

Nebraska Association of Resources Districts

ANNUAL REPORT

2024



In 2024, Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts and the Department of Natural Resources celebrated 20 years of Integrated Management Plans (IMPs). IMPs comprehensively address the unique water resources and demands of an affected area with the ultimate goal to protect existing interests while facilitating economic growth and well being. The Nebraska Cooperative Republican Platte Embankment (N-CORPE) project is a water augmentation project in Lincoln County that helped Lower Republican, Middle Republican, Upper Republican and Twin Platte NRDs address the goals of their IMPs. Back row from left, Upper Republican Director Herry Meyhew, Middle Republican Director Joe Anderjaska, Middle Republican General Manager Jack Russell, Lower Republican Assistant Manager Nick Simonson, Lower Republican General Manager Todd Siel, N-CORPE Operations Manager Mike Keller, Upper Republican Assistant Manager Nate Jenkins; Kneeling from left, Middle Republican Director Jay Schilling, N-CORPE General Manager Kyle Shepherd, and Upper Republican Director Terry Martin.

NARD PRESIDENT'S LETTER: MARTIN GRAFF



Martin Graff
NARD President
Ainsworth, Nebraska
Middle Niobrara NRD

damaging storms—just another year in our great state.

This past year has brought its share of challenges, especially in the political arena. Now more than ever, it's crucial for us to engage with our state senators and national delegates, emphasizing the importance of Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs). Our system of locally elected boards with taxing authority is essential to the success and sustainability of each of the 23 districts.

In the last 20-25 years, NRDs have been given the responsibility of addressing some

of the state's most pressing issues including the Republican Basin Compact with Kansas, National Scenic River designation for the Niobrara, and addressing stream flow depletions in the Upper Platte Basin to name a few. NRDs navigated these issues, and our successes are a testament to the unique natural resources management system that our Unicameral established 52 years ago. This system continues to rise to the challenge year after year.

Our approach to natural resources management is not

only admired across the nation but also globally. Local boards have effectively used their taxing authority to secure state and federal funding for significant projects, including flood risk reduction infrastructure, rural water systems, irrigation efficiency initiatives, and more.

As we move forward, I urge you to continue reaching out to your state representatives and spreading the word about the vital role NRDs play in managing Nebraska's resources for the benefit of all Nebraskans.

It's great to have everyone here once again for the NARD annual conference. As always, Nebraska weather has shown its true colors, blessing some with timely rains while leaving others dry or dealing with



Middle Niobrara NRD Director Martin Graff thanks Nemaha NRD Director Dr. Orval Gigstad for his service as NARD president. Graff became NARD president in March 2024.

Husker Harvest Days Photos Goes Here

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 Martin Graff has served on the Middle Niobrara NRD

Board 29 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 Vice President 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 Secretary/Treasurer Mason

Hoffman is a farmer from Juniata and has served on the Little Blue NRD Board since 2016 and on the NARD boards since 2021. Hoffman and his wife Michelle have three children, Mara, Natalie and Theodore (Tate).

NARD Past 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.

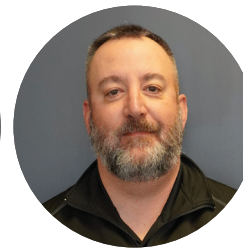
Terry Martin of the Upper Republican NRD serves as the Legislative Committee chair, and Bob Hilger of the Lower Platte North NRD serves as the Information & Education Committee chair.



2023 NARD Executive Committee



Martin Graff
President



Ryan Reuter
Vice President



Mason Hoffman
Secretary/Treasurer



Dr. Orval Gigstad
Past President



Terry Martin
Legislative Chair



Bob Hilger
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 Big Blue NRD Manager Scott Sobotka is chair and Lower Niobrara NRD Manager Wade Ellwanger is vice chair.

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



Scott Sobotka
Chair



Wade Ellwanger
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: www.nrdnet.org/news/conservation-awards.

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

Congratulations to our 2024 award recipients and thank you for your dedication to preserving and protecting Nebraska's natural resources for the next generation.



Paul Hay (posthumously) and Randy Pryor
Water Conservation

For nearly 40 years, Southeast Nebraska Extension Educators Hay and Pryor were pivotal in the ag community promoting no-till farming, field days, trainings, and hands-on demonstrations. They were eager to promote sustainability through education.



Southeast Nebraska Memorial Garden
Community Conservation

Established in 2017, the garden continues to thrive through countless volunteer hours and has become a cherished sanctuary offering hope and a sense of community to those affected by cancer.



Michael Nissen Family
Tree Planter of the Year

Over the past few years, Nissen and his family have planted approx. 1,000 trees and inspired his father Tim to tackle a windbreak renovation, too.



Keith Berns
Soil Stewardship

Berns and his brother Brian founded Green Cover Seeds. He has been continuously no-till for 10 years and has experimented with over 120 cover crops on his 2,500-acre farm.

NRD HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES

Hall of Fame - Director

Larry Moore served nearly five decades on the Upper Big Blue NRD board, from 1975 to 2022. As a past board member, Moore continues to be involved by attending NRD board meetings and speaking out on topics of concern, lending his insight as a farmer as well as his vast institutional knowledge regarding NRD matters.

Dedicated to conservation, Moore has led by example in soil and water management, transitioning his family farm to no-till and incorporating cover crops. He has continuously invested in water conservation since the 1970s, moving from gravity irrigation to center pivots, and more recently installing soil moisture sensors and irrigation scheduling technology to improve efficiency and reduce the likelihood of nitrogen leaching.

His leadership extended beyond his farm, actively participating in public meetings and representing the area in the Big Blue River Compact. Moore's enduring commitment to conservation and public service has significantly impacted the community and the environment.



Larry Moore
Ulysses, NE
Upper Big Blue NRD

Hall of Fame - Employee

Stanley Staab served as the Lower Elkhorn NRD general manager for 29 years. He began his career with Nebraska's NRDs in 1979 as the information & education coordinator at the Upper Big Blue NRD. He became the general manager of the Lower Elkhorn NRD in 1986 and retired in 2015.

During his nearly 36-year career, Staab was instrumental in numerous flood control projects, the construction of recreation areas, and the development of rural water systems. He also championed the establishment of new trails, including the Cowboy Trail Connector in Norfolk.

Staab loved his work and the comradery of his fellow NRD managers, and felt very strongly about the purpose of the Natural Resources Districts to conserve and protect the natural environment.

Staab passed away on March 5, 2024, at age 77. His leadership and commitment to protecting natural resources leave a lasting legacy.



Stanley Staab
Kearney, NE
Lower Elkhorn NRD

Hall of Fame - Supporter

As a third-generation farmer and Nebraska's 44th District senator from 2015 to 2022, Dan Hughes championed natural resources, particularly water rights during his time in the Nebraska Unicameral.

Serving on and chairing the Natural Resources Committee, he was instrumental in passing legislation to protect groundwater and land rights for irrigators, and balancing the interests of agriculture and the environment.

His knowledge of business and farming gave him the ability to see both sides of the issue and create a resolution that pleased both parties while also protecting the natural resources being disputed. Now, as District 5 commissioner for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Hughes continues to advocate for Nebraska's natural resources.

He also continues to be a good steward of the land and water on his farm that he shares with his two children in Venango, passing his knowledge and passion of natural resources onto the next generation.



Sen. Dan Hughes
Venango, NE
44th Legislative District



Judy Ridenour
Director of the Year

Ridenour has served on the Upper Loup NRD Board since 1990 and on the NARD Board since 2004. She has passionately contributed to conservation efforts both as a board member and a producer.



Jessica Evans
Educator of the Year

Evans teaches art, agriculture and is the FFA advisor at Osmond Community Schools. She is known for her hands-on approach and ability to keep students involved and motivated.



NE Nebraska Prescribed Burn Assoc.
Grassland Conservation

Established in 2011, NNPBA promotes and conducts prescribed burns in Knox, Cedar, Dixon, and Wayne counties to improve forage, control red cedars, and enhance wildlife habitats.

NRD Washington, D.C. Conference | March 2024



U.S. Congressman Mike Flood provides a night tour of the U.S. Capitol on March 20, for representatives from Nebraska's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Central Platte, Tri-Basin, Lower Niobrara, and Upper Big Blue NRDs.



Top Far Left: U.S. Senator Deb Fischer meets with NRD directors and staff during the NRD Washington, D.C., Conference March 20, 2024.



Bottom Far Left: During the Nebraska Breakfast Wednesday, March 20, 2024, Gov. Jim Pillen was in attendance. NRD directors and staff had the opportunity to speak with him and other guests in attendance.



Left: From left, Nemaha NRD General Manager Kyle Hauschild, U.S. Congressman Mike Flood and Nemaha NRD and NARD Director Dr. Orval Gigstad meet in the U.S. Capitol.



Bottom left: From left, Lower Loup NRD Directors Darwin Anderson and Larry Mohrman, and staff members Alan Bartels, Tylr Naprstek, Dell Harris, and Kevin Gustafson were among the representatives to attend the Washington D.C. Conference in 2024.

Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) were represented by nearly 50 directors and staff in Washington, D.C., March 18-20, 2024. Nebraska's NRDs advocate for strengthening tools to preserve and fund natural resources projects, which includes engaging policymakers from the grassroots level with a unified voice. This grassroots advocacy culminates with a visit to Washington, D.C., allowing NRD staff and directors to meet with congressional leaders and discuss local priorities with national partners on

federal legislation and programs. "Those who work and live among our natural resources are some of our most effective spokespeople," said Dr. Orval Gigstad, Nebraska Association of Resources Districts past 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. Some of the federal topics and speakers included:

- Watershed Programs, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, Soil Health Division, and Soil Science and Resource Assessment (SSRA) with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Nonpoint

- Source Branch U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA) and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Corps Water Infrastructure Financing Program (CWIFP)
- Bureau of Reclamation WaterSMART Program
- Farm Bill and Agriculture Innovation with Corteva Agriscience, American Farm Bureau Federation and the Irrigation Association.

