

CARC Meeting
July 19, 2001
Department of Agriculture, Platte Conference Room

The meeting was called to order at 9:35 a.m. by Chairman Greg Ibach.

CARC members present were: Greg Ibach, Mark Kuzila, DeLynn Hay (on behalf of Elbert Dickey), Jack Daniel (on behalf of Richard Nelson), John Erickson, Larry Nedrow (on behalf of Roger Lempke), Steve Soberski (on behalf of Roger Patterson), Dayle Williamson, Merwin Fricke, and Barb Cooksley. Member Don Wilhite was absent.

The minutes from the February 13, 2001, meeting were unanimously approved.

Mark Svoboda, with the National Drought Mitigation Center, began by discussing the long-term hydrological dryness in southwest Nebraska and noted the low water level at Lake McConaughy due to draw-down during the 2000 drought and low snowpack in Wyoming. He said southwest Nebraska is experiencing a flash drought and noted that the area has endured an abnormal amount of days in June and July with triple digit heat.

Svoboda referenced the topsoil moisture conditions report released by the Nebraska Agricultural Statistics Service. He showed maps indicating Nebraska's vegetational health has improved this year compared to last year at this time.

He showed a series of weekly drought monitors to demonstrate the change in the drought patterns over the past six months. The July 10 drought monitor shows an abnormally dry area that stretches south of Interstate 80 from about Clay Center to the southwestern border. A small area near McCook is categorized as being in the first stage of drought. The drought in the northwestern and south central United States seems to be spreading east out of the Rocky Mountains and north out of Texas, Svoboda said.

He talked about the chances for precipitation and above-normal temperatures in the coming weeks, explaining that Nebraska is in a transition zone and forecasters are unsure of what the weather will do. He reviewed the seasonal outlook maps for precipitation, temperature, and drought.

Mike Hayes, with the National Drought Mitigation Center, provided an update on the hydrological concerns for western Nebraska. Lake McConaughy is at 91% of the level it was at this time last year. It is holding 58% of capacity and is at its lowest level since 1957. Hayes said the lake is currently 26 feet below full pool, but is expected to drop to 41 feet below full pool by the end of the year. Hayes also talked about the Platte River Basin, noting storage for the basin in Wyoming is 92% of average and 65 to 75% of capacity.

Hayes reported that the National Weather Service (NWS) Office in Valley has been awarded \$21,000 to purchase eight new soil moisture probes for the High Plains Regional Climate Center's Automatic Weather Data Network. The network includes about 50 stations, and currently only 14 of those have soil moisture probes. Svoboda noted the probes will be placed at stations in areas of the state that are lacking such equipment.

Hayes also noted that a group of organizations, including the NDMC and the High Plains Regional Climate Center, have received a grant from The National Science Foundation. The grant is for \$1 million over a three-year period. The project calls for further calculation and mapping of the Palmer Drought Index and the Standardized Precipitation Index and better drought monitoring and risk identification.

State Climatologist Al Dutcher noted the grain markets have been very volatile due to the uncertainty regarding the weather situation across the Midwest. He gave a detailed precipitation summary, looking at the precipitation amounts over the past 30 and 60 days and rainfall percent of normal maps. He noted things have turned dry in the last 60 days in the central part of the state.

Dutcher said he did not expect to see any reduction in the drought and thought the dry conditions would worsen south of the Platte River. He also noted the grain markets will continue to be volatile through the growing season.

Daniel Nietfeld, with the National Weather Service in Valley, gave a brief summary of what is expected of the weather in the next 8 to 14 days and noted his concern about the possibility of high temperatures and dryness at the end of July and beginning of August. Steve Schurr, with the NWS Hastings office, talked about conditions in the south central part of the state. That area is four to six inches below normal in precipitation since the beginning of June.

Glenn Engel, with U.S. Geological Survey, distributed a stream flow conditions report. He noted the report verifies the conditions that have been discussed, with the lowest stream flow in the southwest area of the state.

Susan France with the Department of Natural Resources gave a report on surface water irrigation. She noted that DNR has had to shut off junior irrigators on the lower Platte River at various times to meet the water needs of senior rights holders. They are continuing to monitor the situation and turn users on and off as conditions warrant. She said they also have had to do some regulation on the Republican River, but this is a yearly occurrence.

Steve Soberski, with the Department of Natural Resources, and co-chair of the Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Wildlife Subcommittee, provided a handout that included information on reservoir levels and other issues.

Jack Daniel, co-chair of the Municipal Water Supply, Health, and Energy Subcommittee, distributed a handout on Health and Human Services (HHS) System - Regulation and Licensure Drought Management Activities. He noted that last year, at this time, there were 88 public water systems having troubles due to the drought. He said HHS is trying to work with village boards and others that encountered those problems to take correctional actions. This year, only three systems have water restrictions in place due to the dry weather: Verdon, Guide Rock, and Grant.

Greg Ibach asked Mark Wilke and Greg Reisdorff, from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Farm Service Agency (FSA), to discuss actions in their office regarding the dry circumstances. Mark Wilke reviewed the steps for declaring a Secretarial Drought Disaster and noted, at this point, it doesn't appear any counties in Nebraska would meet the standards. Greg Reisdorff talked about the process for releasing Conservation Reserve Program acres for haying and grazing due to drought. He didn't believe that any counties would be able to qualify for the release at this time.

Greg Ibach asked about the Livestock Assistance Program, which was enacted in 2000 to help producers recoup some of the financial losses caused by lack of forage for livestock due to the drought. It was noted that 65 to 66 Nebraska counties were approved for the program in 2000. The committee discussed whether the counties in the southwest part of Nebraska could qualify this year. Mark Wilke said FSA would continue to closely monitor the situation.

Greg Ibach asked the committee for input on potential drought mitigation steps. After discussion, the group decided to monitor the conditions and meet again on August 16. The meeting will begin at 1:30 p.m.

Greg Ibach said he would prepare a report for Governor Johanns based on the meeting discussion.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:18 a.m.

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