

'CARC Meeting

January 30, 2003

Nebraska Department of Roads Auditorium

The meeting was called to order at 1:05 p.m. by Chairman Greg Ibach.

CARC members present were:

Greg Ibach
DeLynn Hay on behalf of Elbert Dickey
Jack Daniel on behalf of Richard Nelson
Steve Soberski on behalf of Roger Patterson
Al Berndt on behalf of Roger Lempke
Dayle Williamson
Don Wilhite
John Erickson
Mark Kuzila
Merwin Fricke

Absent:

Barb Cooksley

The minutes from the September 23, 2002, meeting were unanimously approved.

Mark Svoboda, with the National Drought Mitigation Center, began by discussing the percent of normal precipitation for the full 2002 year. He said no area of the state experienced above normal precipitation in 2002, and that the map shows a marked dryness especially in the western half of Nebraska.

The 2002 year ranked, statewide, as the third driest year on record. Svoboda said Colorado recorded the worst year in its history, which is significant to Nebraska because of our state's reliance on Platte River flows from the Rockies.

Svoboda showed the Standardized Precipitation Index for the year, emphasizing the spotty nature of the rainfall that was received and pointing out on the map the Ogallala rainfall event. A similar map for the period from November 5, 2002, to January 28, 2003, showed the extremely dry winter Nebraska has had in almost all areas of the state.

Svoboda reviewed the U.S. Drought Monitor, showing a series of the maps to display how the drought had receded somewhat from the eastern cornbelt states in September 2002, but has since reestablished across the entire region. It remains very dry in the Rockies and in the states above and below Nebraska. Svoboda pointed out that the extreme drought category is starting to creep into southeast Nebraska.

Svoboda said the mountain snow pack report as of January 1, 2003, shows that the basins that feed the Platte River in Wyoming and Colorado are 50 to 70 percent of average. Spring and summer streamflow

predictions are also in the same range. On the positive side, he said, there is still much of the snow season left.

Svoboda said the Colorado and Wyoming basin average snow water content is poor and below average in all cases.

Given the above factors, the Colorado and Wyoming water supply situations are looking very poor. Svoboda said the Upper North Platte River out of Wyoming has a basin snow water average that currently is below normal. In Colorado, reservoir storage statewide currently is averaging 51 percent, and precipitation in the South Platte basin in December was 39 percent of average, which forced the 2002 overall average down to 83 percent.

Svoboda reviewed Nebraska's water supply situation, noting that as of January 27, 2003, Lake McConaughy was at 41 percent of capacity. Inflows are about 700 cubic feet per second; normally this amount is 1,100 to 1,200 cubic feet, so the inflows have been worse than anticipated. The spring 2003 peak projection is 800,000 acre feet at the end of April. Svoboda said this would be the lowest spring peak since the lake was filled in 1948.

In the Republican River Basin, all reservoirs are below the capacity they held a year ago. Harlan County Reservoir had the most significant drop, from 79 percent capacity in January 2002 to 51 percent capacity in January 2003.

Svoboda detailed the 2002 economic loss estimates from other drought-plagued states, noting that Nebraska's total does not include livestock losses.

Svoboda reviewed the Winter Outlook Map, noting that predictions for a warm and wet winter have not proven out on the precipitation side. He also showed the U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook Map, including predictions through April 2003. The map forecasts some improvement, but Svoboda said the map was based on changes to the El Nino weather pattern that haven't materialized.

In his review of long-range temperature and precipitation chances through April 2003, Svoboda indicated there are equal chances of normal, above normal, and below normal temperatures, and a very slight chance of above normal precipitation.

State Climatologist Al Dutcher noted the most significant thing about the long-range outlook is that the authors of the map backed off their previous predictions of a more positive spring precipitation outlook.

Member Don Wilhite also noted the streamflow predictions are made by taking the amount that has snowed so far and, assuming normal precipitation, the remainder of the season. He cautioned that with this in mind, the streamflow outlook may be overly positive. He also noted that some towns in Wyoming are already thinking about limiting water use.

Dutcher reviewed a series of precipitation maps detailing precipitation departure from normal for three years, two years, and in the past year. For the three-year map, the entire state is below normal. He said the state would need 160 percent of normal precipitation to get rid of the dryness this year.

