

Climate Assessment Response Committee Meeting (CARC)
February 28, 2002
Nebraska State Office Building, Lower Level A

The meeting was called to order at 2:05 p.m. by Chairman Greg Ibach.

CARC members present were: Greg Ibach, Mark Kuzila, DeLynn Hay on behalf of Elbert Dickey, Richard Nelson, Merwin Fricke, Steve Soberski on behalf of Roger Patterson, John Erickson, Dayle Williamson, Roger Lempke, Barb Cooksley, and Don Wilhite. No members were absent.

The minutes from the September 14, 2001, meeting were unanimously approved.

Mark Svoboda, with the National Drought Mitigation Center, began by discussing the regional distribution of precipitation over the last 60 days. He noted dryness in the western wheat belt of Nebraska has been persistent all winter. Regionally, the maps show a strong storm track that can be seen from west Texas northeast to the Great Lakes area.

Regarding snowpack outlook, Svoboda said Colorado is roughly 58% of average and much of Wyoming is 50 to 75% of average. He said he is hoping some late season storms will dump extra precipitation to help improve those statistics.

Svoboda reviewed the Drought Monitor, showing maps dating back to September 11, 2001. He pointed out the then abnormally dry conditions in the western part of Nebraska and eastern part of the state. Snowfall in February helped eliminate the dry conditions in the east; the drought in the west has been increased to a D1-drought moderate rating on the map.

He reviewed the Monthly and Seasonal Climate Outlook maps for temperature and precipitation. It appears that March is predicted to have above normal temperatures; the March-May period is showing climatology, meaning an equal chance of above, below, or normal temperatures. For precipitation, the maps indicate climatology for March and the March-May period. In looking out further on the forecasting maps, Svoboda said there seems to be a chance of an El Nino pattern developing, meaning things could get warmer and wetter in Nebraska. Beginning in the fall of 2002, maps show a precipitation pattern in the southern tier of states, generally signifying the development of an El Nino.

He reviewed the Seasonal U.S. Drought Outlook map. Through May, 2002, it shows slow improvement to the dry conditions likely, but water shortages still possible in the Panhandle region of Nebraska and into Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and parts of Nevada and Colorado.

Svoboda noted a new weather tool called the "National Agriculture Decision Support System." He said it's an interface that allows users to look at individual weather stations for information. It's found at <http://rcf.unl.edu:8015/~dgv/>. He also reviewed the Standardized Precipitation Index map of Nebraska.

Mike Hayes, with the National Drought Mitigation Center, detailed reservoir levels. Lake McConaughy, as of February 27, 2002, was at 1,122,900 acre-feet, which is 64% of capacity, but 100% of

its level at the same time last year. The North Platte River Basin, as of February 27, 2002, has a storage level of 52% of capacity. The North Platte Basin streamflow projections are 39-49% of average. The South Platte Basin streamflow projections are 25-46% of average.

Hayes reviewed the Mountain Snowpack map and the Spring and Summer Streamflow Forecast map. Streamflow forecasts out of Wyoming and Colorado show very poor conditions.

In the Republican River Basin, as of February 27, 2002, Hugh Butler, Swanson, Enders, and Bonny (Colorado) reservoirs are at historical lows for the end of February. Harlan County Reservoir is three feet above the level it was at in February, 2001.

State Climatologist Al Dutcher noted soil moisture is at or above levels from last year, particularly in the eastern part of Nebraska. He said our soil profile moisture does seem to be building in the eastern part of the state. The fire danger will probably persist because of a lack of snow cover. He reviewed a series of precipitation maps detailing precipitation totals for 30-, 45-, and 60-day time frames and looking at those totals as a percent of normal precipitation. He noted that because of the warm weather this winter, the precipitation we have been receiving is soaking into the soil profile. There have been some pockets of the state that have received above-normal precipitation over the 60-day trend maps.

Dutcher noted a storm system was set to come in this weekend, but would probably miss the Panhandle area; he also indicated a precipitation pattern seemed to be growing for a storm in mid-March.

Susan France, with the Department of Natural Resources, provided handouts showing a comparison of storage in reservoirs. She noted that based on predictions by the Bureau of Reclamation, some irrigators in the western part of the state will probably have an allocation year. Chairman Ibach suggested CARC work through the Department of Agriculture public information office to get as much information as possible out to farmers about the reservoir levels and irrigation issues.

France noted that several Natural Resource Districts are beginning to discuss their capabilities to help ensure water for municipalities and domestic users of water in times of drought. Mark Kuzila noted that the Municipal Water Supply, Health, and Energy Subcommittee had suggested this as a mitigation item in the Drought Plan.

CARC members discussed the reservoir situation. Hayes said there probably would be enough water in the Lake McCounaghy for users this year, but there may be impacts next year.

Dean Groskurth, with Nebraska Agricultural Statistics Service, said the winter wheat, as of February 1, 2002, appeared in better shape than in the past two years.

Ibach read a pasture/range conditions report compiled by Extension Forage Specialist Bruce Anderson. He said most grazinglands in Nebraska appear in relatively healthy condition at this point. Spring and summer growth potential is questionable due to low soil moisture, particularly in the west. The northeast appears to have the best growth potential, he said. Ibach noted most producers were probably able to build back some hay stocks because of the open winter.

Jack Daniel, co-chair of the Municipal Water Supply, Health, and Energy Subcommittee, reported

no public water supply systems were having any difficulties at this point.

Member Don Wilhite said that federal drought legislation, which originated through efforts of the Western Governors' Association, is expected to be introduced in the next two to three weeks on the Senate floor. New Mexico Senator Domenici will introduce it. There has been debate about what agency will take the lead on drought matters, but it appears USDA will fill that role. The purpose of the legislation is to create coordinated mitigation opportunities.

Kuzila said his office has been getting calls about wet basements, meaning moisture is going into the soil rapidly.

Member Merwin Fricke reported on weather, crop, and pasture conditions in the area that he farms near Hastings. He said his winter wheat is looking good. Member Barb Cooksley said the Sandhills region where she lives has been having severe winds.

Wilhite said the CARC web site needs to be updated.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:15 p.m.

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