"We are grateful to our Nebraska federal

delegation for their unwavering support and collaborative spirit in championing the cause of conservation alongside the Natural Resources Districts," Gigstad said. "Their dedication and partnership have been instrumental in securing vital funding and resources that enable us to protect and preserve Nebraska's precious natural resources for generations to come." 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. "NACD thanks Nebraska's district leaders for taking the time and effort to advocate for locally led conservation on

Capitol Hill," said Chris Young, NACD director of government affairs. "As the Farm Bill and federal funding legislation are being developed, it's a critical time for lawmakers to hear district priorities and understand how they can support conservation delivery in Nebraska and across the country." Back in Nebraska, advocacy efforts continued 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 elected officials know what the needs of locally led conservation are so that NRDs can receive adequate support to continue protecting lives, property and the future." Background: Panoramic view of the Tidal Basin, which is part of West Potomac Park in Washington, D.C. The Tidal Basin is about 107 acres in size and approximately 10 feet deep. It was built to harness the power of the tides in the Potomac River to flush silt and sediment from the Washington Channel. During the NRD Washington, D.C., Conference, the cherry blossoms were at peak bloom.

Republican Basin Hosts Tour

More than 80 elected directors and staff from Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) along with conservation partners convened in McCook for the annual NRD Basin Tour hosted by the Lower Republican, Middle Republican, Upper Republican and Tri-Basin NRDs on June 10-11, 2024.

The NRD Basin Tour explores a different water basin each year, with the hosting NRDs showcasing conservation projects, partnerships, and the local communities they serve. This year's tour focused on the Republican River Basin, a vital water resource in southwest Nebraska. The water resources in the basin play a significant role in the region's agriculture, environment, economy and recreation. However, the Republican River has also been at the center of controversy, particularly regarding water rights, usage, and interstate conflicts.

But cooperation among the Republican Basin NRDs and the State of Nebraska over the last decade has created stability by mitigating the threat of non-compliance with the Republican River Compact, an 80-year-old interstate compact involving Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado.

Development of stream augmentation projects by the local NRDs has essentially assured compliance and protected irrigation on approximately 1 million acres in southwest Nebraska.

"Augmentation and other projects in our district paid for by local irrigators provides much-needed stability in our Basin and for the state," said Upper Republican NRD General Manager Jasper Fanning. "Our district and the other NRDs in the Basin are working hard to preserve water for future generations."

The Republican River Basin NRDs face unique challenges related to water allocations. The allocation system, which restricts how much water producers can pump for irrigation, has helped create sustainability and protect existing users in the Basin. Over-extraction for irrigation in previous years has led to reduced water flow, impacting downstream users. Ensuring sustainable water management practices is critical but challenging; however, NRDs are on the path to achieving sustainability.

"We operate under the strictest water allocation in the state and our producers are still profitable," said Lower Republican NRD General Manager Todd Siel. "By equipping our producers with cutting-edge technology like real-time water meters and soil moisture probes, we continue to see an increase in irrigation efficiency."

"We are making investments to better understand the aquifer, which will allow us to be more efficient

Basin Tour Continued

with groundwater to help protect streamflow and our groundwater resources," said Middle Republican NRD General Manager Jack Russell.

Events like the NRD Basin Tour are essential in addressing these controversies by promoting dialogue, showcasing successful conservation projects, and fostering partnerships. The collaboration among various NRDs highlights the commitment to sustainable water management and conservation practices.

The tour included several stops featuring projects that protect irrigated acres and help meet compact compliance. Some of the 2024 tour highlights included:

- Airborne Electromagnetic (AEM) Survey Presentation & Demonstration (McCook, NE)
- Swanson Lake and Republican River Compact Presentation (Trenton, NE)
- Rock Creek Augmentation Project & Rock Creek Hatchery (Parks, NE)
- Blackshirt Feeders (Haigler, NE)
- Middle Republican NRD Watershed Structure (McCook, NE)
- Nebraska Cooperative Republican Platte Enhancement Project (Lincoln County, NE)
- Platte-Republican Diversion Project Presentation (Curtis, NE)
- Medicine Creek Reservoir (Cambridge, NE)
- Cambridge Canal Diversion (Cambridge, NE)

While the Republican River is a critical resource for Nebraska, managing its waters amid competing demands and environmental challenges remains a complex and ongoing issue. The importance of the river necessitates continued collaboration and innovative solutions to address the controversies and ensure a sustainable future for all stakeholders involved.



Above: Tri-Basin NRD General Manager John Thorburn explains allocations. Left: Upper Republican NRD Director Terry Martin explains the NCOPE well pipelines. Bottom: Middle Republican NRD General Manager Jack Russell discusses NCOPE benefits.



GMDA Conference in Omaha



The 2024 Groundwater Management Districts Association (GMDA) summer conference took place in Omaha July 17-19, organized by Lower Loup and Lower Platte South NRDs. Attendees discussed Lincoln's future water supply, agricultural aerial imagery, the Perkins County Canal, 20 years of Nebraska's Integrated Management Planning, Lower Platte River groundwater modeling, groundwater conflicts/lawsuits, PFAS-forever chemicals, and toured Omaha's Metropolitan Utilities District.

About 80 participants from 11 states attended (California, Colorado, Kansas, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Mexico, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming). In addition, Nebraska well license holders earned continuing education units for their participation.

NARD was a proud sponsor of the 2024 GMDA summer conference.

The annual Basin Tour made a stop at Rock Creek Lake near Parks, Nebraska. Attendees learned about the Rock Creek Hatchery and Upper Republican NRD's Rock Creek augmentation project.

STATE ENVIROTHON HEADS NORTH TO PONCA BLUFFS

Amidst the picturesque Missouri River bluffs in northeastern Nebraska, high school students from across the state met at Ponca State Park for the 32nd annual Nebraska State Envirothon April 24, 2024. Concordia Lutheran High School from Omaha, Nebraska, took home the championship along with \$1,500 and will represent Nebraska at the National Conservation Foundation (NCF) Envirothon in Geneva, New York.

Envirothon is an environmental education program for high school students that combines classroom learning and outdoor activities. The

competition rotates around the state, and this year's competition was hosted at Ponca State Park near Ponca, Nebraska.

"Envirothon allows students to get outdoors and learn about natural resources in a hands-on environment," said Martin Graff, Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD) president. "The activities are designed to help students become environmentally aware, action-oriented adults, but also exposes them to many exciting career opportunities."

During the state competition, five-member teams were tested on their knowledge of aquatics, forestry, policy, range, soils and wildlife, as well as prepared and delivered an oral presentation focusing on a current environmental issue. Some of the immersive test questions require students to identify live snakes, measure trees, distinguish range grasses and test water quality.

The 2024 oral presentation theme "Renewable Energy for a Sustainable Future" challenged teams to propose



Concordia Lutheran High School of Omaha takes home the Nebraska Envirothon Championship April 24, 2024. Team members include: Avery Dieckman, David Rice, Malachi Ellis, Margret Rice and Mayleigh Walvoord, and are coached by Mike Ellis.

a solution to a complex problem before a panel of judges. Teams presented as part of a hypothetical design committee whose mission was to evaluate and discuss the benefits and challenges of a proposed hydroelectric power plant.

"Students work together to research the current environmental issue, and consider the hypothetical impacts," Graff said. "It is important to train students to think critically and problem solve, because they'll encounter difficult issues in their lives and their future careers."

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

- **First Place (\$1,500):** Concordia Lutheran
- **Second Place (\$1,000):** St. Paul
- **Third Place (\$500):** Overton

Additional prizes were awarded to the top teams in each testing

category:

- **Aquatics:** Concordia
- **Forestry:** Concordia
- **Policy (tie):** Concordia & Overton
- **Range:** Burwell
- **Soils:** Concordia
- **Wildlife:** Concordia
- **Oral Presentation:** St. Paul

Sixty-eight teams competed in the regional contests during February and March, and 14 teams qualified to participate in the state competition.

Concordia Lutheran High School represented Nebraska at the NCF-Envirothon July 28 to Aug. 3, 2024, competing for a top prize of \$15,000. The international NCF-Envirothon was hosted at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, and included 49 teams from the U.S., Canada, China and Singapore.

NCF-ENVIROTHON IN NEW YORK STATE

After taking the top spot at the State Envirothon, Concordia went on to represent Nebraska at the NCF-Envirothon July 28-Aug. 3, 2024, at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York.

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, "Renewable Energy for a Sustainable Future."

The Nebraska team had an excellent oral presentation score ranking 18th out of 49 teams.

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

Top places went to the following:

- **First:** Tennessee
- **Second:** New York
- **Third:** Maryland

The 2025 NCF-Envirothon will be hosted in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, July 20-26, 2025.



Above: The Nebraska Envirothon team works together on testing day out in the field near Canandaigua, New York. Below: The team visits Ontario Beach Park in Rochester, New York. The beach is located on the shore of Lake Ontario and contains one of the Great Lakes' best natural sand beaches.



ACE CAMP RETURNS

Adventure Camp about the Environment, better known as ACE Camp, returned June 23-26, 2024, after a year hiatus.

The camp was previously hosted at the Nebraska 4-H Camp near Halsey, but after it was destroyed by the Bovee Fire in 2022, the camp was not hosted in 2023 while a new location was secured.

This year, the 6th & 7th-grade campers were hosted at Kamp Kaleo near Burwell. Campers came from all over the state with 90% of them receiving scholarships from their local NRD.

The four-day adventure camp provided students an opportunity to dive into different hands-on activities with a natural resources focus. Sessions educated youth on Nebraska's water resources, wildlife, soil, trees, grasslands, technology and more. Students attending gain a better awareness of possible careers in natural resources by learning from professionals working to conserve them every day.

During their stay, campers also took part in fishing, archery, canoeing, swimming, water rockets and campfires.



Upper Loup NRD General Manager Anna Baum welcomes ACE Camp attendees and quizzes them about natural resources.



ACE Camp includes many activities for campers including water rockets (left) and fishing (above). Multiple NRDs and partner agencies help provide programming.



Above: Lower Niobrara and NARD Director Deb Hansen announces awards during the Nebraska State Envirothon.

Below: Students from Tri-County Public Schools work together to identify a snake at the Envirothon wildlife testing station.



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 year two of the NRD Recreation Exploration.

