

Nebraska Association of Resources Districts

# ANNUAL REPORT

2023



*Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts returned to Washington, D.C., after a three-year hiatus due to the pandemic. NRD staff and directors visited with federal partners and the Nebraska delegation throughout the conference.*

# PRESIDENT'S LETTER



**Dr. Orval Gigstad**  
NARD President  
Syracuse, Nebraska  
Director, Nemaha NRD

"May you live in interesting times." An old English greeting or a Japanese curse? The origin may be uncertain, but the words are apropos for us today.

Welcome to Kearney and the NARD annual meeting! You can get your news from many sources today and many of the lead stories cover natural resources concerns, such as water shortages in the southwestern states, extreme climate events like wildfires, flooding or record-breaking storm events. At the NACD summer meeting in Bismarck,

North Dakota, we went around the table at the Natural Resources Committee meeting and each delegate voiced the primary concern in their state. The top two were water issues, too much or too little, and the loss of farm ground to urban expansion.

Mark Twain said challenges make life interesting. However, overcoming them is what makes life meaningful. Thank goodness we have locally led NRDs in Nebraska to work out solutions and manage the challenges we face in "interesting

times."

There are no easy answers but coming together to compare notes, learn new things and honor deserving award winners is a good way to energize and gear up to take on the challenges. I don't know of a group with employees, managers and directors who are better qualified or more creative in meeting these challenges head on than the NRDs in Nebraska. Job well done!

Have a great annual meeting!



Left: NARD President Dr. Orval Gigstad introduces U.S. Senator Deb Fischer during the NRD Washington, D.C., Conference visit to the Capitol March 2023.



NACD recognizes states that have achieved 100% participation in dues. Nemaha NRD Director and NARD President Dr. Orval Gigstad accepted the award on behalf of Nebraska in February.



From left, Nebraska State Arboretum Executive Director Hannah Pinneo, Nebraska State Forester John Erixson, State Auditor Mike Foley, former Lower Platte South NRD Director/NARD Director Roxanne Smith, NARD President and Nemaha NRD Director Dr. Orval Gigstad, and Lower Platte South NRD Director Melissa Baker celebrate Arbor Day (April 28) at the Nebraska State Capitol by planting an Elm tree.

# 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 Dr. Orval Gigstad has served on the Nemaha NRD board since 1993

and the NARD board since 1996. He also serves as chair of the National Association of Conservation Districts Northern Plains Region. A practicing veterinarian for more than 45 years, he operates the Arbor Valley Animal Clinic in Syracuse.

NARD Vice President Martin Graff has served on the Middle Niobrara NRD board 28 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 Secretary/Treasurer Ryan Reuter is a sales manager with Betaseed and ACH Seeds (sugar beets). He has served on the North Platte NRD and NARD boards since 2018. Reuter and his wife Amie live in Minatare and have two daughters, Avery and Addison.

NARD Past President Jim Eschliman has served on the Lower Loup NRD board 17 years and 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.

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.



2023 NARD Executive Committee



Dr. Orval Gigstad  
President



Martin Graff  
Vice President



Ryan Reuter  
Secretary/Treasurer



Jim Eschliman  
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 Loup NRD Manager Russ Callan is chair and Lower Big Blue NRD Manager Scott Sobotka is vice chair.

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



Russ Callan  
Chair



Scott Sobotka  
Vice Chair

# NRD CONSERVATION AWARD WINNERS

Nebraska's NRDs have a history of recognizing landowners, producers and partners for being great stewards of the land and our natural resources.

The Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD) coordinates an annual recognition program to provide awards for outstanding efforts in conservation. Districts nominate individuals for the various awards and the NARD board of directors select the winners in June.

Award nominations are due

to the NARD on May 1. To learn more about the individual awards, visit [nrdnet.org/news/conservation-awards](http://nrdnet.org/news/conservation-awards).

Once winners are selected, the awards are presented at the NRD Annual Conference each September.

Congratulations to our 2023 award recipients and thank you for your dedication to preserving and protecting Nebraska's natural resources for the next generation.



The Brian Moes Family  
**Tree Planter of the Year**

Since 2006, the Moes family have planted more than 7,000 trees on their farm near Osmond. They understand tree survival and are dedicated to planting replacements in their windbreaks.



Bob Hansen  
**Community Conservation**

Hansen has been referred to as the "Silent Soldier" of northeast Nebraska conservation volunteer work. Hansen volunteers his property and also works with neighbors and local agencies to protect soil, water, plants and wildlife.



Marcel Kramer  
**Director of the Year**

Kramer has served on the Lewis & Clark NRD board since 1996 and on the NARD board since 2015. He has been active in natural resources on a personal, local and state level, and his thoughtful guidance is appreciated.



Daryl Obermeyer  
**Soil Stewardship**

A devout no-tiller since the 1980s, Obermeyer operates a cow/calf and rotational cropping system with cover crops near Brownville. His other BMPs include terraces, waterways, field borders and filter strips.



Dave Condon  
**Water Conservation**

Condon is fourth generation farmer growing row crops. He uses variable rate irrigation, chemigation, soil moisture probes, nutrient management and cover crops on his farm near Creighton.



Zeta Greene  
**Educator of the Year**

Greene teaches 7-12 grades at Sandhills Public Schools. She is passionate about forage quality, planting trees and edible wildlife feeding areas, and incorporates that into her curriculum.



Mark & Deb Alberts  
**Grassland Conservation**

In an effort to improve rangeland in central Nebraska, Alberts has helped producers in the Loess Hills of Dawson County improve their pastures using prescribed burns as a management tool.

# NRD HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES

## Hall of Fame - Director

Longtime Columbus resident Darwin Anderson was first elected to the Lower Loup NRD board nearly half a century ago on Nov. 5, 1974. He was 33 at the time. Anderson took his oath of office on Jan. 14, 1975, and has been a dedicated public servant ever since.

In his time with the Lower Loup NRD, Anderson has attended nearly 600 board meetings (so far), racking up more than 115,000 miles traveling to headquarters and back home again. This does not include the many miles traveled to public meetings and hearings, monthly Programs and Projects Committee meetings, and other Lower Loup NRD and NARD events. In addition to his many other roles with the agency, Anderson served as secretary of the Lower Loup NRD board of directors for 25 years.

Anderson is a skilled woodworker known for the intricate wooden creations he donates to causes such as the NARD Foundation silent auction, the Lower Loup NRD annual awards dinner, and other events. Lower Loup NRD staff members cherish the high-quality pens turned on Anderson's lathe.



Darwin Anderson  
Columbus, NE  
Lower Loup NRD

## Hall of Fame - Employee

Kent Miller is the only general manager the Twin Platte NRD has ever known. Kent was hired in July 1973 when Nebraska's NRD system was just being established, and he is the only remaining original manager within the NRD system.

Miller has been involved in many instrumental projects during his 50-year career including work with irrigation canal entities, the Nebraska Cooperative Republican Platte Enhancement (NCORPE), Water Data Program, and the Perkins County Canal Project/South Platte Compact.

Miller is currently a member of the Mid Plains Community College Board of Governors and has served on the board intermittently since 1975. Miller has a Bachelor of Science degree and a Master of Science degree, both in civil engineering from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In 1975 he was certified as a Professional Engineer in both Nebraska and Colorado.



Kent O. Miller  
North Platte, NE  
Twin Platte NRD

## Hall of Fame - Supporter

Many NRDs have worked with James Cannia across his varied career. Cannia started his career in 1980 with Kiewit Mining and Engineering and later worked for the University of Nebraska Conservation and Survey Division, North Platte NRD, Nebraska Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Geological Survey, and Exploration Resources International (XRI). Later, he co-founded Aqua Geo Frameworks, a company specializing in airborne electromagnetic (AEM) surveys and hydrogeologic framework models.

He spent his nearly 40-year career advancing Nebraska's capacity to conserve and protect its groundwater resources. His contributions to Nebraska groundwater are numerous, including advancements in monitoring and modeling, management of integrated groundwater and surface water supplies, advocacy and awareness of the importance of groundwater, and the adoption of innovative technologies to characterize groundwater resources. The impact of Cannia's work is felt throughout Nebraska and his legacy will live on for generations to come.



James Cannia  
Mitchell, NE  
Aqua Geo Frameworks

# NRD Washington, D.C. Conference

## AFTER 3-YEAR HIATUS, NRDS RETURN TO D.C. TO VISIT DELEGATION

Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) were represented by more than 55 directors and staff in Washington, D.C., March 20-22, 2023.

Nebraska's NRDs advocate for strengthening tools to preserve and fund natural resources projects, which includes influencing policymakers from the ground up with a unified voice.

This grassroots advocacy culminates with a visit to Washington, D.C., allowing NRD staff and directors to engage with congressional leaders and hear from national partners on federal legislation and programs.

"The most effective lobbyists are the people who work and live among our natural resources," said Dr. Orval Gigstad, NARD

president. "Going to D.C. is an opportunity to advocate for Nebraska by sharing our personal stories, and also hear federal perspectives on issues that could impact us locally."

While on Capitol Hill, conference attendees spent a day meeting with Nebraska senators and congressmen and participated in a two-day session with federal agencies and conservation partners. NRDs help deliver several federal programs locally, and these partnerships equate into real dollars for Nebraska agriculture and communities. Gigstad, who has served on the Nemaha NRD board since 1993, also serves as chairman of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) Northern Plains Region on behalf of Nebraska's NRDs.

NACD provides a unified, national voice for the more than 3,000 conservation

districts across the U.S. including Nebraska's 23 NRDs. NACD's member-driven board of directors selects conservation policy priorities, which are used to develop and review environmental and natural resources legislation and to secure adequate federal funding for natural resources conservation programs.

On March 21, National Water Resources Association (NWRA) Executive Vice President and Nebraska-native Dale Nellor spoke to NRD attendees. His career in Washington, D.C. started with an internship in 2000 and 2001 sponsored by the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts. Nellor went on to work for Sen. Chuck Hagel and several agriculture organizations on Capitol Hill.

"Elected officials and government agencies get the greatest value from the relationships

and conversations with constituents that can provide a real-time perspective on the challenges being faced at home," said Nellor, whose father, Lloyd, served on the Lower Loup NRD board. "That value is what the NRDs bring each time they come to Washington and share their story."

Back in Nebraska, advocacy efforts will continue by hosting elected officials in the Natural Resources Districts and engaging in public outreach.

"Locally, NRDs will continue to share our successes and concerns with our elected officials to ensure more informed decision making," Gigstad said. "It is important that our members of Congress know what the needs of locally led conservation are so that NRDs can receive adequate support to continue protecting lives, property and the future."



