Climate Assessment Response Committee (CARC) Meeting (DRAFT MINUTES)
April 27, 2010

Members Present:

Ginger Langemeier, Chair
Mark Kuzila
Mike Hayes
Cindy Newsham for Al Berndt
Mark Matulka
Rick Leonard for Senator Tom Carlson, ex-officio
Jack Daniel
Al Dutcher for Elbert Dickey
Barb Cooksley
Steve Soberski for Brian Dunnigan
Senator Chris Langemeier, ex-officio

Members Absent:
Merwin Fricke

Audience members present included: Rick Ewald and Barbara Boustead, National Weather Service; Joe Parsons and Dean Groskurth, Nebraska office of the National Agricultural Statistics Service; Tim McCoy, Nebraska Game and Parks; Cameron Loerch and Wayne Vanek, Nebraska Natural Resources Conservation Service; Tom Sands and Denise Wallman, Nebraska Department of Roads; Phil Erdman, 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; Mike Linder, Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality, Vicki Wohlers, USDA APHIS PPQ; Danielle Jensen, Nebraska Energy Office; Scot Blehm, Representative Jeff Fortenberry's Office; Martha Shulski, High Plains Regional Climate Center, Art Hovey, Lincoln Journal Star; Nate Jenkins, Associated Press; and Nancy Gaarder, Omaha World-Herald.

Chair Ginger Langemeier called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m.

Minutes from the March 20, 2009, 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 April 20, 2010, noting that conditions are mostly quiet across the Great Plains and that no part of Nebraska is considered in drought. Last year, at this time, southern Nebraska had some "abnormally dry" on the map, and two years ago, the western part of the state was still dealing with the effects of a hydrologic drought.

Svoboda showed a U.S. Drought Monitor Time Series Map that details conditions from 2000-2010. This map and other data query options are new under the "archive" button on the Drought Monitor web site.

Svoboda showed a panel of Drought Monitor Classification Change maps, noting that for the "water year," conditions have deteriorated in Idaho and western Wyoming due to lack of snowfall.

Svoboda said while the snowpack situation was average a year ago, there is more concern for this season as the spring and summer streamflow forecasts for the western United States are about 65 percent to 85 percent of normal in areas that feed Nebraska's river basins.

He highlighted the NIDIS Drought Portal at http://drought.gov and noted the Republican River Basin water and drought portal, which has been developed with local NRDs, will soon be available at www.urnrd.org.

Brian Fuchs with the National Drought Mitigation Center provided the water supply update. He said Lake McConaughy currently is at 68.3 percent of capacity, which is ahead of last year at this time and showing an overall upward trend aided by a wet fall and snowy winter. For March inflows were 80 percent of normal, he said.

Fuchs highlighted the U.S. Geological Survey streamflow maps, reflecting mostly normal conditions in Nebraska and the region.

He said reservoir levels in the Republican River Basin are: Hugh Butler at 17 percent, Enders at 39 percent, Harry Strunk at 100 percent, and Swanson at 68 percent of capacity. He said Harlan County Reservoir is full.

In summary, he said:

- There is no drought in Nebraska at this time;
- There are better lake levels in general from last year;
- The hydrological recovery continues to be aided by better precipitation the past two years.

Svoboda added that the water equivalency in the western snowpack this season is about 15 percent less than it was last year and that could negatively impact runoff.

Al Dutcher, State Climatologist, provided an analysis of moisture conditions and risk assessment for the 2010 production season. He reviewed precipitation and departure of normal precipitation maps for the United States and Nebraska for October 2009 through present. He noted areas of the Corn Belt are above normal for moisture conditions, including Nebraska, due to the wet October and snowy December.

Dutcher also highlighted that the moisture conditions in the soil profile are overall mostly good for the entire state. There is enough moisture in the profile that if Nebraska has storms in three- to four-day intervals, there will be some planting delays, he said. The eastern Corn Belt is generally ahead of Nebraska for corn planting, but Dutcher noted farmers in that area are also ahead of the average hard freeze date, so he thinks there is some freeze risk.

Dutcher noted grasshopper counts in western and northern Nebraska are significant and there is concern.

Dutcher showed the outlook maps for temperature and precipitation. The Climate Prediction Center maps show a chance of below normal temperatures and above normal precipitation for Nebraska from May through July. However, Dutcher said he doesn't believe these trends match with what the El Nino weather pattern and statistics support. He predicts above-normal June, July, and August temperatures and believes the statistics support below normal moisture during June for eastern Nebraska and during September for both eastern and western Nebraska.

Dutcher's conclusions include:

- Significant grasshopper outbreak potential; more information can be found at http://www.sidney.ars.usda.gov/grasshopper/index.htm;

- Still haven't reached average 28°F or 32°F freeze date across northern/western Nebraska;
- Flood concerns will remain elevated across eastern Nebraska through spring planting due to abnormally high sub-soil moisture levels;
- Mountain snowpack has gained considerable ground last 30 days easing concerns for sub-par runoff;
- Past El Nino events suggest above normal June - August temperatures statewide. There is a strong tendency for above normal July - August temperatures across the eastern ⅔ of the state;
- There is a strong tendency for below normal moisture during June for eastern Nebraska, September for eastern and western Nebraska; and
- Average first hard freeze data mirrored historical trends at Omaha and Scottsbluff. There was a slight shift toward an earlier freeze for Kearney.

Ginger Langemeier asked about where the potential for flooding is the worst. Dutcher noted eastern Nebraska, but said once the crops are in the ground, it will only take a couple weeks for the flood risk to be decreased.

Langemeier also asked about grazing land conditions in northern Nebraska. Cooksley reported tremendous cool season grass growth and a mostly positive outlook for the grazing year.

Vick Wohlers, with the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Plant Protection and Quarantine Division, gave an overview of the outlook for grasshopper distribution this season, showing a hazard map that includes areas of concern over much of the western ⅔ of Nebraska. The federal program has three components: surveying on rangeland to determine the scope of the problem; technical assistance to determine need for treatment; and cost share on the treatment program when funding is available. She said there are 24 Nebraska counties where the hazard map indicates a potential for infestation of a level that will have an economic impact. Wohlers said weather conditions during egg hatch will greatly influence the outlook, and mid-May to mid-June is a critical time period.

Wohlers said ranchers or landowners with questions should contact either their local county Extension agent or the APHIS PPQ office in Nebraska. CARC members discussed budget issues associated with the program. Ginger Langemeier asked whether the federal government could contribute more than ⅓ of the cost if state funds were lacking. Wohlers said the ⅓ match is a part of statute.

Joe Parsons, with the Nebraska Office of the National Agricultural Statistics Service, provided and overview of hay stocks and crop conditions. Over the past three years, Nebraska hay production has been relatively flat; hay in storage was slightly up at the end of 2009 over 2008, but Parsons said anecdotal evidence is that a great deal of hay was fed this winter due to the harsh conditions. The May hay stocks update may reflect that factor, Parsons said.

Parsons said pasture and range conditions as of Sunday were 74 percent good and 9 percent excellent. Corn planting was 23 percent complete for the state, which is 1 percent behind this time last year, but ahead of the 5-year average which is generally 15 percent. Wheat conditions are 23 percent fair, 67 percent good and 7 percent excellent, which is about the same as last year.

The meeting adjourned at 11:15 a.m.