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 hills 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.

2024 NRD Recreation Exploration Winners:

- March (\$100): Cody of Beatrice
- April (\$100): Ashley of Malcom
- May (\$100): Anthony of Omaha; Brandy of York
- June (\$100): Rachel of Omaha; Justin of Bruning
- July (\$100): Jeannine of Norfolk; John of Lincoln

- August (\$100): Leaha of Wahoo; Hannah of Phillips
- Grand prize winners – Second Runner-Up (\$300), Runner Up (\$500), and Grand Prize (\$1,500) – will be selected in late September.

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

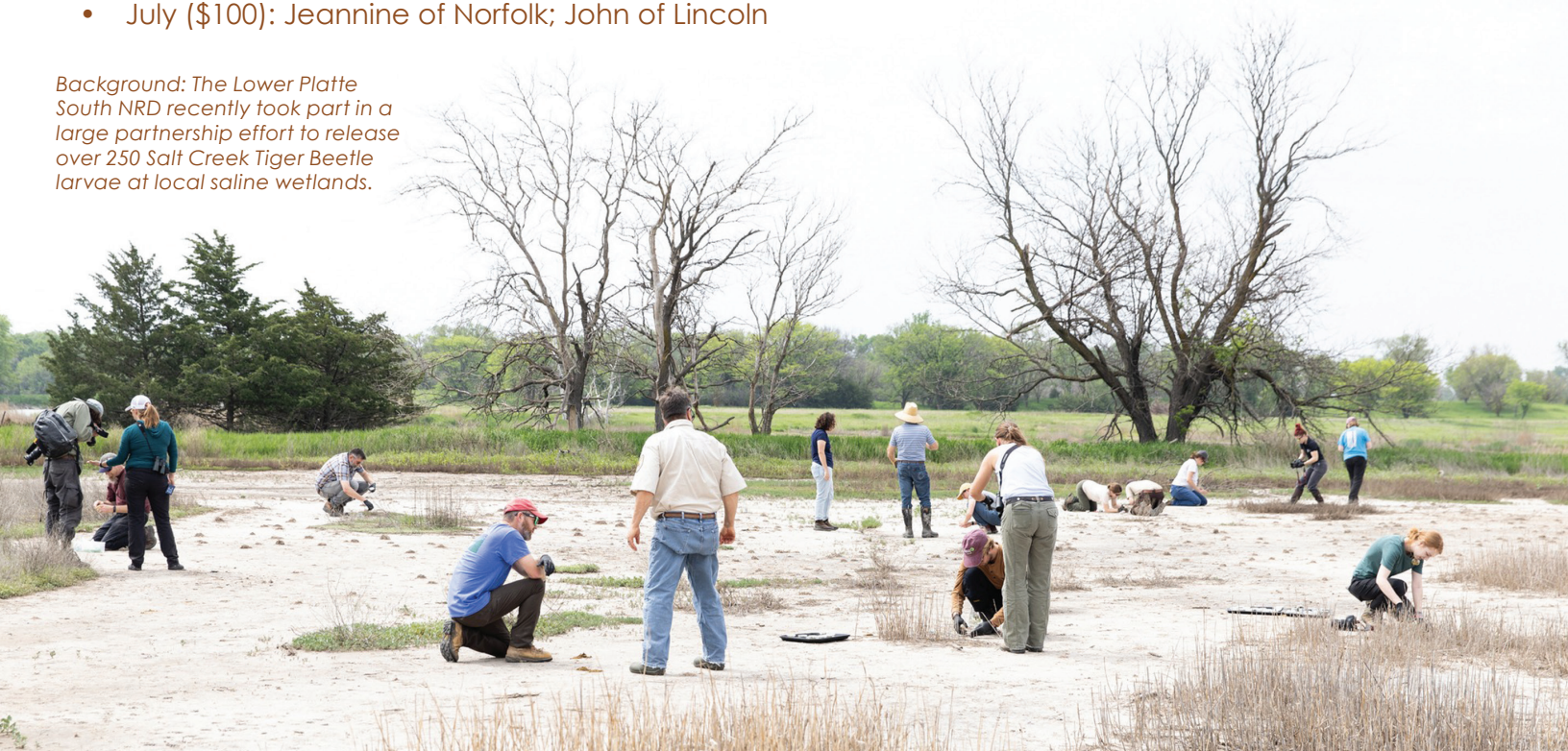
For more information about the NRD Recreation Exploration program, including a list of recreation areas, photos, program rules, and the prize structure, visit www.nrdnet.org/recreation.



Top left: Amy of Edgar visited Little Blue NRD's Lonestar Rec Area noting, "We spent five weeks here on and off all summer! Kids love the swimming beach and parents love the serene atmosphere! It will be someplace we visit for years to come!"

Top Right: A daycare explores Lower Platte North NRD's Lake Wanahoo with their binoculars in hand. They picnicked then trekked the story walk trail.

Background: The Lower Platte South NRD recently took part in a large partnership effort to release over 250 Salt Creek Tiger Beetle larvae at local saline wetlands.



CONSERVATION *Tree Program*

In 2024, the NRDs sold more than 660,000 conservation trees and shrubs statewide.

NRDs continue to explore new ways to promote and expand tree plantings through partnerships with NRCS, Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) and Executive Travel.

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 2025, Executive Travel has committed another \$50,000 for conservation tree cost-share funding. This marks a contribution of \$240,000 from Executive Travel since the partnership began in 2022.

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 Conservation Technician Jordyn Duffek plants a row of trees in Boone County near a recently built home.



Middle Niobrara NRD's Kyle Temple plants a windbreak.



Right: Nebraska's NRDs help plant a concolor fir for Arbor Day at the Capitol. From left, Lower Platte South NRD/NARD Director Tom Green, Lt. Gov. Joe Kelly, Executive Travel Chairman Steve Glenn.

2024 FORESTRY WORKSHOP AT LEWIS & CLARK

The annual NRD Forestry Workshop was hosted by Lewis & Clark NRD at Ponca State Park, Aug. 7-8, 2024.

In addition to presentations, partnership meetings, and roundtable discussions, attendees had the opportunity to learn during a projects tour led by Lewis & Clark NRD and the Nebraska Forest Service.

The annual Workshop allows NRD forestry staff to meet with partners and learn from one another in a relaxed in-field environment.



Papio NRD Forester Jordan Smith provides information about the "Ponca Wolf Oak," a bur oak estimated to be 380 years old. The tree is located in Ponca State Park.



NRD Forestry Workshop attendees attend a projects tour with Lewis & Clark NRD and the Nebraska Forest Service.

PARTICIPATION UP (AGAIN) FOR RANGE & LAND JUDGING

In September 2023, Lower Big Blue NRD hosted state Range Judging at Homestead National Historic Park near Beatrice with 59 teams competing. Teams from West Holt took top honors in both the Senior and Junior Divisions.

2023 was another record year for Land Judging with 110 schools and 1,969 students participating in regional competitions.

Lower Loup NRD hosted state Land Judging near Broken Bow in October 2023 with 42 schools competing.

Five teams – Falls City, Wisner-Pilger, Alma, Bishop Neumann (Wahoo) and The Career Academy (Lincoln) – took honors at state Land Judging and went on to compete at national Land Judging April 30-May 2, 2024, near Reno,

Oklahoma.

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 Upper Republican NRD Sept. 24-25, 2024, and state Land Judging will be hosted by Lower Elkhorn NRD Oct. 16, 2024.



Students stand in the soil pit and check the soil profile during State Land Judging Oct. 24, 2023.

Background: Lower Loup NRD hosted State Land Judging in Custer County. Students stand next to one of four soil pits listening to instructions before judging on Oct. 25, 2023.



The 2023 Nebraska State Land Judging contest was held in Custer County in 2023 on land owned by Jeff and Karen Evans of rural Broken Bow. The Evans family is known for their conservation practices and for being thoughtful stewards of their land. Lower Loup NRD General Manager Russ Callan, left, presents a thank you gift to Jeff Evans from the State Land Judging Committee.

NRD WATER MANAGEMENT A MODEL FOR GLOBAL PARTNERS

The Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD) has been actively hosting international visitors to showcase Nebraska's innovative approaches to natural resources management especially related to irrigation.

- September 2023: New Zealand
- January 2024: Japan
- February 2024: Brazil (Parana) and Czech Republic
- April 2024: Brazil (Mato Grosso)
- July 2024: Brazil (Bahia)

Visits were organized in conjunction with partners including the Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute, Nebraska Department of Economic Development, and Water Strategies, Inc.

Upper Big Blue NRD also hosted international visitors this year including two groups from Brazil and a guest from Paraguay.

These visits underscore Nebraska's role as a leader in natural resources management and its commitment to fostering global partnerships for sustainable development.



On Jan. 30, 2024, the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts welcomed Makiko Oleynikov from Washington, D.C. Makiko is working on behalf of the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries to learn about the irrigation management practices that are unique to Nebraska. From left, NARD Director of Programs and Partnerships Dustin Wilcox, Makiko Oleynikov, and NARD Executive Director Dean Edson.



Left: Upper Big Blue NRD staff visit with representatives from Bahia, Brazil, who came to learn about Nebraska's innovative solutions for natural resources management.



GOV. JIM PILLEN MEETS WITH 23 DISTRICTS ON WATER POLICY



Governor Jim Pillen: Charting the Future With Technology and Groundwater Conservation



Gov. Jim Pillen meets with all 23 NRDs in Lincoln on July 30, 2024.

A GLIMPSE OF ACTIVITIES IN THE *natural resources districts*



Lower Loup NRD Water Programs Assistant LeeAnn Smith takes readings with a multi-parameter sonde at Davis Creek Recreation Area near North Loup.



Little Blue NRD directors learn more about the Little Blue Public Water Project, which secured \$6.6M in funding to find a new clean drinking water source for rural water users.



Middle Niobrara NRD Technician Travis Reagle opens a main line check valve during an inspection.



Upper Elkhorn NRD installs weed mulch on rows of windbreaks outside O'Neill, Nebraska.



All irrigators in the Middle Republican NRD are now equipped with telemetry meters to improve irrigation efficiency.