NRD Washington, D.C., Conference attendees took an afternoon tour of Fort McHenry in Baltimore. Guests learned more about the birthplace of the Star Spangled Banner.



Central Platte NRD visits the U.S. Capitol for delegation meetings. From left, Director Jerry Milner, General Manager Lyndon Vogt, and Director Jerry Wiese.



Rep. Mike Flood (left), discusses NRD priorities with Lower Platte South NRD General Manager Mike Sousek (center) and Papio NRD Director Tim McCormick.



Lower Elkhorn NRD Director Melissa Temple (center) asks a question of Nebraska's delegation during the NRD Capitol Hill visit.



Several NRD Managers visited Capitol Hill to speak to Nebraska representatives. From left, Scott Nelson, Little Blue NRD; Wade Ellwanger, Lower Niobrara NRD; Mike Murphy, Middle Niobrara NRD, Annette Sudbeck, Lewis and Clark NRD; Lyndon Vogt, Central Platte NRD; Mike Sousek, Lower Platte South NRD; and David Eigenberg, Upper Big Blue NRD.

## LEWIS & CLARK NRD WORKS WITH U.S. SEN. DEB FISCHER TO SECURE \$10M

U.S. Senator Deb Fischer (R-Neb.), a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, announced July 27, 2023, that she secured more than \$20 million for water infrastructure priorities across Nebraska in the FY 2024 Interior, Environment, and related agencies appropriations bill.

A portion of the money will go to Lewis & Clark NRD for the Cedar Knox Rural Water Project (CKRWP). The NRD will receive \$10 million for construction of a water source, treatment plant and distribution system that will serve residents in Cedar and Knox counties.

"Meeting with our state delegation is important for building relationships that can be critical in times of need for a district," said Lewis & Clark NRD General Manager Annette Sudbeck. "The project is important to northeast Nebraska residents and having the ability for the NRD to work closely with federal representatives and their staff puts a face to the name and builds connections for us and for them. Those interactions and relationships have been helpful in securing additional funding. I would encourage directors and staff to get to know their representatives and the Washington, D.C., conference provides an ideal platform to do just that."



Background: Panoramic view of Ft. McHenry and the Baltimore Harbor. The valiant defense of the fort during the Battle of Baltimore on September 13-14, 1814, inspired Francis Scott Key to write the words that became the U.S. national anthem.

# Platte Valley CENTRAL PLATTE HOSTS BASIN TOUR

More than 65 directors and staff from Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) along with conservation partners convened in Kearney for the annual NRD Basin Tour hosted by the Central Platte NRD June 12-13, 2023.

The Platte River's economic and cultural significance in Nebraska extends from its role in supporting agriculture, tourism, and recreation to its deep connections to Native American heritage, pioneer history, and environmental conservation.

Central Platte NRD General Manager Lyndon Vogt discussed how the Platte Basin is vital for drinking water, irrigation, municipal and industrial uses, wildlife, and recreation in Nebraska as well as water uses in Wyoming and Colorado.

"We appreciate the opportunity to share more about the proactive approach Central Platte NRD has taken to develop projects that conserve our resources and protect water users throughout the Basin," Vogt said.

Vogt along with Assistant Manager Jess Mintken and Information/Education Specialist Marcia Lee led the two-day tour showcasing several projects that protect lives, property and the future in central Nebraska including groundwater recharge, flood reduction infrastructure and habitat restoration.

"Basin tours give NRD directors a unique look at the conservation challenges that are being faced around the state," said Dr. Orval Gigstad, Nebraska Association of Resources Districts president and Nemaha NRD director. "It is interesting to see the diversity of natural resources issues and how local NRD boards develop solutions to benefit their communities and the state."

The tour included several stops featuring conservation projects that protect both urban and rural natural resources. Some of the 2023 tour highlights included:

- Upper Prairie-Silver-Moores Flood Reduction Project (Grand Island)
- State Fairgrounds Outdoor Learning Area (Grand Island)
- Wood River Flood Control - Hall County Park (Grand Island)
- Crane Viewing Decks (Alda and Gibbon)
- Elm and Turkey Creeks Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (Elm Creek)
- B1 Reservoir and Wildlife Management Area (Lexington)
- Cozad Ditch Company Headgates (Gothenburg)

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.



From left, Nemaha NRD Director Doug Iske, Nemaha NRD General Manager Kyle Hauschild, and NARD President and Nemaha NRD Director Dr. Orval Gigstad learn more about the rehabilitation of the Cozad Canal near Gothenburg.



The annual Basin Tour made a stop at Central Platte NRD's crane viewing deck near Alda. The deck overlooks the Platte River and allows visitors to safely view Sandhills Cranes during the migration season.

# Conservation Tree Program

In 2023, the NRDs sold more than 598,000 conservation trees and shrubs statewide.

NRDs expect to plant more trees through partnerships with NRCS, Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) and Executive Travel.

NFS is heading up the Nebraska Forest Restoration Partnership, which brings together NFS, 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 one million trees. Through the initiative, the company hopes to offset the carbon footprint from airline travel. For 2024, Executive Travel has committed another \$65,000 in cost-share funding. This marks a contribution of \$190,000 from Executive Travel

since the partnership began in 2022.

Nebraska's NRDs were featured in the National Association of Conservation Districts' (NACD) July edition of Forestry Notes. The article highlighted Nebraska's tree planting efforts and our partnership with the Nebraska Forest Service to serve the entire state with forestry professionals.

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 Husker Harvest Days, Nebraska Ag Expo and the Women in Ag Conference.



Lower Loup NRD technician Jordyn Duffek readies tree orders.



Little Blue NRD Operations Supervisor Tim Hecke and Technician Todd Leininger plant trees in spring 2023.

## 2023 FORESTRY WORKSHOP

The annual NRD Forestry Workshop was hosted by Upper Loup NRD in Theadford Aug. 9-10, 2023.

In addition to presentations and roundtable discussions, attendees learned more about the Upper Loup NRD recycling program and toured the Bovee Fire scar. The Bovee Fire burned through Halsey National Forest in October 2022 and destroyed the State 4-H campground.

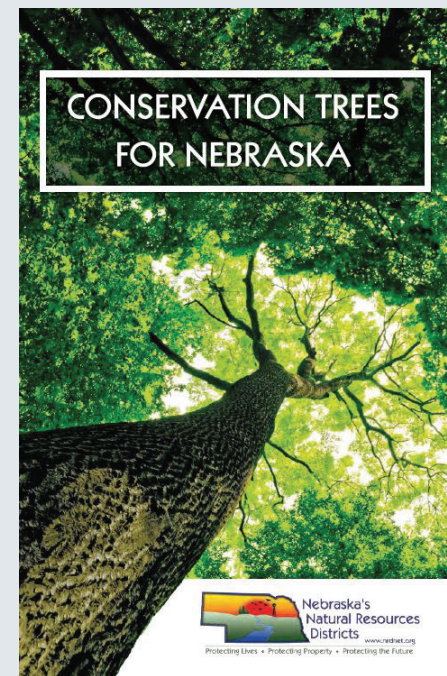


## FORESTRY BOOKLET GETS AN UPDATE

The Conservation Trees for Nebraska booklet received an update this year.

This spring, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) updated their spacing guidelines for between trees and between rows of windbreaks. Those changes were included in the booklet as well as new photos and a few new tree species.

This booklet last received an update in 2017. The refreshed content will be distributed as tree sales ramp up through this fall and winter.



The content in the Conservation Trees for Nebraska also matches the online content at [www.nrdtrees.org](http://www.nrdtrees.org).

# STATE ENVIROTHON MAKES A SPLASH AT LAKE MAC

Pelicans and turkeys welcomed high schoolers from across Nebraska to Lake McConaughy for the 31st annual Nebraska State Envirothon April 26, 2023. Dawson County Envirothon Club took home the championship along with \$1,500 and represented Nebraska at the National Conservation Foundation (NCF) Envirothon in New Brunswick, Canada, 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 University of Nebraska's Cedar Point Biological Station at Lake McConaughy near Ogallala.

"Envirothon allows students to get outdoors and learn about natural resources in a hands-on environment," said Dr. Orval Gigstad, Nebraska Association of Resources Districts 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 2023 oral presentation theme "Adapting to a Changing Climate" challenged teams to propose a solution to a complex problem before a panel of judges.

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

- **First Place (\$1,500):** Dawson County Envirothon Club
- **Second Place (\$1,000):** Milford
- **Third Place (\$500):** St. Paul

Additional prizes were awarded to the top



Dawson County Envirothon Club named Envirothon state champions at Lake McConaughy April 26, 2023. The team is coached by Janice Wolfinger and includes, Ryan Arbuthnot, Creyton Line, Parker Walahoski, Jacie Wolfinger and Jaelin Wolfinger.

teams in each testing category:

- **Aquatics:** Concordia
- **Forestry:** Concordia
- **Policy:** Dawson County Envirothon Club
- **Range:** Ord
- **Soils:** Milford
- **Wildlife:** Milford
- **Oral Presentation:** Dawson County Envirothon Club

Eighty-six teams competed in the regional contests during February and March, and 14 teams qualified to participate at the state competition.



State Envirothon Oral Presentation judges from left, Terry Julesgard (UBBNRD), Marcia Lee (CPNRD), Tyler Goeschel (LBNRD), Alexa Davis (NeDNR) and David Carr (CPNRD).



Left: Milford team members work together at the Envirothon range station.

Right: State Envirothon scoring volunteers included from left, Beth Walsh (UENRD), Namanet Keller (SPNRD); Yolanda Hruska (SPNRD); Connie McCarthy (LNNRD); Kaylyn Kelly (PMRNRD) and Jay Richeson (CPNRD).



# NCF-ENVIROTHON IN NEW BRUNSWICK

After taking the top spot at the State Envirothon, Dawson County Envirothon Club went on to represent Nebraska at the NCF-Envirothon July 23-28, 2023, at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, Canada.

In addition to tests in aquatics, forestry, soils, wildlife and a current environmental issue, teams prepared a 20-minute presentation on this year's theme, "Adapting to a Changing Climate."

The NCF-Envirothon included 49 teams from the U.S., Canada, China and Singapore.

Top places went to the following:

- **First:** Massachusetts
- **Second:** Pennsylvania
- **Third:** Ontario, Canada

The 2024 NCF-Envirothon will be hosted in Geneva, New York.



The Dawson County Envirothon Club arrives in New Brunswick, Canada for the 2023 NCF-Envirothon. The team from left, Coach Janice Wolfinger, Jaelin Wolfinger, Ryan Arbuthnot, Parker Walahoski and Jacie Wolfinger. Not pictured is Creyton Line.



