhorn Administrative Supervisor Vickie DeJong retired September 2021. She has worked for the District since 1979.

Below: Middle Niobrara NRD Natural Resources Supervisor Dana Krueger passed away Dec. 31, 2020.



Right: Middle Niobrara NRD Water Program Specialist Tim Storm passed away March 10, 2021.



Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy Planning and Aid Division Manager Marty Link retired December 2020.



# EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S LETTER

The Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (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 24th consecutive year, the NARD has balanced its budget and added to the reserves, which is a testament to involvement from NRD board members and staff. 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 during the last 24 years thanks to annual fundraisers and member involvement.

What started out as a small foundation in 1997 with \$4,100 funding an internship in Washington, D.C., has grown to fund 11 educational programs that reach thousands of Nebraskans.

The pandemic limited our ability to hold fundraising events in 2020.

However, several individuals, companies and districts stepped up to the plate and donated \$24,620 to the Foundation allowing us to continue to fund important ag and natural resources programs. The Foundation has and will continue to build partnerships and engage young Nebraskans to learn more about natural resources.

## Rising from the Ashes

The downtown NARD building was a 100 percent loss and was torn down

this summer. More than 90 percent of the office contents were declared non-salvageable. NARD staff worked through the insurance adjustment process to identify and price more than 895 items – everything from desks to paperclips. Approximately six months after the fire, a final settlement payment was made to NARD amounting to just over \$209,000.

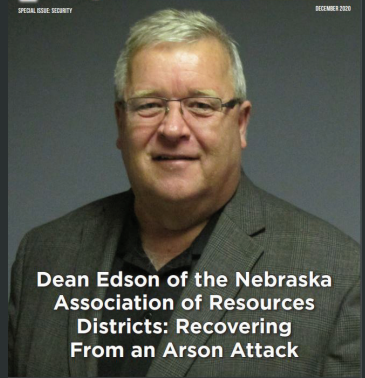
## Moving Forward

To say the least, 2020 was challenging.

Moving forward, water quality problems present opportunities to develop new working relationships with different organizations and NARD is taking the lead. Currently, we are working with Nebraska commodity groups – Agribusiness Association, Cattlemen, Corn Board, Farm Bureau, Pork Producers Association, State Dairy Association, Soybean Association and Wheat Growers Association – to develop a working group to educate producers about water quality problems.

The group is also

Irrigation Leader



*Irrigation Leader, December 2020*

working with major corporations to provide funding for NRD programs on sustainability. We were able to direct funding from Pepsi-Frito Lay and the Illinois Corn Board to the Central Platte NRD to promote farming practices that protect the environment. More opportunities exist if we continue to work with ag organizations and corporations.

We are also working with Executive Travel to develop a new promotional program for planting 1 million trees in Nebraska in the next five years. Hopefully, we will have the program finalized before trees orders start in November.

The NARD staff looks at these challenges as opportunities to learn and grow. The COVID comeback in 2021 adds to the challenges. However, optimism will win out.



*NARD staff began working in the new office building January 2021.*



# SAVE THE DATE

## *2022 Events*



Nebraska's  
Natural Resources  
Districts

Protecting Lives • Protecting Property • Protecting the Future

2022 | NRD 50th Anniversary

Jan. 5, 2022 | Nebraska Legislative Session Begins

Jan. 25-26, 2022 | NRD Legislative Conference (Lincoln)

Feb. 12-16, 2022 | NACD Annual Meeting (Orlando, FL)

March 1, 2022 | Water Programs Conference (Kearney)

March 2, 2022 | Managers Meeting (Lincoln)

March 6-7, 2022 | NARD Board Meeting (TBA)

March 19-23, 2022 | NRD Washington, D.C. Conference

April 27, 2022 | Nebraska State Envirothon (Camp Comeca, Cozad)

June 2022 | Adventure Camp About the Environment (ACE Camp)

June 1, 2022 | Managers Meeting (TBA)

June 5-6, 2022 | NARD Board Meeting (TBA)

June 6-7, 2022 | NRD Basin Tour (TBA)

Sept. 25-27, 2022 | NRD Annual Conference (Kearney)

*Fog rises from the Niobrara River valley on an early July morning.  
Photo courtesy of Sam Williams, Middle Niobrara NRD.*