Above: Upper Loup NRD prepares a planter for a producer to lease from the District.



Front row from left, Rob Lawson, USDA NRCS State Conservationist; David Potter, Lower Platte South NRD Assistant Manager; Tom Green, Lower Platte South NRD Director; J. Scott Sobotka, Lower Big Blue NRD General Manager; John Winkler, Papio-Missouri River NRD General Manager. Middle row from left, Mark Hall, Lower Elkhorn NRD Director; Kyle Hauschild, Nemaha NRD General Manager; Steve Sandberg, Upper Niobrara White NRD Director; Larry Barta and Steve Kelley, Lower Big Blue NRD Directors. Back row from left, Curt Becker, Lower Elkhorn NRD Assistant Manager; Dr. Orval Gigstad, NARD President and Nemaha NRD Director; Pat O'Brien, Upper Niobrara White NRD General Manager; Ryan Reuter, North Platte NRD Director; and Travis Preston, North Platte NRD Assistant Manager.



Below: Nemaha NRD Field Representative Tomas Chalé Aké measures water levels in the spring.



In February 2024, Central Platte NRD began renovations on the Alda Crane Viewing site near Alda, Nebraska. Renovations included a new viewing platform, paving the recreational trail and two parking lots to make the area fully ADA accessible. Other improvements included angler access to the pond and bank stabilization.



Representatives from the Lower Elkhorn NRD and JEO Consulting were available to address questions and comments from citizens and stakeholders at a June open house for the North Fork Elkhorn River Flood Risk Reduction Plan.



Crews prep to line the outlet of Lower Big Blue NRD's Cub Creek 10-C flood mitigation structure with a cast-in-place liner. The cost-effective repair involves inserting a flexible liner inside the existing pipe and hardening the liner. The liner forms a smooth surface inside the existing pipe, restoring it to near-new condition.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE!

20 YEARS

- Curt Becker, Lower Elkhorn
- David Carr, Central Platte
- Jasper Fanning, Upper Republican
- Jane Klanecky, Lower Loup
- Kelly Kloppenborg, Upper Elkhorn
- Carol Lashley, Middle Republican
- Charlie Pierce, Nemaha
- Shaula Ross, Lower Platte South
- Esther Smith, Tri-Basin

25 YEARS

- Curtis Armstrong, Lewis & Clark
- Kandis Bremer, Lower Loup
- Chris Dierks, Upper Elkhorn (director)
- Marcia Lee, Central Platte
- Ray Naprstek, Lower Niobrara (director)
- Scott Nelson, Little Blue
- Tom Pleiss, Papio
- Scott Sobotka, Lower Big Blue
- Mike Sousek, Lower Platte South
- Aaron Stalder, Nemaha
- Jerry Weaver, Twin Platte (director)

30 YEARS

- Deb Hayes, Upper Republican
- Rita Hoblyn, Upper Big Blue
- Julie Wragge, Lower Elkhorn

35 YEARS

- Norman Hadenfeldt, Lower Loup (director)

40 YEARS

- Tom Backer, Central Platte

45 YEARS

- Wilma Zimbelman, Upper Republican

50 YEARS

- Darwin Anderson, Lower Loup (director)

IN MEMORIAM

- Karen Amen, Lower Platte South (director)
- Dean Jochem, Middle Niobrara (director)
- Leonard Schmitz, Lower Niobrara (director)
- Justin Sprague, Upper Loup
- Stanley Staab, Lower Elkhorn
- Boyd Stuhr, Upper Big Blue (director)
- Merlin Volkmer, Upper Big Blue (director)

PROGRAMS THAT MAKE A *difference*

2024 NRD PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

• • • UPPER NIOBRARA WHITE • • •

UNWNRD distributed over 97,000 trees and 408,069 feet of weed barrier, working with the Nebraska Forest Service to plant another 75,000 ponderosa pine trees in wildfire scars. Staff provided a no-till drill for planting 650 acres, measured water levels at 190 wells, prepared 12 weekly crop water-use reports, inspected 630 chemigation systems, collected 750 water quality samples, and obtained water-use reading from 1,872 meters. UNWNRD hosted several educational events including Range Day; Western Region Envirothon and the Northwest Nebraska Conservation Festival.

• • • NORTH PLATTE • • •

As NPNRD faces drier conditions, the emphasis is on water quality and drought. Water quality planning focuses on the use and overuse of nitrates and is ongoing districtwide. To encourage reduction of consumptive water use, the NPNRD works with producers to sign up for the Encouraging Producer Innovation through Conservation (EPIC) programs as well as the Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Cost-Share Program (NSWCP).

• • • SOUTH PLATTE • • •

SPNRD and Nebraska Forest Service hosted Western Field Days. Approximately 50 tree and geography enthusiasts toured Hackberry Hollow and local stands of limber pine including a 500+ year-old limber pine. After countywide advisory meetings and a public hearing, the District approved the proposed amendments to districtwide Groundwater Management Area rules & regulations effective June 14, 2024. Groundwater allocations will remain the same for 2025-2027.

• • • UPPER REPUBLICAN • • •

URNRD has continued converting odometer flow meters to digital meters that transmit water-use readings via radio network, allowing irrigators to better track usage and their remaining allocation. A new groundwater model is being used to help URNRD evaluate aquifer impacts for requests to relocate existing irrigation pumping, and in the future will inform important water-use decisions.

• • • MIDDLE NIOBRARA • • •

MNNRD sold nearly 90,000 conservation trees. The District approved 6,000 new irrigated acres, which increased the amount of water quality/quantity monitoring sites, and added real-time monitoring to observation wells in conjunction with NeDNR. Administration work has begun on the newly acquired instream flow rights from the Niobrara River's Spencer Hydro Facility. Planning efforts continue for the Long Pine Creek watershed and three Cherry County WFPOs.

• • • UPPER LOUP • • •

ULNRD has continued to grow the recycling program and was honored with the Common Wealth Award. This award recognizes the time and effort that the ULNRD has given to the community to improve the natural environment through better materials management. ULNRD's Hazard Mitigation Plan will be completed in September. ACE Camp returned after a short break due to the Bovee Fire and is now hosted at Kamp Kaleo.

• • • LOWER LOUP • • •

LLNRD had a busy spring measuring static water levels in 453 wells, issuing 3,469 chemigation permits, and selling 52,981 trees. Completion of the Sargent Hazard Mitigation Grant design phase is expected by year's end. Davis Creek Road Paving Project phases 1-2 also will be completed by year's end. The Vadose Zone Nitrate Tracking Project was augmented in 2024 with installation of soil moisture monitoring stations in the eastern portion of the District.

• • • TRI-BASIN • • •

TBNRD continues its unique Water Conservation Incentive Program (WCIP). WCIP incentivizes groundwater irrigators to limit pumping. The program also has a commingled option that encourages irrigators to use canal water from Central NE Public Power and Irrigation District to increase recharge and reduce groundwater withdrawals. This program is funded by the NRD and NeDNR. Over 5,000 acres are enrolled in WCIP.

• • • LOWER REPUBLICAN • • •

LRNRD began Phase 1 of a groundwater flow meter project last winter. Over 400 telemetry meters have been installed in the Rapid Response Area. The Bureau of Reclamation recently announced that an additional \$4.3M has been set aside for Phase 2, enabling installation of new meters across the entire district in the next few years.

• • • MIDDLE REPUBLICAN • • •

MRNRD has partnered with McCrometer and Longitude 103 to create an accurate, accessible database for producers. The team has worked diligently to clean and improve data quality, which will benefit groundwater users and support the Republican River Compact. Additionally, the district completed AEM surveys and installing meters and is now providing educational resources to stakeholders.

• • • LOWER NIOBRARA • • •

LNNRD has installed HydroVu on their website for real-time well monitoring. LNNRD received a \$500,000 WSF grant to offer 75% cost share on flow meters, telemetry, soil moisture probes, and other irrigation technology. The West Knox Rural Water System received a \$200,000 WSF grant to install and implement remote-read meters. LNNRD continues to host educational events in every district school. LNNRD has partnered with others to pass the initial Niobrara River Valley Hazard Mitigation Plan.

• • • UPPER ELKHORN • • •

UENRD is upgrading the network of transducers in monitoring wells, and adding telemetry with additional transducer locations are being considered. Adding these options along with the rain gauge data loggers allows the NRD to identify the effects of irrigation pumping and precipitation on water levels in a timelier manner. The District is funding a weather station by Elgin and considering additional locations.

• • • CENTRAL PLATTE • • •

The CPNRD Board approved a new office and education center to be located at the NRD's Prairie Silver Moores Flood Reduction site northwest of Grand Island. With a budget of \$13,473,000, construction is expected to take 18 months. CPNRD plans to offer indoor/outdoor educational opportunities for producers, NRD staff, well drillers, students and the general public.

• • • LITTLE BLUE • • •

LBNRD imposed an immediate stay, beginning May 14, on the construction of all high-capacity irrigation wells and the expansion of irrigated acres in most of the district. LBNRD has also taken a significant step in protecting water quality by elevating four areas with known high-nitrate concentrations to Level III, which is LBNRD's highest level of regulation. 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 LBNRD has also secured \$200K in funding to replace broken or outdated irrigation meters.

• • • LEWIS & CLARK • • •

LCNRD is working with farmers, students, conservation partners, and agricultural professionals on projects that positively impact water quality/quantity. LCNRD continues to promote best management practices across the district, with a focus on the Bow Creek watershed and Bazile Groundwater Management Area. LCNRD also maintains flood mitigation structures in the Aowa Creek watershed and is currently working with NRCS to address erosion, sediment and flood concerns in the South Creek watershed in Dixon County.

• • • LOWER ELKHORN • • •

LENRD continues efforts to develop watershed plans for Maple Creek, Battle Creek, and North Fork Elkhorn River watersheds. LENRD and LCNRD were awarded NRCS funds for a Source Water Protection Specialist to establish conservation practices on Wellhead Protection Areas, and are also cooperating to update Hazard Mitigation Plans. Progress is being made to implement BMPs in the Willow Creek Watershed to improve water quality. The LENRD sold approximately 73,000 conservation trees.