Dawson County Envirothon Club team members work on the soils test during the NCF-Envirothon in New Brunswick, Canada.



NCF-Envirothon teams and volunteers gather on the beach in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada, July 26, 2023.

# Flood Control Plan Approved for Saunders County

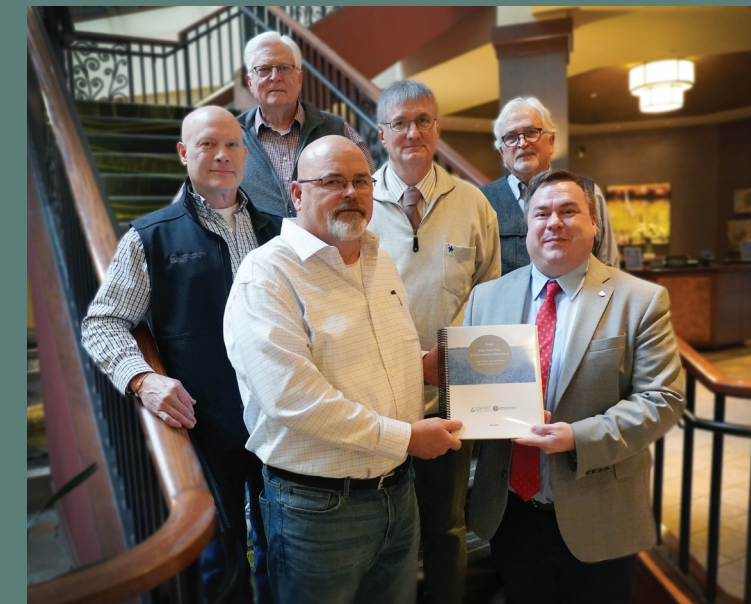
The Lower Platte North NRD and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) recently approved the Upper Wahoo Creek Watershed Plan.

The Upper Wahoo Creek Watershed Plan focuses on constructing 10 floodwater-reduction dams within a 100-square-mile-area in the Wahoo Creek Watershed, generally located west of Wahoo, in Saunders County. This is the first Watershed Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) plan approved in Nebraska since funding for watershed operations was reestablished by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2017.

The \$19.7 million project includes 10 wet dams on sites south of Prague, west of Weston and west of Wahoo.

"Our district selected sites that have the greatest potential to reduce flood damages to agriculture, county roads and bridges, urban land, improve water quality, and enhance wildlife and aquatic habitats," said Lower Platte North NRD General Manager Eric Gottschalk.

In addition to the Nebraska NRCS WFPO funding, the Lower Platte North NRD received funding for the Wahoo Creek Watershed from the Nebraska Legislature in 2022.



From left, LPNNRD General Manager Eric Gottschalk, LPNNRD Director Robert Hilger (David City), LPNNRD Director Kelly Thompson (Fremont), LPNNRD Lead Water Specialist Russell Oakland, LPNNRD Director Bill Sauger (Fremont), and NRCS State Conservationist Rob Lawson.

# NRD RECREATION *Exploration*

As Nebraskans continue to seek the peace and tranquility of the outdoors, Nebraska's NRDs continue to invest in recreation area improvements throughout the state.

This year, the Nebraska Association of Resources District's Foundation launched the NRD Recreation Exploration program.

The NRD Recreation Exploration program is designed to inspire individuals and families to venture into the great outdoors and explore the state's natural beauty. The program aims to foster a deeper connection with nature while offering participants the chance to win a grand prize of \$1,500 in Scheels gift cards.

The NRD Recreation Exploration program invites participants to embark on an adventure through more than 80 diverse NRD recreation areas. From the rolling grasslands of the Sandhills to the tranquil shores of the Platte River, Nebraska boasts an abundance of breathtaking landscapes.

By actively participating in the NRD Recreation Exploration program, participants not only stand a chance to win prizes but also instill a love for the outdoors, promote physical activity, and encourage environmental stewardship.

The NRD Recreation Exploration program is supported by the NARD Foundation and Scheels, a leading sporting goods retailer.

For more information about the NRD Recreation Exploration program, including a list of recreation areas, visit [nrdnet.org/recreation](http://nrdnet.org/recreation).

*Background:* Piles of removed invasive trees at Lower Platte South NRD's Cottontail WMA, where the district conducted a Grassland Restoration Project with Nebraska Game & Parks. The project was primarily the removal of invasive trees across the property to increase native grassland habitat. The grassland is important for maintaining a wildlife friendly landscape.

*Right:* Sara of Lincoln visited Nemaha NRD's Iron Horse Recreation Area. "What a beautiful lake to fish, enjoy birdwatching and walk on the trail. My son was beyond happy to catch his first Saugeye!"



Left: Angela of Elkhorn visited Middle Niobrara NRD's Brewer Bridge Public Access Area. "We took a mini tour across Nebraska this summer and enjoyed Brewer Bridge as we floated down the Niobrara River!"



Selena of Lawrence visited Little Blue NRD's Liberty Cove Recreation Area. "The kids love to fish, kayak, and have picnic lunches! We make many trips to Liberty Cove in the summer with family and friends!"



Joseu of Wahoo visited Lower Platte North NRD's Lake Wanhoo. "Fishing with my husband and two young boys and we caught this large mouth bass that was 20.5 inches!"

# NRD RECREATION *Investments*



Upper Big Blue NRD hosts an open house at Bruce L. Anderson Recreation Area to welcome the public to the newly installed playground equipment.



Lower Loup NRD installs a new restroom at Pibel Recreation Area near Bartlett.



Lower Platte South NRD's MoPac East Trail received a new trailhead at Wabash, which included restroom facilities.



A new playground at Tekamah's Summit Lake thanks to a partnership between the Papio NRD and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

## GROUNDWATER TECH TRAINING GOING VIRTUAL

The groundwater technician training will soon be available as an online tutorial. NRDs hire groundwater technicians to inspect chemigation systems; measure and record static water levels; inspect and service flow meters; and conduct water sampling practices. Groundwater technicians must sit through a training course and pass an examination administered under the Water Well Standards Licensing Program.

The new online training will have five interactive learning modules composed of videos, animations, flip cards, and knowledge checks. Individuals will be able to sit through the training any time of the year and work through it at their own pace. The goal of creating an online training is to train and license groundwater technicians year-round. Project partners include multiple NRDs, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Nebraska Dept. of Environment and Energy, U.S. Geological Survey, and McCrometer.



Lower Loup NRD Technician Harold Benton, left, meets with a local ag producer at his irrigation well to demonstrate an inspection. Lower Loup NRD contributed chemigation inspection videos as part of the new online groundwater technician training modules.

# BRIGHT FUTURE FOR RANGE & LAND JUDGING, PARTICIPATION UP

In September 2022, Upper Niobrara White NRD hosted state Range Judging in Dawes County with 42 schools competing. Teams from West Holt took top honors in both the Senior and Junior Divisions.

2022 was another record year for Land Judging with 103 schools and 1,832 students participating in regional competitions.

North Platte NRD hosted state Land Judging near Scottsbluff in October 2022 with 33 schools competing.

Five teams – Norfolk, Hampton, Southwest, Bayard and Lewiston – took honors at state Land Judging and went on to compete at national Land Judging May 2-4, 2023, in

Oklahoma City.

This year, Nebraska Land Judging will start scoring contests electronically using Scantron cards and machines. This will increase efficiency with scoring and allow NRD hosts to handle more contestants with fewer volunteers.

Special thank you to our NRD hosts, NRCS range specialists and soil scientists, and the Nebraska Society for Range Management, who help make Range and Land Judging a success. This year, state Range Judging will be hosted by Lower Big Blue NRD Sept. 26-27, 2023, and state Land Judging will be hosted by Lower Loup NRD Oct. 25, 2023.



Students check the soil profile during state Land Judging hosted by North Platte NRD near Scottsbluff in October 2022.

Right: North Platte NRD Community Educator and Data Technician Amanda Shepperd and General Manager Scott Schaneman give final instructions before state Land Judging in October 2022.



Left: Hampton FFA team members use a soil pit to prepare for the Land Judging National in Oklahoma City May 2-4, 2023.

Right: The Hampton FFA Land Judging Team coached by Joel Miller and Marlin Seeman compete at Land Judging Nationals May 2-4, 2023, in Oklahoma City. At National, there were 702 contestants, 181 teams, from 35 states including the Nebraska teams of Hampton, Norfolk, Bayard, Southwest and Lewiston.



Background: Students trail through Spring Creek Prairie near Denton during Lower Platte South NRD's Region 6 Range Judging competition.



# 2023 NEBRASKA STATE FAIR



Nebraska's NRDs participated in the Largest Classroom Days (Aug. 25, Aug. 29, Aug. 30) at the Nebraska State Fair. South Platte NRD Information and Education Coordinator Yolanda Hruska talks to students about Nebraska's water resources.

# MANAGERS RETREAT & TOUR



During the annual managers retreat hosted by Lower Loup NRD, managers and partners toured Nebraska Distillers Products Aug. 29. The company turns distillers grains leftover from ethanol production into a pelletized feed product for livestock.



# PERKINS COUNTY CANAL RECEIVES FUNDING, PROGRESSES

On dual trips to western Nebraska, nearly a dozen state senators toured parts of Colorado to survey the area that could be part of the proposed Perkins County Canal.

The Perkins County Canal project is intended to ensure Colorado sends the water Nebraska is

entitled to in the 1923 South Platte River Compact.

Due to good precipitation in western Nebraska, the South Platte River flows were running quite high during the spring and summer, which demonstrated the need to capture the water and retime for later use.

During the Legislative session, LB 819 provided for transfers of funds from the state Cash Reserve Fund including a one-time transfer of \$574.5 million from the Cash Reserve Fund to the Perkins County Canal Project Fund in FY 23-24. The bill modifies use of the Perkins County Canal Project

Fund authorizing the Department of Natural Resources to utilize the fund to identify the optimal route and purchase land for and develop, construct, manage, and operate the Perkins County Canal.



Left: Gov. Jim Pillen and Nebraska senators tour the Perkins County Canal project on April 28, 2023. From left, Sen. Robert Dover, Gov. Pillen, Sen. Loren Lippincott, Sen. Steve Erdman, Sen. Brian Hardin, Sen. Theresa Ibach, and Lt. Gov. Joe Kelly. A second group of senators visited the project on May 1, 2023.

Right: Gov. Jim Pillen speaks with Twin Platte NRD General Manager Kent Miller about the Perkins County Canal Project.





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



North Platte NRD Natural Resources Technician Keelie Williamson measures water levels.

