

**Climate Assessment Response Committee (CARC) Meeting (DRAFT MINUTES)
March 20, 2009**

Members Present:

Ginger Langemeier, Chair
Mark Kuzila
Mike Hayes
Al Berndt

Jack Daniel
Al Dutcher for Elbert Dickey
Barb Cooksley
Mike Thompson for Brian Dunnigan

Members Absent:

Merwin Fricke
Mark Matulka (Governor's Policy Research Office)

Audience members present included: Steve Eddy, National Weather Service; Dean Groskurth, Nebraska office of the National Agricultural Statistics Service; Duane Gangwish, Nebraska Cattlemen; Tim Reimer, Dan Steinkruger, and Mike Eller, Nebraska Farm Service Agency; Tim McCoy, Nebraska Game and Parks; Arlis Plummer, Nebraska Natural Resources Conservation Service; Tom Sands, Nebraska Department of Roads; Scott Lloyd, Senator Mike Johanns' Office; Dayle Williamson, Senator Ben Nelson's Office; Scott Sprague, Department of Health and Human Services; Marcia Trompke, Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District; Pat Rice, Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality, Phil Soenksen, U.S. Geological Survey; and Don Westover, Nebraska Forest Service.

Chair Ginger Langemeier called the meeting to order at 1:34 p.m.

Minutes from the April 22, 2008, meeting were unanimously approved.

Mark Svoboda, with the National Drought Mitigation Center, presented the first half of the Water Availability and Outlook Report. He showed U.S., regional, and Nebraska Drought Monitor maps from March 17, 2009, noting for the first time in this decade, no part of Nebraska is considered in drought. The Panhandle of Nebraska still is considered abnormally dry on the map, and there is encroachment of abnormally dry conditions from Kansas at the southern border of Nebraska.

Svoboda compared the current Drought Monitor to the map from a year ago, noting that Nebraska still had parts of the Panhandle and Southwest in varying degrees of D-1, D-2, and D-3 stages of drought at that time.

Svoboda showed a panel of Drought Monitor Classification Change maps, noting the dryness in Kansas is a concern as it nears the Nebraska southern border, but is something that could be erased quickly with good spring rains.

Svoboda said the spring and summer streamflow forecasts for the western United States are near 100 percent in some areas, which isn't quite as good as last spring, when several areas had an above-normal outlook. He said the outlook is mixed in areas that feed Nebraska's river basins, but also noted there are still some opportunities for snows this spring in those areas.

Svoboda showed the U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook map for March through May 2009. Nebraska is not predicted to see drought development during the period, but there is potential for drought to develop in northwest Kansas, which is a concern, he said.

He highlighted the NIDIS Drought Portal and noted the development of a Republican River Basin water and drought portal with the area's Natural Resources Districts. The Republican River basin information will feed into the national portal, which can be found at <http://drought.gov>.

Svoboda provided the water supply update, noting that Lake McConaughy currently is at 48.5 percent of capacity, which is 6 percent fuller than at this same time last year. Inflows are at 69 percent of normal, he said.

Svoboda highlighted the U.S. Geological Survey streamflow maps, reflecting the low stream flows in southwest and western Nebraska, as the Republican and North Platte rivers enter the state.

He said reservoir levels in the Republican River Basin look much the same as this time last year, with Hugh Butler at 76 percent, Enders at 36 percent, Harry Strunk at 95 percent, and Swanson at 51 percent of capacity. He said Harlan County Reservoir is 100 percent full, slightly above last year at this time.

In summary, he said conditions are the best they have been in eight years in Nebraska, with only 11 percent of the state considered abnormally dry. There have been only average snows in the Rocky Mountains, and there are better lake levels in general, but the hydrological conditions still need to improve, as stream flows are low.

Al Dutcher, State Climatologist, provided an analysis of moisture conditions and risk assessment for the 2009 production season. He reviewed precipitation and departure of normal precipitation maps for the region and Nebraska for October 2008 through present. He noted the western $\frac{1}{3}$ of Nebraska, and the eastern Montana region, all the way south to Texas, experienced 2 to 4 inches of precipitation in the fall, and that has been the main precipitation event for that region. As demand for soil moisture picks up with the wheat growth, there is a need for new precipitation in those areas.

Dutcher also highlighted that the moisture conditions in eastern Nebraska are in decent shape, and there is even potential for flooding in the south central part of the state, if large spring rains occur. The areas of biggest concern at present are southwest Nebraska and the Panhandle, where conditions could quickly deteriorate into drought status.

Dutcher showed the Sea Surface Temperatures Anomalies Map and said the La Nina pattern is waning, while it appears an El Nino may establish itself by this fall. Dutcher showed the outlook maps for temperature and precipitation. Nebraska is on the eastern edge of an area that is predicted to have above-normal temperatures over the summer months. The maps indicate the possibility of below-normal precipitation through July over the Rocky Mountain region, he said, and a chance of above-normal precipitation over the western half of Nebraska, from August through November.