• • • LOWER PLATTE NORTH • • •

LPNNRD continues updates on the Groundwater Management Plan and the Hazard Mitigation Plan renewal. Priority watershed projects are advancing to promote long-term water quality benefits. LPNNRD is in the assessment and planning phase of flood damage caused by the record rain event across multiple district watersheds on May 21. As an approved disaster for Saunders County, LPNNRD will work closely with FEMA on repairs.

• • • UPPER BIG BLUE • • •

The Upper Big Blue partnered with area agencies and communities to update Hazard Mitigation Plans. Restoration projects are being considered for impaired lakes in Hastings and York to provide better habitat and recreational opportunities. Many upgrades were completed at recreation areas including updated picnic and playground structures at Smith Creek (Utica) and a supply well installation at Oxbow Trail (Ulysses).

• • • LOWER BIG BLUE • • •

LBBNRD continues working to update groundwater rules and regulations to ensure a plentiful source of groundwater is available for all uses well into the future. Dam maintenance is a continued focus with staff inspecting, maintaining, and repairing structures as needed.

• • • PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER • • •

The Papio NRD has three flood mitigation reservoirs currently underway. WP-4, located in Gretna, is expected to open in spring of 2025. WP-2, also located in Gretna, is expected to open in 2026. WP-1, located in northwest Omaha, is anticipated to open in 2027.

• • • LOWER PLATTE SOUTH • • •

LPSNRD facilitated public meetings to gather input pertaining to the MoPac East-Lied Connector Trail; approximately 180 individuals attended. The District also secured a critical conservation easement for the Prairie Corridor on Haines Branch project. This spring, LPSNRD, alongside conservation partners, reintroduced the endangered Salt Creek Tiger Beetle at two saline wetlands. LPSNRD also completed a \$4M stream stabilization project along Antelope Creek in Lincoln and continued work on the Piening Water Quality Basin project. I&E staff hosted more than 2,000 high school students on field trips.

• • • NEMAHA • • •

The Nemaha NRD continues to look for new and cost-effective ways to maintain aging watershed structures. Seven structures were slip-lined in 2024. Local conservation efforts to assist landowners with erosion concerns remain a top priority. The District started a pilot project to promote irrigation efficiency within the Burr-Cook paleovalley aquifer.

When It Rains, It Pours

FLOOD INFRASTRUCTURE PROTECTS LIVES AND PROPERTY

It has been a record-breaking year for severe weather in eastern Nebraska. Thanks to a network of floodwater-reduction dams, lives were saved, and property damage was significantly mitigated.

Amid a series of intense rainstorms May 21, 2024, eastern Nebraska faced a deluge that brought up to 10 inches of rain within hours.

Lower Platte North NRD

Within the 51,000-acre Bellwood Creek Watershed, 13 dams south of Bellwood, in Butler County, prevented an estimated \$1 million in damages to downstream property and infrastructure.

Similarly, the 34,000-acre Cottonwood Creek sub-watershed, northwest of Wahoo, Nebraska, in Saunders County, benefited from 12 dams that prevented an estimated \$300,000 in damages. Despite these protective

measures, the town of Wahoo still experienced significant flooding. However, the presence of the dams helped reduce the overall impact. The towns of Prague and Malmo also saw benefits from these dams.

"While we understand we will never be able to control all flooding we are working hard to reduce flooding and flood-related damages throughout our 1 million+ acre district," said Eric Gottschalk, Lower Platte North NRD general manager.

Recognizing the ongoing flood risks, the Lower Platte North NRD and NRCS approved the Upper Wahoo Creek Watershed Plan in 2022. This \$19.7 million project aims to construct nine floodwater-reduction dams within a 100-square-mile area in the Wahoo

Creek Watershed in Saunders County. The plan includes the construction of nine wet dams.

Lower Platte South NRD

In the 63,000-acre North Oak sub-watershed, spanning portions of Butler, Saunders and Lancaster Counties, 16 dams prevented an estimated \$800,000 in property and infrastructure damage. The towns of Valparaiso and Raymond are located within this watershed.

Papio-Missouri River NRD

This spring, three Omaha metro storms were 100-year-plus rain events.

Flood mitigation structures (creek channels, levee systems and reservoirs) held during all three events. Papio NRD General Manager John Winkler said the end results show that public investments in flood mitigation infrastructure in

the Papillion Creek Watershed are paying dividends.

"Every time it rains, there's some level of protection, some level of savings in flood mitigation," Winkler said. "It doesn't have to be a 100-year storm. It could be just your average rain. But there's always some benefit there."

In late June, heavy rain in South Dakota, northeast Nebraska and northwest Iowa led to high water coming down the Missouri River.

Once again, Papio NRD staff jumped into action closing slide gates and culverts that empty into rivers and installed a temporary flood wall barrier along the railroad tracks in Bellevue to reduce flood impacts.

Flood mitigation to save lives and property has always and continues to be a priority for Natural Resources Districts.



Far left: From left, Lower Platte North NRD General Manager Eric Gottschalk and Water Resources Specialist Will Brueggemann monitoring the dam and spillway at Lake Wanhoo northeast of Wahoo, Nebraska.

Left: In anticipation of rising waters along the Missouri River in June, Papio NRD crews build a temporary levee closure section over the railroad tracks near Bellevue.

Nitrogen Reduction Incentive Act

NRDS WORK WITH DNR TO ROLL OUT SEN. IBACH'S NEWEST PROGRAM

On April 11, senators approved the creation of a program to incentivize the reduction of nitrogen use in Nebraska farming practices.

LB1368, sponsored by Sen. Teresa Ibach, created a nitrogen reduction incentive program to be administered by the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (NeDNR). The program will provide an annual incentive

of \$10 per acre to qualified farmers who verify a reduction in commercial fertilizer rates of either 40 pounds per acre or 15% by incorporating a qualifying product into the farm's nutrient plans.

The program is funded through a one-time transfer of \$1 million from the Water Resources Cash Fund to a newly created Nitrogen Reduction Incentive Cash Fund,

and \$100,000 in general funds in fiscal year 2024-25 and FY2025-26.

The NRD Manager Water Resources subcommittee has been meeting regularly with NeDNR to draft guidance documents and applications for implementation of the program.

NeDNR recently solicited public feedback, will make appropriate changes,



and expect to open the program for producers in October or November 2024.

LOWER BIG BLUE NRD HOSTS ANNUAL NRD MANAGER RETREAT

Lower Big Blue NRD hosted the annual NRD Manager retreat at Homestead National Historic Park Aug. 26-28, 2024.

In addition to hearing from partner agencies and conducting regular business, managers had the opportunity to tour the Nebraska Public Power District's Beatrice Power Station, which was commissioned in 2005. There was also a presentation from Koch Fertilizer, which operates a nitrogen fertilizer plant in Beatrice.



Attendees learn more about the NPPD Beatrice Power Station.

NRD ANNIVERSARY QUILT GIFTED TO NARD FOR PUBLIC DISPLAY

To commemorate the NRD's 50th anniversary, Deb Eschliman, wife of Lower Loup NRD/NARD Director Jim Eschliman, created a quilt for the NARD Foundation's 2022 silent auction where Central Platte NRD/NARD Director Jim Bendfeldt purchased it.

Recently, Bendfeldt returned the quilt to the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts for display at their office.

We thank the Eschlimans and the Bendfeldts for their generous donation and NRD service.



Above: Jim and Deb Eschliman with the 50th Anniversary quilt made by Deb. Right: Jim and Carol Bendfeldt purchased the quilt and recently donated it to NARD.

PRODUCER CONNECT: A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

NRDs, NARD, NRCS, Corn Board & Agri-Business partner on nitrogen dashboard



Jennifer Swanson
Director of Water Quality Initiatives

The development of the Producer Connect app exemplifies the power of collaboration among key partners, including 17 of Nebraska's 23 NRDs, the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD), the Nebraska Corn Board, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Corteva, CVA, and the Nebraska Cooperative Council. These organizations share a common goal: to foster a thriving agricultural industry in Nebraska while safeguarding its natural resources. Producer Connect aims to be an educational tool that helps producers enhance water and nitrogen-use efficiency in their farming operations,

while also tracking progress to improve groundwater quality.

Producer Connect is a spatial tool that integrates producer data with aerial imagery, generating nitrogen recommendations and displaying nitrate efficiency in bushels per pound of fertilizer. The tool also allows producers to track nitrogen and water use over multiple years.

"Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success."

– Henry Ford

The app helps address the critical issue of rising nitrate levels in Nebraska's groundwater, which serves as the drinking water source for about 85% of the state's population. Producer Connect will be free to use and offer features such as:

- Tailored producer data to meet individual needs.
- Data protection to ensure user confidentiality.
- Customizable nitrogen recommendations for informed decision-making.
- Irrigation

efficiency tools to improve water management.

- Historical data analysis for trend tracking.
 - Economic analysis to maximize profitability.
- To ensure successful adoption, we've developed a targeted outreach strategy focused on:
- Awareness: Highlighting the benefits of Producer

Connect for efficient nitrogen management.

- Adoption: Encouraging widespread use, particularly in Phase II & III management areas.
- Education:



A Central Platte NRD employee collects a water quality sample from a pivot in central Nebraska.

Offering training to help farmers optimize yields while minimizing environmental impact.

- Sustainability: Promoting practices that reduce nitrogen runoff and leaching using the nitrogen dashboard.

All project partners are committed to making Producer Connect a vital tool for sustainable agriculture in Nebraska. Through collaboration, innovation, and a dedication to environmental stewardship, this initiative aims to ensure that Nebraska's agricultural industry thrives while protecting natural resources for future generations.

20 YEARS OF INTEGRATED MANAGEMENT PLANNING

LB962: Safeguarding Nebraska's water resources and economy for the future



Dustin Wilcox
NARD Programs and Partnerships Director

In 2024, we mark another significant milestone in Nebraska's water conservation journey by commemorating 20 years of integrated water management, a critical effort that has safeguarded Nebraska's economy and water resources.

LB962, which was adopted by the Nebraska Legislature in 2004 aiming to address water management challenges, was developed through a consensus reached by a 49-member task force made up of stakeholders and water users with diverse interests.