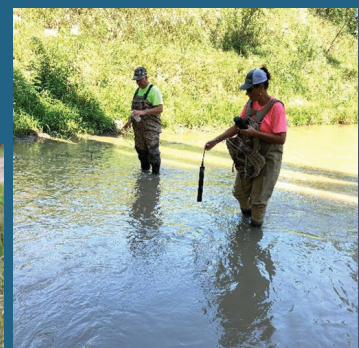


In May, Upper Big Blue NRD hosted a delegation of scientists, policy makers, and business people from Mato Grosso, Brazil. There was a robust discussion about how Nebraska's NRDs manage groundwater for agriculture and all beneficial uses across the state. These leaders were eager to learn more about the unique and successful system of governance in Nebraska that provides local control and local solutions through the NRDs. The delegation was visiting for the 2023 Water for Food Global Conference hosted by the University of Nebraska's Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute.



Above: Jim Olson, Lower Elkhorn NRD conservation planner with Pierce/Madison counties, visits with area producers while filming promotional videos with News Channel Nebraska.

Below: Lower Niobrara NRD Water Resources Technician Gary Richardson launches telemetry into one of the district's monitoring wells.



Above: Lewis & Clark NRD Bow Creek Watershed Project Coordinator Becky Ravenkamp and volunteer Bob Hansen collect surface water samples in the Bow Creek Watershed partnership with NDEE and Nebraska Environmental Trust.



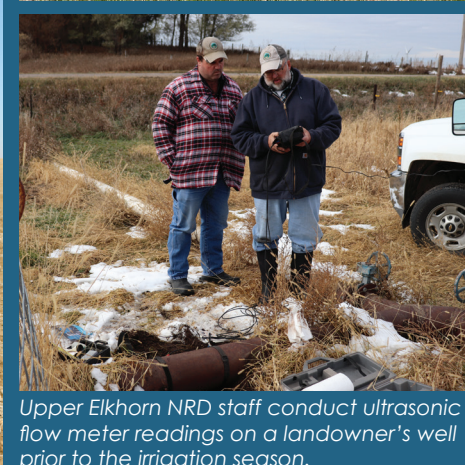
Right: Lower Loup NRD's Mike Lorenz takes a soil sample to track nitrates in the soil profile.



Above: With excess flows in May, South Platte NRD Assistant Manager Ryan Reisdorff and Water Resources Specialist Travis Glanz open gates to deliver water into Western Canal recharge pits.



Below: A slip liner is installed on a Nemaha NRD flood reduction structure in May. Slip liners help prolong the life of aging dams. Over time, the corrugated metal pipe begins to rust and voids can begin to form under the principal spillway causing undercutting and potentially failure of the dam to function properly.



Upper Elkhorn NRD staff conduct ultrasonic flow meter readings on a landowner's well prior to the irrigation season.



Lower Big Blue NRD staff and directors attend a field day near Sterling.



Upper Loup NRD hosts a Hazard Mitigation Plan kick-off barbecue with community members to discuss the plan with JEO Consulting Group in a casual environment.



Tri-Basin NRD staff, directors and guests visit a nitrogen fertilizer demonstration field east of Minden on their board of directors tour.



Middle Niobrara NRD's Long Pine Creek Watershed in Brown County - phase 3 of the project to improve habitat and stabilize streamflows.

## THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE!

### 20 YEARS

- Joe Anderjaska, Middle Republican (director)
- Todd Burrell, Upper Republican
- Tim Fowler, Papio (director)
- Sylvia Jividen, Upper Big Blue
- Jim Johnson, South Platte (director)
- Terry Martin, Upper Republican (director)
- Micheal Nuss, Upper Big Blue (director)
- Lance Olerich, Papio
- Larry Rutt, South Platte (director)
- Brad Wulf, Lower Republican (director)

### 25 YEARS

- Terry Julesgard, Upper Big Blue
- Ariana Kennedy, Lower Platte South
- Carie Lynch, Tri-Basin
- Ryan Trapp, Papio
- Greg Wilke, Middle Niobrara (director)
- Chuck Wingert, Nemaha

### 30 YEARS

- Diane Wieseler, Lewis & Clark
- Orval Gigstad, Nemaha (director)
- Roger Houdersheldt, Upper Big Blue (director)
- Richard Karre, Middle Republican
- Steve Kelley, Lower Big Blue (director)
- Brad Lundeen, Tri-Basin (director)
- Kevin Orvis, Little Blue
- Jeanne Rosen, Lewis & Clark
- Jean Friends Tait, Papio

### 35 YEARS

- Steve Bartels, Nemaha
- Dan Clement, Central Platte
- Deb Jarzynka, Central Platte
- Marty Nissen, Papio

### 40 YEARS

- Doug Dickinson, Upper Big Blue (director)
- Roy Stewart, Upper Elkhorn (director)
- John Zaugg, Papio

### 45 YEARS

- Jeff Ball, Upper Big Blue
- Martin Cleveland, Papio
- Bill Warren, Papio

### 50 YEARS

- Kent O. Miller, Twin Platte

### IN MEMORIAM

- Leroy Arends, Central Platte (director)
- Alan Beller, Lower Platte North (director)
- Douglas Bruns, Upper Big Blue (director)
- Franklin Damrow, Lower Big Blue (director)
- Joe Geist, Lower Platte South (director)
- Elaine Hammer, Lower Platte South (director)
- Mike McGinn, Lower Platte North (director)
- Jim Sattler, Lower Niobrara (director)
- Ron Woodle, Papio (director)

# PROGRAMS THAT MAKE A *difference*

# 2023 NRD PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

## • • • UPPER NIOBRARA WHITE • • •

The Box Butte Creek WFPO identified flood control structures with potential for recharge. Further analysis will determine which are most cost effective and useful for recharge. The 7th annual Range Day was held at Chadron State College in January to provide educational opportunities for producers on everything from drought management to long-range weather forecasts. In May, UNWNRD hosted a Conservation Festival at Chadron State Park with nearly 200 fifth graders in attendance.

## • • • NORTH PLATTE • • •

NPNRD is currently updating the Ground Water Management Plan and developing its Nutrient Management Plan, which includes nitrate testing and development of new Phase II and III areas. The District plans to mail nitrographs and hydrographs for the 600+ monitoring wells throughout the District as well as providing them online.

## • • • SOUTH PLATTE • • •

Marc Sprenger was elected to Subdistrict 4. In late spring, the District opened gates to divert water from the South Platte River into recharge pits via the Western Canal. Twelve pits, each holding up to 10 feet of water, were used for groundwater recharge, mitigating downstream flooding and improving stream depletions. The South Platte Valley Groundwater Quality Management Sub-Area changed to Phase II to help lower nitrate levels.

## • • • UPPER REPUBLICAN • • •

In 2023, the URNRD lowered the allocation from 65" per acre over 5 years to 62.5" for the new 2023-2027 allocation period to help conserve water. The district also saw the completion of a new groundwater model that will improve decision making regarding water usage in the future.

## • • • MIDDLE NIOBRARA • • •

MNNRD is expanding water quantity data with telemetry units, data loggers, and the help of Longitude103's NRD App. MNNRD is partnering with UNL for isotope tests on high-nitrate wells to identify contamination sources. Two in-stream restoration projects on Sand Draw Creek were completed with NET and NDEE funding. Planning efforts continue for five Brown & Cherry County WFPOs. Sandhills Interactive Natural Resources Education Complex hosted educational events for water resource managers.

## • • • LOWER LOUP • • •

LLNRD has measured static water levels in 453 wells, inspected approx. 1,143 chemigation systems, and sold 56,233 trees. LLNRD anticipates approval of Mud Creek & Mira Creek WFPOs by year end. A soil sampling project was initiated to track nitrate movement through the soil profile and advanced soil sampling cost-share launched. LLNRD eliminated Phase III Water Quality Management Areas and combined with Phase II. The District received a grant for monitoring wells & pressure transducers to measure draw down in Petersburg Well Interference Area.

## • • • TRI-BASIN • • •

TBNRD manages the Cottonwood Ranch Streamflow Augmentation Project, which was constructed in 2022. It is a joint project with the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (PRRIP) and the State of Nebraska. Located southwest of Elm Creek, it consists of eight wells that return groundwater to the Platte River to retine flows for the benefit of endangered species.

## • • • LOWER REPUBLICAN • • •

LRNRD received a \$2 million WaterSMART grant, which is a collaboration with NeDNR and Bureau of Reclamation to install new telemetry flowmeters across the district to provide near real-time water usage and weather information to producers. Development of alternatives has been completed for the Turkey Creek and Thompson Creek WFPO projects and will be submitted to the NRCS National Water Management Center.

## • • • LOWER NIOBRARA • • •

LNNRD completed a NET grant adding 18 monitoring wells in 14 locations. LNNRD finished telemetry in the wells to provide real-time data. LNNRD is working with producers to comply with Phase II reporting. Partnership work continues with BGMA to reduce nitrate contamination. West Knox Rural Water finalized a Wellhead Protection Plan and is wrapping up NEMA & FEMA paperwork on 2019 flood repairs.

## • • • UPPER ELKHORN • • •

UENRD updated equipment at monitoring well sites and in the monitoring well truck. New data loggers were deployed at well sites in the spring to collect precipitation data. New measurement equipment was integrated in the monitoring well truck set up for use when pumping the monitoring wells. Due to the latest drought conditions, UENRD only approved 300 new groundwater irrigated acres with a heavy focus on completing irrigation systems so pivots can run full circles to increase their efficiency.

## • • • CENTRAL PLATTE • • •

CPNRD updated their Groundwater Management Plan to address quality & quantity concerns. Quality Section: Phase II/III triggers were lowered to respond to high nitrate levels. Quantity Section: New triggers and controls were implemented to address future groundwater decline and two management areas were subdivided to monitor differences in irrigation development.

## • • • LITTLE BLUE • • •

LBNRD is developing the 32-mile creek watershed plan and environmental assessment with NRCS. This area includes 65,734 acres – mostly farmland. The Little Blue Public Water Project has secured \$6.6M in funding to find a new clean drinking water source for rural water users. The current planning efforts are anticipated to be complete by spring 2025. LBNRD is partnering with Trailblazer RC&D to host tire recycling events. In the last year, LBNRD hired Resources Technician Todd Leininger and Tim Hecke was promoted to Operation Supervisor.

## • • • LEWIS & CLARK • • •

LCNRD is working with farmers, students, conservation partners, and agricultural professionals on projects that positively impact water quality and quantity. LCNRD maintains flood risk structures in the Aowa Creek Watershed and is currently looking at addressing flood risks in the South Creek Watershed in Dixon County. LCNRD continues to promote BMPs across the district with a focus in the Bow Creek Watershed and Bazile Groundwater Management Area.