Dutcher's risk assessment points include: elevated spring flood risk for $\frac{2}{3}$ of Nebraska, with the Blue River Basin at the highest risk; potential for deteriorating dryness in the Panhandle and southwest Nebraska; high fire danger until grasses have a chance to green up; water levels in McConaughy and two Wyoming reservoirs important for Nebraska irrigation, Pathfinder and Seminoe, have improved, but even with decent runoff, it will take some time to near 100 percent capacity; the Central Rockies snowpack and southern U.S. dryness must be monitored; La Nina conditions this summer bring a slight chance of above-normal temperatures and below-normal precipitation in the west; and for the east, La Nina conditions this summer bring slight chances for below-normal temperatures in March and April, and above-normal temperatures in May through August, and below-normal precipitation March through August.

Dean Groskurth with the Nebraska office of the National Agricultural Statistics Service provided an overview of hay production and hay stocks. Production was about the same from 2007 to 2008, and roughly the same amount of supply was on hand in December 2008, as in December 2007. Winter wheat conditions were at 69 percent, good to excellent across the state, which is improved from 57 percent last year at this time.

Dan Steinkruger and Mike Eller, with the state office of the Nebraska Farm Service Agency, provided an overview of the disaster programs that are now available for farmers and ranchers, following the passage in 2008 of a new Farm Bill. Previously, disaster programs were mostly operated on an ad-hoc basis, but the Farm Bill created a disaster trust fund that includes five programs: Supplemental Revenue Program (SURE), Livestock Forage Program (LFP), Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP), Tree Assistance Program (TAP), and Emergency Assistance Program for Livestock, Honey Bees, and Farm Raised Fish (ELAP).

Eller reviewed the details that are known at the present time for each program. SURE, he said, will probably impact producers the most. He also highlighted the point that for most programs, crop insurance or other coverage is required as one component of qualifying for disaster assistance. Slides outlining these details can be viewed on the Climate Assessment Response Committee web site at www.agr.ne.gov/carc, under Committee Reports.

Committee member Mike Hayes noted that the U.S. Drought Monitor will be a trigger mechanism for coverage in the Livestock Forage Program. He said the U.S. Drought Monitor authors are working on a new tool for producers so they can look at their county conditions, by date.

The Committee members discussed the various programs. Members also discussed the use of the Conservation Reserve Program emergency haying and grazing option in past droughts. Eller said that program is still in place.

Pat Laird, with the Risk Management Agency, provided an overview, via telephone, of the Pasture, Range, and Forage Pilot Insurance Program that is available in Nebraska for all counties for the first time this year. He said policy sales for Nebraska were decent. The Nebraska program is utilizing the vegetative index, which uses satellite imagery to determine plant health within a specific grid within a given window of time in order to determine coverage. Temperatures also factor into the formula. The policy covers naturally occurring events, such as drought, hail, and fire.

Laird said 725,000 acres are covered under the program this year in Nebraska, with the highest enrollment in the west.

Committee members discussed various aspects of the Pasture, Range, and Forage Program.

Bobbie Kriz-Wickham, with the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, gave an overview of legislation in the Nebraska Unicameral that addresses the selection of CARC members. LB 389 would change the requirement that all members of the Committee needed Legislative confirmation to serve on the Committee. As amended, designees for the departments of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and Natural Resources would not need confirmation. Committee members discussed the bill and offered some suggestions to be passed on to the bill's sponsor.

Bobbie Kriz-Wickham also provided an update on the CARC and Drought Central web sites. The CARC web site can be found at www.agr.ne.gov/carc, and the Drought Central web site can be found at www.droughtcentral.nebraska.gov. The Drought Central web address was changed to the above recently, due to state government rules; the site no longer has a direct link from the Department of Agriculture homepage, but the link can easily be restored if drought conditions return.

Member Mike Hayes provided an update on NIDIS. He noted the National Drought Mitigation Center is involved with development of the system and that new projects are underway that will continue to improve information sharing and coordination at the federal, state, and local levels.

Langemeier directed the CARC subcommittees to review their respective mitigation sections within the state drought plan and propose any recommended changes at the fall CARC meeting.

Mark Svoboda reminded CARC members that because the Drought Monitor is being used as a triggering mechanism for disaster programming, increased assistance and input on drought issues from CARC members are important to helping keep the tool accurate and valid. Hayes agreed, and offered to highlight, at the next meeting, the key inputs that play a role in the Drought Monitor development.

Langemeier said the next meeting date will depend on how conditions fair through the summer.

The meeting adjourned at 3:17 p.m.

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