The task force's work called for a proactive approach to management of the state's hydrologically connected groundwater and

surface water with the ultimate goal of protecting existing users while facilitating economic growth and well-being.

At the heart of LB962 was the establishment of a formal Integrated Management Planning (IMP) process, which has since fostered strong partnerships between the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (NeDNR) and NRDs. This framework has been essential in developing IMPs that ensure the sustainable management of our water resources.

While LB962's recognition of the hydrological connection between surface water and groundwater was a significant step, the real impact lies in the process it established for creating and managing IMPs. Each plan begins with convening a diverse group of local stakeholders, whose input is critical in shaping goals and objectives that reflect the unique needs of their communities. This locally driven process ensures that each plan is tailored to the

priorities of the water users it serves.

Furthermore, LB962 required that each IMP undergo an annual monitoring and review process. These reviews involve collecting data and evaluating the methodologies used in the plan, ensuring that IMPs evolve in response to new science and technology. Many plans have now entered their fifth generation, demonstrating the effectiveness of this continuous process.

As Vince Lombardi

famously said, "Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence." Nebraska's IMPs embody this philosophy. Today, 20 years after LB962's passage, each of the 23 NRDs continues to partner with NeDNR, actively pursuing excellence in water management. Together, we are ensuring that Nebraska's economy and water resources remain protected for generations to come.





Upper Big Blue NRD helps elementary students participate in water quality testing at an event in Utica.



The public can now explore groundwater levels at the Nebraska State Fairgrounds. A recent addition to the site is a monitoring well, installed by the Nebraska Well Drillers Association and built by Downey Drilling, which reaches a depth of 55 feet. Seim Ag Technology donated a sophisticated monitoring system to provide real-time data on groundwater levels. Central Platte NRD will monitor this well, which has been added to its 116 active monitoring wells from Gothenburg to Columbus. Data collected from these wells, along with 500 irrigation wells, is vital for the NRD's groundwater management program, with measurements taken each spring and fall.



South Platte NRD hosts a Natural Resources Day for fourth grade students on May 6, 2024, with ESU 13 students. The day consists of interactive demonstrations, hands-on activities and games to create student interest and awareness in natural resources.



Lower Republican NRD hosts a tire recycling event. Recycling tires helps keep them out of ditches and landfills where they can leach harmful chemicals into our water.



Right: North Platte NRD Greenhouse Coordinator Kirstee Moore-Schutt gives a tour. The NRD's Greener Gardens Greenhouse is an outdoor educational facility with a geothermal greenhouse, 70 plots of native and introduced grasses, a learning/classroom area, tree identification plantings, and a perimeter of pollinators.



Students learn about tree planting during Upper Niobrara White NRD's Conservation Festival at Chadron State Park.



Right: The Shell Creek Watershed student water monitoring group attended the International Soil and Water Conservation Society conference in Iowa last August to discuss the water quality monitoring and the role they played in the de-listing of Shell Creek for Atrazine. Newman Grove students, along with teacher and Lower Platte North NRD Directors Mark Seier and Matt Bailey shared their involvement in the group over the years.



Two decades in the making, the Platte River Bridge Trail officially opened in August, providing greater safety on the bridge and increased recreational opportunities. The trail connects Sarpy County to Cass County along the Highway 34/Highway 75 bridge. Papio-Missouri River NRD hosted the ribbon cutting on Aug. 3, 2024.



Lower Big Blue NRD's Adam Kimmerling conducts a stormwater runoff activity with area youth in Crete.

Below: Bertrand students catch insects during Tri-Basin NRD's Rainwater Basin Conservation Day.



Lewis & Clark NRD Bow Creek Watershed Coordinator Becky Ravenkamp, left, explains the procedures for surface water sampling to Crofton High School students.



Lower Niobrara NRD Programs Assistant Connie McCarthy, right, appears on PURE Nebraska to discuss the NRD Conservation Tree Program.



Middle Niobrara NRD staff add mulch chipped by the district to Brewer Bridge Landing. Brewer Bridge Landing is a public access site managed by the NRD for recreation on the Scenic Niobrara River.

THE 2ND SESSION OF 108TH LEGISLATURE

The second session of the 108th Legislature adjourned sine die April 18, 2024, on day 60 of the 60-day session.

The first session of the 109th Legislature is scheduled to convene on Jan. 8, 2025. Regular sessions generally last 90 legislative days in odd-numbered years and 60 legislative days in even-numbered years.

Nearly 360 bills were passed this session. In addition, several other bills were incorporated by amendment to the bills that passed. No bills are carried forward to the 2025 session, so all bills that did not receive final approval by the Legislature, or were postponed by committee, were indefinitely postponed on the last day of the session.

This year, the NARD tracked 80 bills and three constitutional amendments. The breakdown of those are as follows:

- Support and passed: 15
- Oppose and passed: 0
- Support and died: 10
- Opposed and died: 13

- Monitor and passed: 18
 - Monitor and died: 27
- The following are a few key bills of interest to Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts.

LB 937 - Adopt the Caregiver Tax Credit Act (Bostar)

Senators gave final approval on April 18, by a 45-0-4 vote. This bill became a vehicle for passing other tax credit bills. LB 1184, the Reverse Osmosis System Tax Credit Act to provide a tax credit for installation of reverse osmosis systems, was included in LB 937. The refundable tax credit would be equal to fifty percent of the cost incurred by the taxpayer during the taxable year for installation of

the reverse osmosis system, up to a maximum of one thousand dollars.

LB 1317 – State Findings relating to property taxes (Linehan)

Senators gave final approval to LB 1317 on April 18, by a 49-0-0 vote. The bill contains an amendment (AM 3246), which contains portions and provisions of 10 other tax related bills. It includes a modified version of LB 1184, which appropriates \$1 million for FY 24-25 from the General Fund to the Department of Environment and Energy for the installation of real-time nitrate sensors in monitoring wells statewide to prioritize nitrate management and reduction.

LB 43e - Adopt the First Freedom Act and the Personal Privacy Protection Act, authorize tribal regalia to be worn by students, change provisions relating to withholding records from the public, provide requirements for interpretation of statutes, rules, and regulations, and prohibit state agencies from imposing certain requirements on charitable organizations (Sanders)

Senators gave final approval to LB 43 on March 21, by a 39-0-10 vote. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed into law by Gov. Pillen on March 27. The bill contains an amendment (AM 2812) offered by Sen. Brewer eliminated the language that gave public bodies discretion to allow for citizens to speak at public meeting and replaced it with language to "shall allow members of the public an opportunity to speak at each meeting". The exception would be at closed sessions. The previous law allowed for any public body to make and

FOCUSED HEAVILY ON PROPERTY TAXES

enforce reasonable rules and regulations regarding the conduct of persons attending, speaking at, videotaping, televising, photographing, broadcasting, or recording its meetings, including meetings held by virtual conferencing.

LB 164e - Change provisions relating to the Economic Recovery Act, the Municipal Inland Port Authority Act, the Nebraska Rural Projects Act, grants awarded by the Department of Economic Development, and transfers of funds and investment earnings, provide for a museum at Fort Robinson State Park, and adopt the Child Care Capacity Building and Workforce Act (McKinney)

A bill to make changes to the Inland Port Authority Act and other projects was approved on Final Reading by a 37-6-6 vote on April 11. The bill was signed into law by Gov. Pillen on April 16. Related to natural resources the amendment makes several changes to the interest income

from the Perkins County Canal Fund. These are as follows:

- Any investment earnings from investment of money in the Perkins County Canal Project Fund shall be credited to such fund, except that for FY 23-24, 24-25, and 25-26, such investment earnings shall be credited to the Economic Recovery Contingency Fund.
- Any investment earnings from investment of money in the Nebraska Capital Construction Fund shall be credited to such fund, except that for FY 23-24, 24-25, and 25-26, any investment earnings from investment of money in the Nebraska Capital Construction Fund from transfers credited to such fund that are designated for the construction of a new state prison shall be credited as to the Economic Recovery Contingency Fund.

LB 287e - Prohibit creation of joint public agencies under the Joint Public Agency Act (Brewer)



From left, Sen. Bruce Bostelman, NARD Executive Director Dean Edson and Lower Platte North NRD Assistant Manager Ryan Chapman discuss issues that are before the Legislature's Natural Resources Committee.

Senators gave final approval to LB 287e by a 46-0-3 vote on April 11. The bill was signed into law by Gov. Pillen on April 16. Provisions of LB 302 were incorporated into LB 287 via AM 2060. This bill amends the Nebraska Political Accountability and Disclosure Act. It removes a number of references to "city or village" and "city, village, or school district" and replaces them with the broader, more inclusive term "political subdivisions." The bill also provides that public employees whose annual salary and benefits exceed \$150,000 must prepare and submit a written statement disclosing certain conflicts of interest or potential conflicts. AM 2060

strikes all instances of "person holding an elective office" and changes them to "public official." The amendment also clarifies that a reference to "salary" refers to an "annual" sum. Provisions of LB 513 were incorporated into LB 287 via AM 2060. The bill as amended incorporates a statewide website, to be completed in 2024, as a repository for public notices. The repository is to be established by a majority of Nebraska's newspapers. The bill also proposes a two-step solution for situations where a newspaper fails to publish a public notice in cases of refusal, neglect or inability of the newspaper



Gov. Jim Pillen speaks with Lower Niobrara General Manager Wade Ellwanger, left, and Lower Loup NRD General Manager Russ Callan at NRD Legislative Conference in January 2024.

SECOND SESSION OF 108TH LEGISLATURE CONTINUED

to timely publish the notice.

- Until January 1, 2025, the public body shall (A) post such notice on its website, if available, and (B) post such notice in a conspicuous public place in such public body's jurisdiction. The public body shall keep a written record of such posting. The record of such posting shall be evidence that such posting was done as required and shall be sufficient to fulfill the requirement of publication.
- After January 1, 2025, the public body shall (A) post such notice on its website, if available, (B) submit a post on a statewide website established and maintained as a repository for such notices by a majority of Nebraska newspapers, and (C) post in a conspicuous public place in such public body's jurisdiction

LB 304 - Require political subdivisions to disclose

membership dues and lobbying fees (Linehan)

Senators gave final approval to LB 304 on March 15, by a 48-0-1 vote. Gov. Pillen signed the bill into law on March 18. The bill requires that political subdivisions or any other unit of local government to disclose on its website the following:

- Membership dues paid annually to any association or organization, identifying each such association or organization and the dues amounts paid; and
- Fees paid to any individual lobbyist or lobbying firm other than any fees paid for lobbying services that may be included in the membership dues.