## • • • LOWER ELKHORN • • •

LENRD was awarded NRCS funding for development of the North Fork Elkhorn Watershed Plan and Environmental Document (Plan-ED) to identify and develop structural and non-structural alternatives for watershed protection, flood prevention, agricultural water management, and public recreation. The project area includes 242,563 acres in portions of Antelope, Cedar, Knox, Pierce, and Wayne Counties, which is approximately 94% agriculture land.

## • • • LOWER PLATTE NORTH • • •

The LPNRRD continues land and water conservation projects throughout the district including the most recently approved Wahoo Creek Watershed project. The project includes 10 structures and is the first Watershed Flood Prevention Operation plan approved in Nebraska since 2017. Staff continue to work on BMPs with landowners in the Shell Creek Watershed to improve soil and water conditions and reduce nitrate contamination.

## • • • UPPER BIG BLUE • • •

UBBNRD has upgraded several recreation areas with new equipment and amenities, including Pioneer Trails (Aurora), Bruce L. Anderson (York), Smith Creek (Utica), Oxbow Trail (Ulysses), and Overland Trail (York). The District worked with the City of Geneva on improving tree resources and walking trails; the City of York on flood planning; and the Village of McCool Junction for municipal water quality improvement. UBBNRD has also begun work with several other agencies on a multi-year project to restore water quality in Lake Hastings.

## • • • LOWER BIG BLUE • • •

In December, LBBNRD imposed a stay on well drilling and the expansion of irrigated acres. This action was taken due to need for area-specific management strategies. The LBBNRD intends to emerge from the districtwide moratorium with a comprehensive and diverse structure for managing the use of groundwater across variable aquifer formations. The District has evaluated aquifer characteristics using known well depths, transmissivity, and airborne geologic surveys.

## • • • PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER • • •

Papio NRD has completed repairs to the Missouri River Levee System that protects Offutt AFB. Construction has started on flood mitigation reservoir WP-4 in Gretna. Construction is anticipated to start this year on reservoirs WP-2 and WP-1. The District continues to acquire right of way for dam sites 7, 12 and 19.

## • • • LOWER PLATTE SOUTH • • •

LPSNRD is working on a \$2.9M stream stabilization project along Antelope Creek in Lincoln and a \$1M sinking fund and work plan development for Salt Creek Flood Resiliency. Working toward the latest conservation easement for the Prairie Corridor on Haines Branch south of Denton. Secured a \$8.3M agreement for evaluation and construction of Mopac East-Lied Connector Trail.

## • • • NEMAHA • • •

NNRD continues to focus on conservation and erosion control on private lands. In FY23, 12+ miles of terraces were constructed. The district hosted the NARD Foundation 5K commemorating the Steamboat Trace grand reopening following 2019 flooding. AEM flights over the last portion of the district were completed. Five NRD flood reduction structures were slip-lined.

# Nitrogen Dashboard

## INNOVATIVE TOOL TO IMPROVE FERTILIZE EFFICIENCY, WATER QUALITY

The Nebraska Corn Board, Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD), USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and 17 of Nebraska's 23 NRDs are developing a nitrogen dashboard in partnership with Longitude 103, a leading provider of agricultural technology solutions.

Producer Connect, a web and mobile application suite, allows producers to access their crop reporting data and includes a fertilizer recommendation based on yield goals. This collaborative effort aims to empower agriculture producers to optimize inputs, which will enhance agricultural profitability, water quality and irrigation efficiency.

Nebraska's agriculture economy depends on groundwater and fertilizer; however, the overuse of fertilizer can come at a cost by contaminating groundwater, which most Nebraskans depend on for

drinking water.

"With the growing concern of increased nitrate in groundwater, it is essential for NRDs and ag producers to work together to address the problem," said Dr. Orval Gigstad, NARD president. "By developing a tool that is mutually beneficial for both ag producers and our natural resources it's a win-win situation. We applaud the Nebraska Corn Board for helping lead the way."

The partnership between the Nebraska Corn Board, NRCS, and the NRDs exemplifies the commitment of key stakeholders to foster a thriving agricultural industry while

protecting our water quality and quantity.

The Nebraska Corn Board has generously contributed funds to assist with the development of Producer Connect, recognizing the potential it holds in transforming the landscape of modern farming.

"We are proud to support this innovative initiative to provide agriculture producers with more tools for nitrogen management," said Kelly Brunkhorst, Nebraska Corn Board executive director.

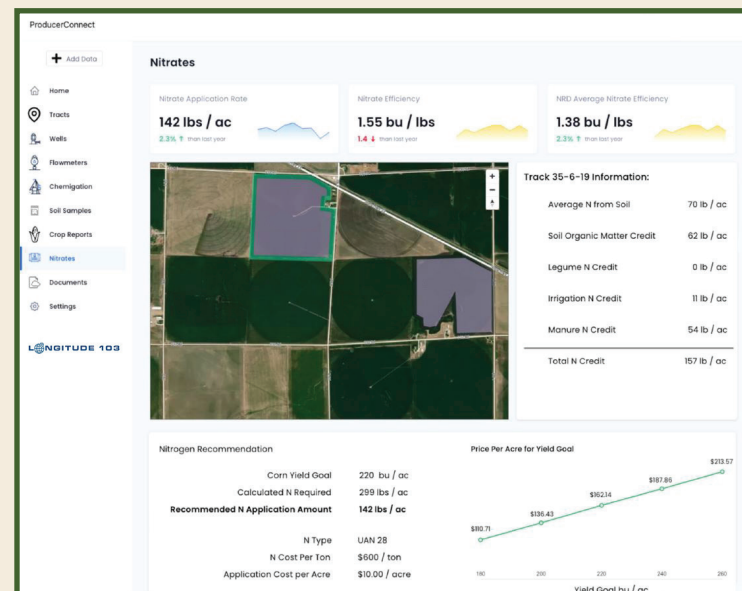
"By empowering producers with their own data, we can improve fertilizer efficiency, maximize profits and protect

our valuable water resources."

The involvement of a majority of Nebraska's NRDs underscores the collective determination to promote responsible farming practices throughout the state. The NRDs along with the NARD Foundation have made financial contributions and are actively applying for grants to help develop and maintain the software for future years.

Producer Connect will be free to producers and offer a wide range of features designed to simplify nitrogen and water management. Ag producers will have a password-protected log in and only be able to see their own data.

Producer Connect is currently in its initial stages of development and is expected to launch in January 2024. The initial roll out will be in Phase II and Phase III Groundwater Quality Management Areas and areas that have irrigation allocations.



# NRCS and NRDs Partner on Statewide Dam Assessments

To ensure water infrastructure safety, Nebraska's NRDs partnered with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) on several dam assessments.

In 2022, nine floodwater reduction dam assessments were completed with four NRDs – Lewis & Clark, Lower Elkhorn, Lower Platte North and Lower Platte South. The cities of Norfolk and Plattsmouth were also joint local partners.

Dam assessments are detailed inspections that analyze the current hazard classification, determine if the dam meets current design standards and evaluate if any deficiencies are

present. In some cases, corrective action may be listed to address deficiencies or to meet design standards. Dam assessments are funded under the NRCS Watershed Rehabilitation Program, which was authorized in 1981.

"NRCS is pleased to provide technical and financial assistance to partners like NRDs and communities for addressing dam safety," said Nebraska State Conservationist Rob Lawson. "Our purpose is to help local sponsors identify any needed improvements to ensure long-term structural integrity."

NRCS's first focus is to complete assessments

on dams that provide flood protection upstream of towns and cities. Because of their location, these structures are classified as "high hazard" by the state of Nebraska and thus receive top priority for review.

"While local sponsors have done a great job operating and maintaining dams over the years, repairs or alterations may be needed as infrastructure ages," said NRCS Dam Safety Engineer Bob Sullivan. "Many of these structures were built 40 to 60 years ago."

On behalf of participating NRDs, the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD) coordinates

the dam assessments with NRCS and local engineering firms.

"Completing these assessments is the first step in securing additional federal funding to help address any dam deficiencies that may be found," said NARD Executive Director Dean Edson. "This program is vital in helping NRDs protect the lives, property, and future of Nebraskans."

This partnership continued in 2023 with 18 additional dam assessments across seven NRDs including: Lower Big Blue, Lower Platte South, Nemaha, North Platte, Upper Niobrara White, Lower Elkhorn and Papio-Missouri River.



NRDs across the state have partnered with NRCS on dam assessments in 2022 and 2023.

Back row from left, former Lower Elkhorn NRD General Manager Mike Sousek (now Lower Platte South NRD General Manager); Lower Elkhorn NRD Director Roger Gustafson; Lower Platte North NRD General Manager Eric Gottschalk; middle row from left, Lower Platte South NRD General Manager Paul Zillig (now retired); Lower Platte South NRD Director Tom Green; Lower Platte North NRD Director Robert Hilger; front row from left, Lewis & Clark NRD Director Marcel Kramer; and Lewis & Clark NRD Director Dan Kollars.

# WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY & AG ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIPS

*NRDs, NARD, NRCS & NE Corn Board collaborate to develop nitrogen dashboard*



**Jennifer Swanson**  
Director of Water Quality Initiatives

Nitrogen is an essential element for plant growth and vital to Nebraska's agriculture industry. However, when not managed properly it becomes a liability to groundwater, surface water, and air quality.

For more than 40 years, levels of nitrate across Nebraska have been increasing. Each Natural Resources District (NRD) has developed groundwater quality and quantity management plans that outline actions to be taken to address nitrate contamination and conserve groundwater. NRDs are adaptive and innovative in their approach to addressing groundwater contamination.

In the last 10 years,

Nebraska has made gains in nitrogen management through split application and irrigation efficiency, but there are opportunities for improvement. Nebraska's agriculture economy depends on groundwater and fertilizer; however, the overuse of fertilizer can come at a cost by contaminating groundwater, which

*"Alone we can do so little;  
together we can do so much."*

*– Helen Keller*

most Nebraskans depend on for drinking water.

Through collaborative conversations the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD), 17 of Nebraska's 23 NRDs, the Nebraska Corn Board, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) have partnered together to develop a nitrogen dashboard. This tool will take a new approach in helping address the growing concern of nitrate in our groundwater. This collaborative

effort aims to empower agriculture producers to optimize inputs, which will enhance agricultural profitability, water quality and irrigation efficiency.