Dutcher noted that a precipitation map showing totals from October 2002 through present indicates some positive precipitation in southeast Nebraska that may provide some limited recharge for the coming crop year. Considering precipitation as a percent of normal during that same time period, most of the state is below normal.

Dutcher listed a number of concerns for this year, including rangeland viability, pest infestation, erosion, low deep soil moisture reserves, fire, and reservoir recharge.

Jack Wergin with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation reported that a few irrigation districts in southwest Nebraska may not deliver any water in 2003 to irrigators due to the low reservoir levels and inflows. Member Mark Kuzila noted this exacerbates the drought problem even more because surface water from the canals that service these areas generally seeps and helps recharge the groundwater in that area.

Scott Keller from Nebraska Agricultural Statistics Service reviewed hay stocks, production, and prices in Nebraska. Nebraska is starting 2003 with the lowest level of hay stocks since 1957. At the same time, alfalfa and other hay prices in Nebraska are peaking past season records. He noted that normally there is a gap in price between poor quality and good quality hay, however, at present, the price is about the same. Keller also reviewed 2002 Nebraska corn silage statistics, noting the state had the highest silage acres since 1980. However, the yield per acre was poor due to the drought, so Keller said in reality corn silage production was down from last year in Nebraska.

Jack Daniel reported on the morning meeting of the CARC Municipal Water Supply, Health and Energy Subcommittee, which he co-chairs. He noted the Committee will work on getting information on water use reduction by the public pulled into one easy to use document that can be available to the general public. Co-chair Mark Kuzila said the group also talked about the need to better coordinate water well level and water well collection data. He said they will try to get the information put together in one place and within better time frames.

Daniel indicated that, at present, there are no public water systems that seem to be having water supply problems, however staff of the Health and Human Services - Regulation and Licensure Division, will continue to work with communities to identify systems that may face problems due to the drought. He said staff also is working with the League of Municipalities to create a video about water infrastructure.

Steve Soberski, Co-chair of the Agriculture, Natural Resources and Wildlife Subcommittee, reported on a morning meeting of the Subcommittee. Potential mitigation actions include asking the Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation to continue its Crop and Weather Scout Report and updating of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture Hay and Forage Hotline. He said Department of Roads officials indicated they would be willing to implement the roadside haying program.

DeLynn Hay with the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension said staff there continues to give drought-related presentations and has held a number of workshops and other meetings. They also continue to put out information through the IANR web site as well as the CropWatch newsletter.

Don Wilhite noted that his staff is working with officials from the Risk Management Agency to coordinate workshops for farmers and ranchers regarding insurance options. There will be five sessions across the state in late February through March. Details on the meetings will be promoted through the IANR web site as well as the Droughtcentral.org web site.

Brian Wolford, State Farm Service Agency Director, gave a report on a number of USDA programs utilized during the 2002 drought. He said approximately 318,000 acres of Nebraska's 1.1 million Conservation Reserve Program acres were utilized for haying and grazing in 2002. Twenty-eight counties utilized the Emergency Conservation Program, with about \$2 million in cost-share for the program. All counties were declared a drought disaster by USDA Secretary Ann Veneman. Nebraska producers received roughly \$52.5 million in assistance through the Cattle Feed Program and \$65.5 million through the Livestock Compensation Program.

Wolford said that his agency would begin as soon as possible to determine what the 2003 losses will be in order to secure disaster declarations, although he noted that timing of these determinations would be important due to the time frame under which the emergency loan program operates.

He said sign-up for the Noninsured Assistance Program has been extended to March 15.

Mark Brohman with the Nebraska Game and Parks noted the drought's negative effect on the state's upland bird population and presented a handout on the economic impact of migratory bird and upland bird hunting.

The Committee discussed community water systems and what types of planning is required of system operators by law. Committee members discussed what other states had in place relative to this, and Wilhite indicated he would help Daniel research this issue.

Wilhite gave the Committee an update on the status of the National Drought Preparedness Act legislation. It failed to pass in Congress last year due to efforts on other key pieces of legislation; supporters are seeking someone to reintroduce it.

Williamson gave a report on federal drought assistance legislation.

The group discussed the need for another meeting; one will be scheduled soon. The meeting was adjourned at 2:42 p.m.