For any political subdivision that does not have a website, the information shall be made available upon request to any member of the public at the office of such political subdivision.

LB 1368 - To adopt the Nitrogen Reduction Incentive Act (Ibach)

On April 11, senators gave final approval to LB 1368 by a 42-0-7 vote. The bill was



Nebraska Ag Youth Institute Council members joined the 2024 NRD Legislative Conference. From left, NAYC Member Jessie Lamp, NARD Director Jim Eschliman (LLNRD), NARD President Martin Graff (MNNRD), NARD Past President Dr. Orval Gigstad (NNRD), NARD Director Larry Reynolds (TBNRD), and NAYC Member Kaleb Senff.

signed by Gov. Pillen on April 16. The bill includes a transfer of \$1 million from the Water Resources Cash Fund to the Nitrogen Reduction Incentive Cash Fund to provide incentive payments to farmers to encourage a reduction in commercial fertilizer use and incorporation of innovative technology into farming practices. The program will be administered by the Department of Natural Resources.

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 1412e on a 42-6 vote

and LB 1413e on a 37-8 vote March 26. Both bills included emergency clauses and were signed into law by Gov. Pillen April 1.

LB 1412e and 1413e make budget adjustments for the expenses of Nebraska State Government for the biennium ending June 30, 2025. The bills reflect a 3.1% increase in state spending and leave approximately \$20 million to fund legislative proposals this year. Additionally, the measures included the transfer of about \$230 million from various cash funds to support property tax relief efforts.

For natural resources programs, the budget highlights include: **Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Fund (NeDNR)**

General Fund decrease of \$127,396 in FY 23-24 and a \$2,445 decrease in FY 24-25.

Water Projects (NeDNR)
Decrease the Jobs and Economic Development Initiative (JEDI) Cash Funds by \$1 million in FY 23-24 and \$20 million in FY 24-25. The JEDI Fund language is changed allowing transfers from the fund to the Cash Reserve Fund or the Critical Infrastructure Facilities Fund at the direction of the Legislature.

Water Sustainability

2024 LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTIONS OF INTEREST TO NRDS

LR 352 - Interim study to assess identified improvement projects for clean water and drinking water systems in Nebraska (Raybould)

This study should examine the funding needs and potential funding sources for such projects. Identification of projects may come from, but need not be limited to, the 2024 Intended Use Plan for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund and Drinking Water State Revolving Fund for State Fiscal Year 2024.

The Intended Use Plan includes projects with total needs of

Fund (NeDNR)

Decreased the General Fund transfer by \$8,481,000 in FY 24-25. Additionally, the reappropriation of the unexpended Cash Fund appropriation on June 30, 2023, is decreased by \$8,481,000. The bill specifies that none of the Cash Funds appropriated to this program shall be used for a rural drinking water project that serves rural water connections and at least four communities in two contiguous counties to convert to

just over \$2.810 billion. Such projects work to improve and maintain aging infrastructure to provide clean water and drinking water and work to create alternative water sources for contamination mitigation. Currently, the state provides funds to meet roughly 15% of such needs through the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund which leaves the large majority of projects in need of funding.

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

groundwater sources and to provide for water system infrastructure and distribution.

Environmental Quality (NDEE)

General Fund decrease of \$804,136 in FY 23-24 and a \$1,590,254 decrease in FY 24-25.

Drinking Water Facilities Loan Fund (NDEE)

The unexpended reappropriation balance of the federal Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund pursuant to the federal American Rescue Plan Act of

2021, existing on June 30, 2023, less \$7 million is reappropriated.

Nebraska

Environmental Trust

Added \$5 million for FY 24-25 due to increased lottery sales.

University of Nebraska

Added provisions of LB 1242 to appropriate \$350,000 from the General Fund for FY 24-25 to the Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska for a study on the viability of using roof-collected rainwater as a safe and sustainable source of drinking water.

of the findings.

LR 367 - Interim study to examine mechanisms to slow the rise of property tax valuations during periods of rapid property value increases (Day)

While the dramatic increase in home prices over the past 10 years has shown the strength of our state's housing market, it has also created challenges for homeowners, as increasing property taxes have strained family budgets.

This study should explore whether there are ways to flatten

valuation increases so that homeowners could have more predictability in their year-to-year property tax bills.

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

LR 406 - Interim study to explore the development of an institution dedicated to providing instruction, orientation, and professional development tailored for elected officials and office holders in Nebraska (McDonnell)

The potential institute shall aim to

LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTIONS CONTINUED

enhance governance through improved collaboration, leadership, and informed decision-making among Nebraska's public servants. This study shall include, but not be limited to, collaboration with the following entities:

- Current and former elected officials at various levels of government within Nebraska;
- Academic institutions with public administration, political science, and leadership programs;
- Private sector leaders with experience in governance and leadership training;
- Nonprofit organizations focused on government accountability and transparency; and
- Public and private funding entities interested in supporting governance and leadership development.

The Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.

LR 414 - Interim study to determine the feasibility of having the state run all property assessment in Nebraska, merging county assessors with another office, or having county assessors be an appointed position (Meyer)

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

LR 418 - Interim study to examine the current property tax valuation process (Dover)

The study shall examine the different classes of real property, including residential, commercial, and agricultural, to ascertain if there is a more equitable process to determine

property valuation that will result in a property tax that more clearly reflects the taxpayer's ability to pay based on the revenue produced by that real property, when possible.

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

LR 426 - Interim study relating to public records requests to determine whether reports of the resistance of government entities to public record requests are representative or isolated (Conrad)

The study should determine whether any additional statutory reforms beyond Laws 2023, LB43, are justified in response to the Supreme Court's

opinion in Nebraska Journalism Trust v. Dept. of Env't. & Energy, 316 Neb. 174 (2024), to ensure that the purposes of sections 84-712 to 84-712.09 are being met and that Nebraskans have prompt, unfettered, and robust access to open government. Subdivision (1)(b) of section 84-712.03 allows for any person who is denied access to public records to petition the Attorney General for assistance in obtaining the requested records.

The Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.



During the NRD Legislative Conference in January 2024, retired Lower Platte South NRD General Manager Paul Zillig was recognized for 44 years of service. Zillig served his entire career with the Lower Platte South NRD. From left, Lower Platte South NRD Directors John Yoakum, Deborah Eagan, Don Jacobson, Zillig, Tom Green, Gary Aldridge, Luke Peterson, Larry Ruth and Gary Hellerich.

SPECIAL LEGISLATIVE SESSION: PROPERTY TAXES

During the regular legislative session, a property tax relief package did not advance on the last day of the session. Senators did not take a Final Reading vote on LB 388, which was the bill to provide property tax relief. It became apparent during debate that there were not 33 votes for cloture, so the bill was passed over. In his closing remarks to the Legislature on the last day of the session, Governor Pillen pledged to call as many special sessions as it takes to finish solving the property tax crisis.

He followed through with that by bringing senators back for a Special Session beginning July 25, 2024. Eighty-one bills and 24 constitutional amendments were introduced. Ideas were all over the board, including eliminating the Natural Resources District's ability to levy a tax and raiding the Perkins County Canal fund.

Gov. Pillen's plan was to expand sales tax on more than 100 items that are currently exempt to provide at least \$2 billion in property tax relief.

Senators adopted LB34e by 40-3-6 vote on Aug. 20, 2024. Governor Pillen signed

the bill later that day and it went into effect immediately due to the emergency clause.

LB34e provides \$750 million in property tax credits for FY 2024-25, mostly from combining existing property tax credits into a new School District Property Tax Relief Credit program. The new credits will appear on property tax statements as a deduction on the final tax bill.

Only \$180 million would be from new state sources of revenue, which came primarily from sweeping interest earned on various funds and reducing some appropriations to make up the funding. NRD funding and the Perkins County Canal funds were not touched.

The special session adjourned Sine Die on Aug. 20, 2024.

"LB 34 is an important step forward," said Gov. Pillen. "This is not a one-and-done issue. It's the top concern that Nebraskans talk to me about wherever I go."

Property taxes will remain a priority for the Pillen Administration; therefore, it is important to continuously update state senators on the role NRDs play in protecting lives, property and the future.

REGENERATIVE AG CONFERENCE DEBUTS IN SEWARD

Several NRDs teamed up to debut a Regenerative Ag Conference Feb 28, 2024, at the Concordia University Campus in Seward.

More than 300 people attended the event, which was hosted by the Little Blue, Lower Big Blue, Lower Platte South, and Upper Big Blue NRDs. The event featured keynote speakers Keith Berns, co-owner of Green Cover Seed, and Mitchell Hora, founder and CEO of Continuum Ag, as well as a local producer panel. The conference drew attendees primarily from the eastern half of Nebraska, but also saw participants from Iowa, Kansas, and Colorado.

Topics covered included soil health, cover crops, no-till, soil microbes, erosion prevention, carbon intensity scores, and potential funding for producers moving from conventional practices to regenerative ones. In addition to the speakers, attendees had time to visit with event sponsors representing a broad spectrum of products and services in the regenerative ag space.



Left: Little Blue NRD Assistant Manager Tyler Goeschel serves as emcee for the Regenerative Ag Conference Feb. 28, 2024, in Seward.



Below: Lower Platte South NRD staff attend the Regenerative Ag Conference. From left, Tyler Benal, Maclane Scott, and Steve Herdzina.

GET THE SCOOP: EMPLOYEE RETIREMENT PROGRAM

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

In the Fiscal Year 2021-22, the NARD 414(h) retirement fund equity value dropped by 20% to \$44,322,094 by June 30, 2022. The next fiscal year ending June 30, 2023, the fund grew 12% to \$49,940,860. For the current year end of June 30, 2024, the fund grew 12.8% to \$56,345,931. The work of the NRD Benefits Committee, with the guidance from UBS Financial Services, helped make changes to the investment options over the past two years to give employees better options and it is paying off.