The dashboard – Producer Connect – is a web and mobile application suite that allows producers to access their crop reporting data, receive a

fertilizer application rates, and will assess environmental impacts. Additionally, the dashboard will allow for communication between the producer and the local NRD. The producer will be able to sign up for notifications to receive reminders of reporting and conservation program application deadlines.

The partnership between the Nebraska Corn Board, NRCS, and the NRDs exemplifies the commitment of key stakeholders to foster a thriving agricultural industry while protecting our water quality and quantity.



Middle Republican NRD General Manager Jack Russell, right, and McCrometer President Pete Oveson look at new telemetry meters installed in the district this spring. Middle Republican is one of the 17 NRDs participating in the soon-to-be-released Nitrogen Dashboard.

# THE POWER OF CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIPS

*A look back at the NRDs' conservation partnership efforts this past year*



**Dustin Wilcox**  
NARD Programs and Partnerships Director

For more than five decades, Nebraska's NRDs have consistently demonstrated the potential of collaborations in achieving conservation successes. These partnerships extend across a spectrum of stakeholders, including state and federal agencies, local communities, counties, private enterprises, individual landowners, and associations. Whether forming coalitions, cooperatives or consortiums, NRDs have a record of demonstrating how partnerships enhance conservation efforts.

Furthermore, NRDs have proven that collective action can yield remarkable results in protecting

lives, property, and the future. Nowhere is this more apparent than within the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD). Under the leadership of the NARD board, your association continues to focus on its mission of ensuring NRDs are partnered to accomplish collectively what may not be accomplished individually to conserve, sustain, and improve our natural resources and environment. Throughout the year, these cooperative efforts coordinated through NARD have led to partnerships with statewide implications.

NARD joined forces with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to pursue and implement new agreements aimed at securing funding and delivering statewide benefits. One such agreement, executed alongside private consultants, has enabled the completion of 27 dam assessments. Additionally, NARD's collaboration with NRCS included

the coordination of Cooperative Conservation Agreements and Technical Assistance grants targeting priority conservation needs.

This year also witnessed the renewal of agreements between NARD and private sector partners. Notably, an agreement with Executive Travel Inc. was extended, providing support for tree plantings across the state. Since 2022, this partnership has channeled nearly \$200,000 in direct cost-share to landowners planting conservation trees.

Furthermore, there was a strengthening of the partnership between NARD and the Department of Natural Resources (NeDNR). As NRDs and NeDNR continue their collaborative efforts to implement integrated management plans, NARD and NeDNR built on that momentum to renew an agreement to foster and further strengthen the partnership. These efforts will further advance and promote the success

of joint water planning activities statewide.

Equally noteworthy, the past year ushered in exciting new partnerships between NARD and organizations dedicated to improving nutrient management.

Under NARD board leadership, a concerted effort was initiated, uniting the majority of NRDs, the Nebraska Corn Board, and other agricultural sector partners. Together, we are working toward addressing water quality concerns. History has shown that a proactive partnership approach is essential to tackle our most complex natural resources management challenges.

Nebraska's NRDs represent an unparalleled system for locally led natural resources management. When NRDs unite and collaborate with all stakeholders, they forge an effective path forward to benefit generations to come.



Lower Platte South NRD hosts a table at Lincoln Earth Day helping students make flowers with cupcake liners.



Fourth graders check out worms during a Natural Resources Day in April hosted by South Platte NRD and ESU 13 in Sidney.



Lower Republican and Tri-Basin NRDs celebrated 30 years of Water Jamboree! Lower Republican General Manager Todd Siel presents Gina Ellis of Southern Valley with a plaque for 30 years of volunteering.



In May, North Platte NRD Resource Conservation Coordinator Todd Filipi received the Nebraska State Foresters Award, presented by Nebraska State Forester John Erixson. Filipi was recognized for his contributions to Nebraska forests and his commitment to conservation.



In May, Upper Niobrara White NRD hosted a Conservation Festival at Chadron State Park with more than 200 fifth graders from across the district.



A pollinator habitat planting activity with York area fourth graders, in partnership with Pheasants Forever and the Upper Big Blue NRD.

Below: In May 2023, residents brought more than 308 loads of e-waste to the Papio NRD electronics collection sites in Blair, Tekamah, Walthill, and Dakota City. Funding is provided through a Litter Reduction & Recycling Incentive Grant with the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy.

Lower Republican and Tri-Basin NRDs celebrated 30 years of Water Jamboree! Lower Republican General Manager Todd Siel presents Gina Ellis of Southern Valley with a plaque for 30 years of volunteering.



Lower Platte North NRD Water Resources Manager Daryl Andersen (left) and Assistant Manager Ryan Chapman show students at the Fremont Middle School Field Day how point source and non-point source contamination works with a groundwater model.



Lower Big Blue NRD, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, and Nebraska City Tourism & Commerce, plant an Osage Orange tree at the Wilber Arboretum.



Nemaha NRD hosts a Test Your Well night with the Johnson-Brock Science Club to test water for nitrate.



Lewis & Clark NRD demonstrate how to test a private well outside of Creighton with Creighton High School students participating in the Know Your Well program.



Lower Niobrara NRD hosts an 8th grade conservation day with students from schools around their district.



During the Natural Resources Festival, Upper Elkhorn NRD fifth graders examine animal tracks during a Wildlife CSI lesson.



The Bazile Groundwater Management Area hosts a table at the AgCeptional Women's Conference in Norfolk. They tested attendees' water for nitrate.

Right: Tri-Basin NRD Field Office Secretary Tami Reese asks water-related questions to fifth graders at the Water Jamboree near Harlan County Reservoir.



This year, Upper Republican NRD opened up public land in northern Chase County.

# THE FIRST SESSION OF 108<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATURE SLOWED IMMENSELY BY FILIBUSTER

The first session of the 108th Legislature adjourned sine die June 1, 2023, on day 88 of the 90-day session.

The second session of the 108th Legislature is scheduled to convene on Jan. 3, 2024. Regular sessions generally last 90 legislative days in odd-numbered years and 60 legislative days in even-numbered years.

An on-going filibuster on abortion and gender-affirming care slowed the legislature. Due to time constraints, the process for moving legislation forward included filing amendments to incorporate multiple bills into advancing legislation. Of the more than 800 measures introduced, 291 bills were all amended into just 33 bills, not including 19 appropriation bills, that were passed into law.

This year, the NARD tracked 48 bills and three constitutional amendments. Thirteen bills NARD supported were passed and signed into law. The following are a few key bills of interest to Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts.

## **LB 531e: Change provisions of the Economic Recovery Act (McKinney)**

The Legislature gave final approval to the bill on a 37-8-4 vote June 1. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed into law by Gov. Pillen June 6.

Due to the filibuster, this bill became a vehicle for several other bills, which were incorporated by amendment (AM 1880). Relating to natural resources, AM 1880 added the investment income from the Perkins County Canal Project Fund for FY 23-24, FY 24-25, and FY 25-26, shall be credited to the Economic Recovery Contingency Fund and be directed to Game and Parks for a Chief Standing

Bear Museum and visitor center. The amendment directs the funding in the following amounts:

- Not more than \$15 million for FY 25-26 from investment earnings from the Perkins County Canal Project Fund and for construction of the museum and visitor center;
- \$750,000 for FY 25-26 from investment earnings from the Perkins County Canal Project Fund and for exhibit fabrication and historical interpretation; and
- \$200,000 in FY 25-26 for staffing.

## **LB 565e: Provide a grant program related to hydrogen hub designations (Bostelman)**

Senators gave final approval to the bill on

a 41-0-8 vote on May 23. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed into law by Gov. Pillen May 30.

This bill included an amendment to add LB 217, which extends the sunset date for the scrap tire recycling grant program under the Waste Reduction and Recycling Incentive program from June 30, 2024 to June 30, 2029.

LB 723 was added to LB 565e with an amendment (AM 1240), which creates the Public Water and Natural Resources Project Contracting Act under the Dept. of Natural Resources. The purpose of Act is to provide the department with alternative methods of contracting for public water and natural resources projects.

## **LB 683e: Create the Nebraska Broadband Office and provide duties (Transportation and Telecommunications Committee)**

Senators gave final approval to the bill by a 39-0-10 vote May 23. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed into law by Gov. Pillen May 26.

The bill proposes to create the Nebraska Broadband Office to coordinate all federal, state, and local government funding for broadband infrastructure and services in Nebraska be leveraged strategically to ensure that all Nebraskans have access to affordable, reliable broadband services before January 1, 2028. Currently, the Public Service Commission has many of these duties. The office shall be headed by the Director of Broadband, who would be appointed by the Governor. The office shall be located in the Department of Transportation.

## **Budget Bills**

The state budget is structured on a 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 814e on a 42-3-4 vote and LB 818e on a 41-3-5 on May 18. Both bills included emergency clauses and were signed into law with line-item vetoes by Gov. Pillen May 24.

LB 814e and LB 818e

appropriate funds for the expenses of Nebraska State Government for the biennium ending June 30, 2025.

For natural resources programs, the budget highlights include:

## **4-H Camp (LB 281)**

Create the Youth Outdoor Recreation Innovation Cash Fund, transfer \$10 million from the Cash Reserve Fund, and clarify matching requirements. This provides funding to rebuild the Halsey 4-H Camp that was destroyed by the Bovee Fire in 2022.

## **Precision Agriculture Infrastructure Grant Program (LB 361)**

Transfer \$1 million each year from the Cash Reserve Fund to the General Fund and appropriate funds to the Public Service Commission to carry out the Precision Agriculture Infrastructure Grant Program.

## **Cedar Knox Rural Water (LB 768)**

Transfer \$7 million from the Cash Reserve Fund to the General Fund and to appropriate funds for purposes of providing grant assistance for a rural drinking water project that serves rural



From left, Sen. Rita Sanders, Papio NRD General Manager John Winkler, Sen. Justin Wayne and Lt. Gov. Joe Kelly meet at the NRD Legislative Conference in January 2023.

water connections and at least four communities in two contiguous counties to convert to ground water sources and to provide for water system infrastructure and distribution. This would be funding for the Cedar Knox Rural Water project sponsored by the Lewis and Clark NRD. Unfortunately, the additional funding was vetoed by Governor Pillen.

## **Lincoln Drinking Water Source (LB 785)**

Includes \$179.2 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to the Department of Natural Resources for grants to cities of the primary class for the design, construction, and implementation of additional water supply projects.

## **Water Resources Cash Fund**

Amends the Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund to authorize transfers to the Water Resources Cash Fund, subject to a limitation that funds transferred be expended in accordance with the purposes of the Environmental Trust Fund Act.

## **Surface Water Irrigation Fund (LB 125)**

States that investment earnings from the Surface Water Irrigation Fund shall be credited to the fund.

## **State Game Fund (LB 744)**

Amend language in the State Game Fund statute to permit use of the fund for wildlife damage payments.



Gov. Jim Pillen joined NARD President and Nemaha NRD Director Dr. Orval Giastad at the NRD Legislative Conference in January 2023.

# FIRST SESSION OF 108TH LEGISLATURE CONTINUED

## Perkins County Canal (LB 819)

Provides for transfers of funds from the state Cash Reserve Fund including a one-time transfer of \$574,500,000 from the Cash Reserve Fund to the Perkins County Canal Project Fund in FY 23-24. The bill modifies use of the Perkins County Canal Project Fund authorizing the Dept. of Natural Resources to utilize the fund to identify the optimal route and purchase land for and develop, construct, manage, and operate the Perkins County Canal. Language is also added that any fees collected for water delivery may be credited to the fund.

## Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Fund

Maintains General Fund funding at \$1,806,112 and \$50,000 in Cash Funds for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25.

## Water Well Decommissioning

Appropriates \$70,000 in Cash Funds for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25.

## Water Resources Cash Fund

A \$7 million transfer from the Environmental Trust Fund in both FY 23-24

and FY 24-25.

## Nebraska Resources Development Fund

The bill includes no additional appropriations. However unexpended balances existing on June 30, 2023, would be re-appropriated.

## Nebraska Water Sustainability Fund

An appropriation of \$10,865,033 for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25. Unexpended balances existing on June 30, 2023, would be re-appropriated.

## Water Projects

A Cash Fund appropriation of \$87,800,000 for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25. Includes \$62.8 million in Cash Funds from the Perkins County Canal Project Fund and \$25 million Cash Funds from the Jobs and Economic Development Initiative (JEDI) Fund in both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25. A Federal Fund appropriation of \$177.2 million in FY 23-24 for a grant to a municipality for water project. A Federal Fund appropriation of \$2 million in FY 23-24 for a grant to a first class city located in first congressional district for purposes of constructing riverfront improvement project.



Tri-Basin NRD General Manager John Thorburn greets Sen. Teresa Ibach and Sen. Loren Lippincott at the NRD Legislative Conference.

## Critical Infrastructure Fund

A \$10 million Cash Fund appropriation in FY 23-24 for funding a portion of the cost of a wastewater system. Unexpended balances existing on June 30, 2023, would be re-appropriated.

## Department of Natural Resources Operations

\$22,436,156 in FY 23-24 and \$22,919,860 in FY 24-25. Included in the appropriation is \$1.3 million in Federal Funds for each fiscal year for enhanced data collection.

Unexpended balances existing on June 30, 2023, would be re-appropriated.

## Environmental Trust

\$21,309,636 for FY 23-24 and \$21,581,666 for FY 24-25. Includes \$7 million transfer to the Water Resources Cash Fund in both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25.

## Department of Environment & Energy

\$84,137,755 for FY 23-24 and \$67,766,117

for FY 24-25 for Administration, Water Quality, Land Quality and Air Quality programs. Includes \$1 million General Funds for a Water Quality study. The passed proposal included \$7 million General Funds to provide a grant to a rural water district that serves four communities in two counties, however this funding was part of a line-item veto by Governor Pillen.

## Drinking Water Facilities Loan Fund (NDEE)

\$12,710,000 in FY 23-24 and \$12,810,000 in FY 24-25.

## Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Wildlife Conservation

\$40,934,603 for FY 23-24 and \$42,027,843 for FY 24-25.

## Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Habitat Development

\$12,280,770 for FY 23-24 and \$12,389,355 for FY 24-25.

## Nebraska Game and

## Parks Commission Planning and Trails Coordination

\$2,012,043 for FY 23-24 and \$2,081,761 for FY 24-25.

## Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Niobrara Council

\$178,500 for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25. This includes \$125,000 from Federal sources, \$52,500 in General Fund and \$1,000 in Cash Fund for each fiscal year.

## Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute

\$500,000 in General

Funds for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25 to support water and agricultural research and initiatives for water conservation.

## Nebraska Forest Service

\$2,804,862 in General Funds for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25.

## Governor Vetoes

On May 24, Gov. Pillen signed LB 814e and LB 818e with several line-item vetoes. These line-item vetoes reduced the overall appropriations

previously passed by the Legislature by more than \$140 million.

Relating to natural resources, the vetoes included eliminating the \$7 million appropriation for NDEE to provide a grant to the Cedar/Knox rural drinking water project. The Governor's veto message noted the project had already received significant investment from state funds. Additionally, the veto action reduced the \$300,000

appropriation increase in FY 23-24 and FY 24-25 for interstate water litigation within the Attorney General's office. The Governor's veto message noted existing interstate water litigation funding is sufficient to meet the state's needs.

## Carry-Over Bills

As this was the first session, there will be several bills that carry over to the second session in 2024.

# 2023 LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTIONS OF INTEREST TO NRDS

## LR 133: Examine any issues within the jurisdiction of the Natural Resources Committee of the Legislature that may arise during the interim (Bostelman)

The Natural Resources Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.

## LR 156: Examine the impact and increased frequency and intensity of wildfires in Nebraska and the sufficiency of the firefighting response to such wildfires. (McDonnell)

The study should focus on reviewing the resources available in Nebraska to fight

wildfires, the limitations and burdens placed upon the present resources used in fighting wildfires in Nebraska, and the development of additional state-supported resources to assist in fighting wildfires. The study includes but is not limited to:

- Identifying different resources presently available in fighting wildfires, including those resources supplied by Nebraska's volunteer firefighters, the State Fire Marshal, the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, the



From left, Tri-Basin NRD Director David Grimes, Lower Platte South NRD Director Larry Ruth (back), and Zulkoski Weber Lobbyist Katie Zulkoski speak with Sen. Lou Ann Linehan at the NRD Legislative Conference.

Nebraska Forest Service, and the Game and Parks Commission;

- Examining the policies and procedures presently used by each of the above entities to fight wildfires,

recommended improvements to such policies and procedures, if additional state funding is needed to assist each of such entities to fight wildfires, and if state-funded wildfire

# LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTIONS CONTINUED

task forces should be created to support intrastate mutual aid to fight wildfires; and

- A cost-benefit analysis of assigning and funding a state agency, department, program, or division with jurisdiction over wildfire task forces to support intrastate mutual aid.

## LR 162: Examine any issues within the jurisdiction of the Game and Parks Commission that may arise during the interim (Bostelman)

The Natural Resources Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.

## LR 163: examine opportunities that increase recycling of municipal solid waste while also facilitating economic development and growth (Hughes, Armendariz)

The study will be conducted by the Natural Resources Committee and includes but is not limited to:

- Analyzing ongoing

instate efforts to divert more municipal solid waste from landfills into recycling and remanufacturing;

- Analyzing regional efforts to divert more municipal solid waste from landfills into recycling and remanufacturing;
- Examining of the potential for Nebraska to update existing law to develop and sustain private innovative solutions to managing municipal solid waste through the remanufacture of recycled materials into useful products of value for other Nebraska-based industries;
- Recommending potential legislation to simultaneously increase recycling in Nebraska and promote economic growth.

## LR 208: Examine the current funding mechanisms and operations of Nebraska's Mesonet system and to determine necessary changes in such funding and



Middle Niobrara NRD General Manager Mike Murphy greets Gov. Jim Pillen during the NRD Legislative Conference in January 2023.

## operations to ensure the future viability of the system. (Dorn)

The study will be conducted by the Appropriations Committee and includes but is not limited to:

- Reviewing the historical and current level of Mesonet funding and the sources from which that funding is derived;
- Reviewing the current scale of the Mesonet system in Nebraska and whether such scale is consistent with the needs of Nebraska's agricultural producers and other current and potential users of Mesonet data;
- Reviewing any other issues relevant to

Nebraska's Mesonet system.

## LR 212: Examine any issues within the jurisdiction of the Agriculture Committee of the Legislature that may arise during the interim (Holloran)

The Agriculture Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.

## LR 224: Examine laws governing the ring-necked pheasant upland game bird in hopes of improving the population of the species for increased hunting and tourism in Nebraska (Brewer)

The study will be conducted by the Natural Resources Committee and includes but is not limited to:

- Examining laws governing how

the Game and Parks Commission regulates pheasant hunting in Nebraska, specifically those laws and programs that concern federal and state revenue sources relating to pheasants;

- Examining laws and programs that govern what can be done to improve pheasant habitat in Nebraska;
- Examining laws and programs that govern what can be done to reduce the impacts nest predators have on the pheasant population;
- Examining laws and programs that govern youth hunting, specifically the practice of early youth hunting on public land with released birds;



Sen. Mike Jacobson of North Platte speaks with NRD directors and staff during the NRD Legislative Conference Senators Reception.

- Examining the thoughts and opinions of individual citizens and sportsman groups that have experience and knowledge of the aforementioned subject.

## LR 238: Examine the location of recreational vehicle parks, entertainment venues, and other recreational development and the impact of zoning regulations related to flooding on locating such facilities. (McDonnell)

The study will be conducted by the Urban Affairs Committee and includes but is not limited to:

- Examining the rules, regulations, and ordinances for flood plains or floodways relating to obstructions, permanent structures,

recreational vehicle parks, other recreational venues, and recreational development;

- Evaluating the subsequent risk of potential property loss due to lack of enforcement of rules, regulations, and ordinances in flood plains or floodways;
- Evaluating eminent life, safety, and financial loss facing Nebraskans under the current rules, regulations, and ordinances in flood plains and floodways and enforcement of those rules, regulations, and ordinances.

## LR 247: Examine issues related to Legislative Bill 133 introduced in the 108th Legislature, First Session (Cavanaugh, J)

The study will be conducted by the Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee and includes but is not limited to:

- Examining current laws regarding the use of eminent domain by state agencies, boards, commissions, and other political subdivisions and

the process such entities must follow to use eminent domain;

- Examining current laws regarding the use of eminent domain by nonpublic or private entities and how the process differs, if at all, from the process used by political subdivisions;
- Examining which public and nonpublic entities have the right of eminent domain;
- Determining whether a public hearing prior to the use of eminent domain should be required;
- Examining other potential policy changes regarding the use of eminent domain that the Legislature may consider.

## LR 250: Consider improvements to the Property Assessed Clean Energy Act and property assessed clean energy financing for real estate development projects (McDonnell)

The Urban Affairs Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.



# 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.

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.



Tri-Basin NRD staff discuss water safety and enjoy an afternoon kayak as part of their Wellness Program.