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

determine the amount of risk and potential rate of return they feel most comfortable with. Because it is a defined contribution program and not a defined benefit

plan, there is no financial liability to the local NRDs or the NARD.

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.

Similar to the NARD 414 (h) program, as of June 30, 2022, the voluntary NARD 457 retirement fund equity value also dropped by 20% to \$4,987,597. By June 30, 2024, the fund had rebounded to \$5,863,547.69. 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 of UBS Financial Services provides the Nationwide investment platform for the plans and provides quarterly reports to the NRD Benefits Committee. Nationwide representatives set up regional meetings for employees to attend to learn more about investments. Employees have the option of attending in person or virtually. 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 17 years, the average annual NARD health insurance premium increase

has been 4.61% while the national annual average has been 10.66%. 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 2024-25. In the fiscal years 2019-20 to 21-22 we had losses and reserves were used to pay the claims. In FY 2022-23, the Risk Pool showed a \$2.3 million profit, and FY 2023-24 showed a \$1.8 million

NARD HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAM CONTINUED

profit, reversing losses of past years.

In FY 2023-24, the Risk Pool experienced eight claims over \$100,000, with only one at the \$175,000 maximum liability. This is up from six experienced at the end of FY 2022-23 with one over \$175,000. For FY 2024-25, 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 2024-25. Subsequently the NARD Risk Pool Board approved those rates. This is the second year in a row of no increases. Thus, all premium levels will remain the same as they were in FY 2022-23.

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 \$8.3 million to allow for annual premium changes to be limited. 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 \$2,088 in FY 2023-24. In addition, the Risk Pool paid \$38,511 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.

Change of Claims Processing

The Stop Loss Committee was used to accept bids from claims processors to make sure the employees are getting the best claims discounts and processing possible. Three companies bid on the line of business. The committee selected the Blue Cross/Blue Shield Nebraska network to process claims beginning Jan. 1, 2025, which the NARD Risk Pool Board approved. The NARD staff is working with Blue Cross/Blue Shield Nebraska to make a smooth transition.

The Blue Cross/Blue Shield Nebraska network provides more health and dental provider access and better discounts on services. The move will reduce costs and provide more health care provider options for employees.

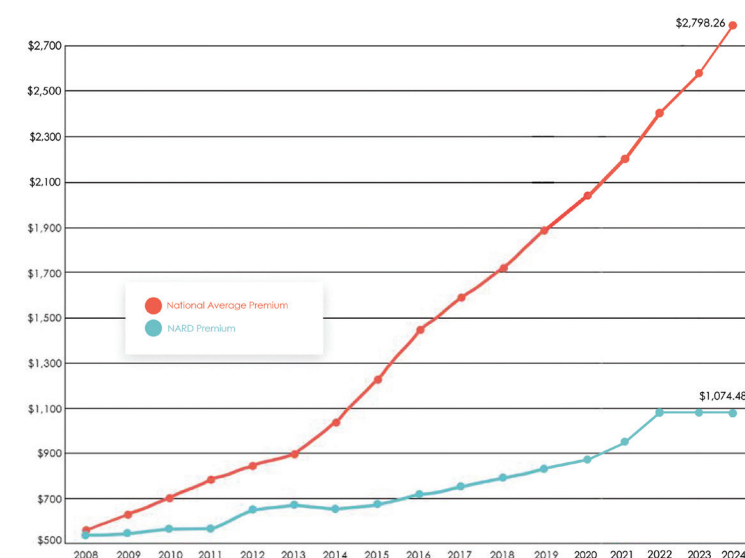


Chart 1: Shows the actual NARD insurance premium compared with the national average.

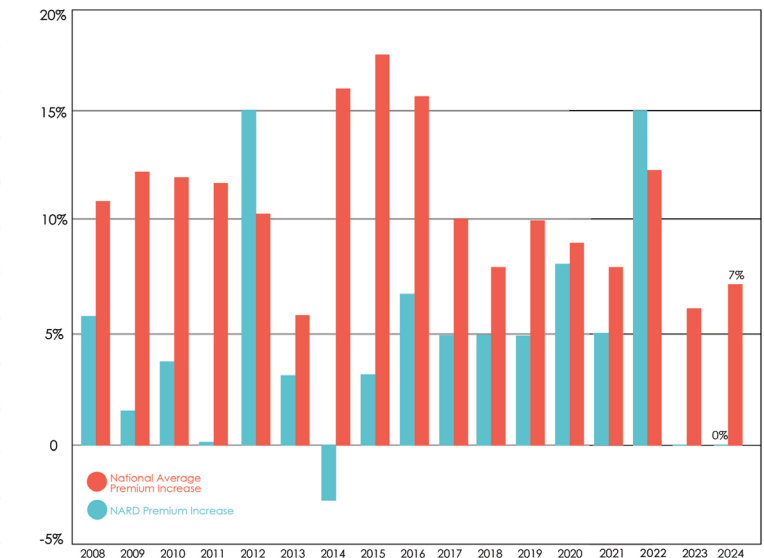


Chart 2: Shows the NARD annual premium increase (percent) compared to the national average premium increase.

NARD FOUNDATION PROUD TO SUPPORT EDUCATION

The NARD Foundation has grown significantly during the last 27 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 almost \$30,000 for natural resources educational programs that reach thousands of individuals in Nebraska.

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

Nebraska Envirothon

Envirothon is 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.

NRD Recreation Exploration

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

NAYI

Annually, the Foundation supports the Nebraska Agriculture Youth Institute and participates in the career fair. NAYI is in its 53rd year, making it the longest running

ag youth program of its kind in the nation. The event welcomed 250+ junior and seniors to UNL East Campus July 8-12, 2024.

Nebraska FFA

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

This April, 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. The camp was hosted June 23-26, 2024, at Kamp Kaleo in Burwell. The NARD Foundation

increased their annual funding this year to help purchase items that were lost during the Bovee Fire near Halsey in 2022.

Ag in the Classroom

Ag in the Classroom delivers ag literacy programming to K-12 students and teachers across Nebraska. The program promotes an understanding of the connection and value of agriculture in the lives of all people.

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.

Producer Connect

Producer Connect is a web and mobile application suite designed to empower agricultural producers with the tools they need to optimize inputs, enhance agricultural profitability, improve water quality, and increase irrigation efficiency.

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 27th 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.

Nebraska Legislature

During the regular 60-day Legislative Session, NARD worked with Gov. Pillen, the Nebraska Legislature, and other partners to help secure the largest funding for water in Nebraska history.

During the last three 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 paid off with \$547.5 million secured for the Perkins County Canal project. However, there have been repeated efforts to raid the money and use it for other purposes.

Fifteen state senators finished their last session – 13 are departing due to term limits, and two chose not to seek re-election. Those term limited include Joni Albrecht, Carol Blood, Bruce Bostelman, Tom Brewer, Steve Erdman, Steve Halloran, Lou Ann Linehan, John Lowe, Mike McDonnell, Tony Vargas, Lynne Walz, Justin Wayne and Anna Wishart. Those not seeking re-election include Fred Meyer and Julie Slama. Remember to thank them for their years of service to the Nebraska Legislature.

Ten more incumbent senators are up

for election. These include John Cavanaugh, Terrel McKinney, Robert Dover, Beau Ballard, Carolyn Bosn, Kathleen Kauth, Ray Aguilar, Rita Sanders, Jenn Day and Eliot Bostar. Senator Bostar is the only incumbent that does not have an opponent.

As funding continues to be targeted for property tax relief, it is extremely important to reach out to your state senator and make sure they understand what your district is doing to protect lives, property and the future! There will be at least 15 new senators next year, reach out to them as well.

Corporate Partners

NARD is taking the lead in developing new working relationships to address water quality. These partnerships have resulted in the development of Producer Connect, a nitrogen dashboard to improve nutrient management.

These partnerships have led to more opportunities to promote practices and programs that protect our natural



Dean Edson
Executive Director

resources. Jennifer Swanson is now the 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 works with agriculture organizations, agribusinesses, and state and federal agencies to secure funding for local water quality initiatives.

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

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



Upper Big Blue NRD Public Relations Manager Chrystal Houston, right, and Central Platte NRD GIS Coordinator Angela Warner speak with FFA students about career opportunities in natural resources April 3, 2024.



Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts

Nebraska Association of Resources Districts

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SAVE THE DATE | 2025 EVENTS

- Jan. 8, 2025 – First Day of 109th Nebraska Legislature, 1st Session (90-Day)
- Jan. 27, 2025 – Managers Meeting, I&E Staff Meeting, Administrative Meeting
- Jan. 28-29, 2025 – NRD Legislative Conference, Lincoln
- Jan. 29, 2025 – NARD Board Meeting, Lincoln
- Feb. 9-12, 2025 – NACD Annual Meeting, Salt Lake City, Utah
- March 3-5, 2025 – NARD Water Programs Conference, Kearney
- March 5, 2025 – NRD Managers Meeting
- March 9-10, 2025 – NARD Board Meeting
- March 28 to April 2, 2025 – NRD Washington, D.C, Conference
- April 30, 2025 – Nebraska State Envirothon, Chalco Hills in Omaha
- June 4, 2025 – NRD Managers Meeting
- June 8-9, 2025 – NARD Board Meeting
- June 9-10, 2025 – NRD Basin Tour
- June 22-23, 2025 – ACE Camp at Kamp Kaleo, Burwell
- July 20-26, 2025 – NCF-Envirothon in Calgary, Alberta, Canada
- Aug. 25-27, 2025 – NRD Managers Retreat, Lower Niobrara NRD
- Sept. 28, 2025 – NARD Foundation Ron Bishop Memorial Golf Tournament, Kearney
- Sept. 29-30, 2025 – NRD Annual Conference, Kearney
- Sept. 30, 2025 – NARD Board Meeting, Kearney
- Nov. 5, 2025 – NRD Managers Meeting
- Nov. 9-10, 2025 – NARD Board Meeting