# GET THE SCOOP: EMPLOYEE RETIREMENT PROGRAM

The 2022-23 year has been hard on the markets and retirement funds. The S&P 500 index is trying to battle back from a 20% drop last year, but inflation and other external factors are holding up progress. Unfortunately, our retirement programs are tied to the market.

As of June 30, 2022, the NARD 414(h) retirement fund equity value dropped by 20% to \$44,322,094. By June 30, 2023, the fund has grown 12% to \$49,940,860.

The defined contribution program allows each employee to determine their own investments, providing the 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.

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, 2022, the voluntary NARD 457 retirement fund equity value also dropped by 20% to \$4,987,597. By June 30, 2023, the fund had rebounded to \$5,898,267. 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 Nationwide 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 PROGRAM UPDATE

The Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD) has operated a licensed health risk pool for NRD employees since 2006. 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 16 years, the average annual NARD health insurance premium increase has been 4.8% while the national annual average has been 10.9%. This is very rare in the insurance industry. If premium changes followed the national average, premiums would almost be double what they are today.

This year, many things went in a positive direction – fewer overall claims, reduced claims for lasers, reduced reinsurance renewal rates, and no lasers in reinsurance for FY 23-24. The last three fiscal years had losses and reserves were used to pay the claims. This year, the Risk Pool shows a \$2.3 million profit, reversing losses in each of the last three years.

In FY 22-23, the Risk Pool experienced six claims over \$100,000, with only one at the \$175,000 maximum liability. This is down from 11 experienced at the end of FY 21-22 with six over \$175,000. Further, last fiscal year an additional \$601,000 of medical was paid out for lasered individuals compared to only \$117,000 this year. For FY 23-24 we do not have a lasered individual, which limits additional risk exposure.

After two recent renewal meetings, the Stop Loss Committee recommended no proposed change for medical and dental premiums for FY 23-24. Subsequently the NARD Risk Pool Board approved those rates. Thus, all coverage will remain the same as FY 22-23.

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 \$6.4 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.

As part of the Affordable Care Act, an annual federal premium tax based on the number of employees and family members enrolled in the plan is assessed. These taxes totaled \$5,351 in FY 22-23. In addition, the Risk Pool pays \$35,884 in state premium taxes to retain a license to operate the insurance company. The NARD Risk Pool Board has opted to pay the taxes from reserves rather than assess each employee or district for the tax.

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 four times by the NDOI, with the most recent in 2021. The audits have never found any major operational, structural, or financial problems with the operation of the NARD Risk Pool.

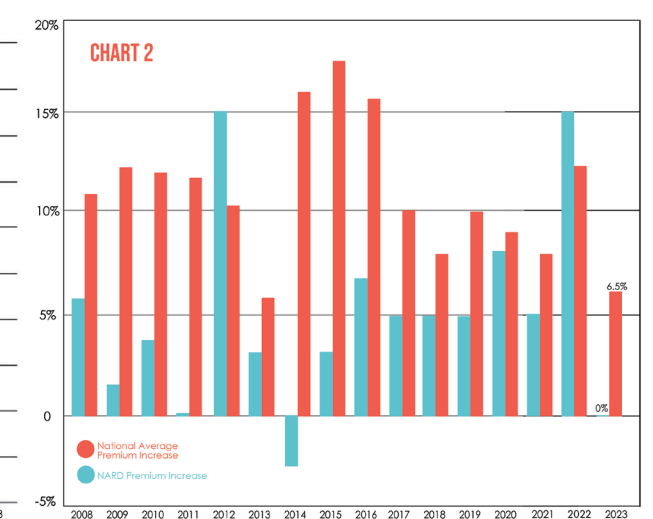
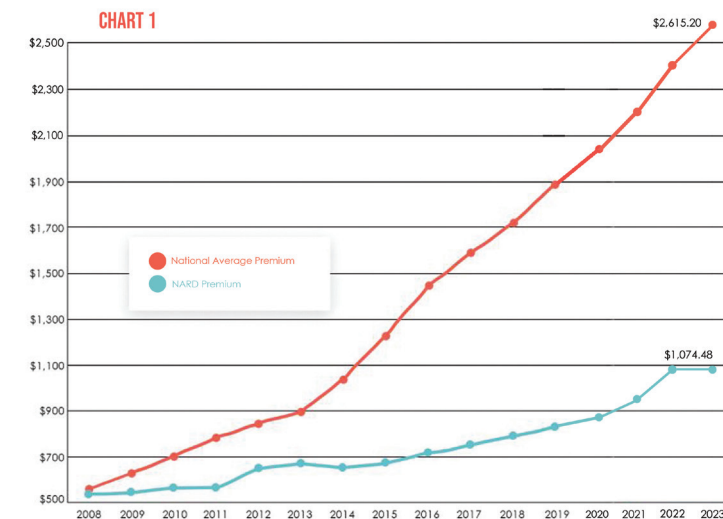


Chart 1: Shows the actual NARD insurance premium compared with the national average.

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

# 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.

In the last year \$28,195 was raised through the NARD Foundation silent auction, raffle, Ron Bishop memorial golf tournament and the 5K fun run.

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 2023 Nebraska State Envirothon was hosted at Cedar Point Biological Station near Lake McConaughy. The 2023 NCF-Envirothon was hosted in New Brunswick, Canada, with 49 teams from the U.S., Canada, China and Singapore competing. Nebraska was represented by Dawson County Envirothon Club.

## NAYI

Annually, the Foundation supports the Nebraska Agriculture Youth Institute and participates in the career fair. The event

welcomed 270 junior and seniors (a record!) to UNL East Campus July 10-14, 2023.

## 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 March, more than 6,000 FFA students were in Lincoln for the Nebraska FFA Convention.

## ACE Camp

Adventure Camp about the Environment (ACE) is a three-day natural resources camp put on by NRDs. 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.

## NRD Recreation Exploration

The NRD Recreation Exploration challenges participants to get outdoors and visit NRD recreation areas between March 1 and September 15. Visitors submit photos of their visits for a chance to win prizes monthly and a grand prize of \$1,500 in Scheels gift cards.

# 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 quality and quantity management, youth programs, benefit programs and public relations.

For the 26th consecutive year, the NARD has balanced its budget and added 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 26 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 a variety of natural resources educational programs that reach thousands of individuals in Nebraska.

## Banner Year for Water Funding

NARD worked with Gov. Pillen, the Nebraska Legislature, NeDNR Director Tom Riley and other partners to help secure the largest funding for water in Nebraska history.

During the last two years, NARD has worked with the South Platte Basin Coalition to secure funding for the Perkins County Canal. The South Platte, Twin Platte and Central Platte NRDs worked with Nebraska Public Power, Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District and Western Canal to promote securing Nebraska's water under the 1923 South Platte River Compact.

These efforts have paid off as we were able to secure \$547.5 million for the Perkins County Canal project. In addition, other legislation was passed to allow for a design-build process to be used to construct the canal.

On a broader note, there were 48 bills and three constitutional amendments on the NARD watch list. Of those, 13 that were supported by NARD passed

and were signed into law. Seven bills were opposed and remain in committee. Thanks goes out to the lobbying team of Zulkoski | Weber!

## Corporate Partners

NARD is taking the lead to develop new working relationships with public and private entities to address water quality.

The NARD, 17 NRDs, the Nebraska Corn Board and NRCS have partnered together to develop a nitrogen dashboard to improve nutrient management.

These partnerships have led to more opportunities to promote practices and programs that protect our natural resources. Jennifer Swanson's job has changed to Director of Water Quality Initiatives, moving her away from daily office work at the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy. In her new role, she will work with agriculture organizations, agri-businesses, and state and federal agencies to secure funding for local water quality initiatives.

By extending and growing our partnerships in the



Dean Edson  
Executive Director

agri-business sector we can enhance conservation in a way that is mutually beneficial for agriculture and our natural resources and transform the landscape of modern farming.

Our tree planting partnership with Executive Travel that began in 2022 has allowed for an additional 111,232 trees to be planted through the NRD Conservation Tree Program. Executive Travel has committed an additional \$65,000 in cost share for the spring 2024 planting season, which will further enhance the beauty and sustainability of Nebraska's landscapes.

The NARD staff looks at challenges as opportunities to learn and grow. Optimism always wins out.



For the first time since 2018, the 5K was hosted to raise funds for the NARD Foundation. Nemaha NRD hosted the 5K Depot Dash on Steamboat Trace Trail, which coincided with the trail's grand reopening after it was damaged by flooding in 2019.



Lower Platte South NRD and NARD Director Tom Green hands out awards during the FFA Convention in late March. Through the NARD Foundation, Nebraska's NRDs sponsor various natural resources related FFA contests.



# Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts

Nebraska Association of Resources Districts

8100 S. 15th St., Suite B  
Lincoln, NE 68512

402.471.7670 | [www.nrdnet.org](http://www.nrdnet.org)

## SAVE THE DATE | 2024 EVENTS

- Jan. 3, 2024 – First Day of 108th Nebraska Legislature 2nd Session
- Jan. 22-24, 2024 – NARD Legislative Conference, Lincoln
- Jan. 24, 2024 – NARD Board Meeting, Lincoln
- Feb. 10-14, 2024 – NACD Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA
- March 4-5, 2024 – NARD Water Programs Conference, Kearney
- March 10-11, 2024 – NARD Board Meeting
- March 18-20, 2024 – NARD Washington, D.C, Conference
- April 24, 2024 – Nebraska State Envirothon, Ponca State Park
- April 26, 2024 – Arbor Day
- June 9-10, 2024 – NARD Board Meeting
- June 10-11, 2024 – NARD Basin Tour
- June 23-26, 2024 – ACE Camp at Camp Kaleo, Burwell
- July 28-Aug. 3, 2024 – NCF-Envirothon, New York
- Aug. 24-Sept. 3, 2024 – Nebraska State Fair, Grand Island
- Sept. 10-12, 2024 – Husker Harvest Days, Grand Island
- Sept. 22-24, 2024 – NARD Annual Conference, Kearney
- Sept. 24, 2024 – NARD Board Meeting, Kearney
- Nov. 10-11, 2024 – NARD Board Meeting

*Background: An irrigation well electrical safety class is hosted at the Sandhills Interactive Natural Resources Educational Center (SINREC) at the Middle Niobrara NRD in Valentine.*

*Five Electrical Safety Classes were held across Nebraska with training provided by the Nebraska Rural Electrical Association, local public power districts, and the Nebraska State Electrical Division. The training consisted of a classroom presentation followed by hands-on training at a pivot location. The goal was to provide hands-on training for NRD Groundwater Technicians who work around high-voltage pivots.*

