

Climate Assessment Response Committee Meeting  
May 23, 2002  
Nebraska State Office Building, Lower Level F

The meeting was called to order at 9:05 a.m. by Chairman Greg Ibach.

Climate Assessment Response Committee (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; Barb Cooksley; and Don Wilhite. Roger Lempke was absent.

The minutes from the February 28, 2002, meeting were unanimously approved.

Mark Svoboda, National Drought Mitigation Center, began by discussing the national distribution of precipitation as a percent of mean, particularly looking back to levels since October 2001. He noted dryness in the southwest United States, dryness in Nebraska's winter wheat belt, and dryness in the Rocky Mountains and along the east coast.

Svoboda showed maps detailing mountain snow pack and spring and summer stream flow forecasts as of May 1, 2002. Regarding snow pack, Svoboda said most of the basins feeding the Platte River are below 50 percent of average. Low stream flow also is forecast for the entire Rocky Mountain stem. He reviewed the Surface Water Supply Index map.

Svoboda reviewed the Drought Monitor, showing the severity of the weather changes by reviewing the February 26<sup>th</sup> map compared to the May 21<sup>st</sup> map. Conditions deteriorated rapidly and pushed eastward, he noted. He then highlighted the 6- to 10-day outlooks for precipitation and temperature, as well as the monthly and seasonal outlooks for temperature and precipitation. Svoboda said the seasonal outlook shows equal chances of normal, above-normal, or below-normal temperatures for Nebraska through the fall. The same is predicted for precipitation, even into next spring, he said.

Mike Hayes, National Drought Mitigation Center, detailed reservoir levels and stream flow projections. He noted that, in February, Lake McConaughy was at 100 percent of its 2001 level, but it now is at 92 percent of its 2001 level. It currently is at 1,134,300 acre feet, which is 65 percent of capacity. Hayes said usually in May and June the lake receives more inflows than outflows, however, this year the trend has been reversed.

The North Platte River Basin, as of May 1, 2002, had stream flow inflows that are 30 percent of average. The South Platte Basin stream flow projections haven't changed from February, when they were projected to be 25 to 46 percent of average.

In the Republican River Basin, Hayes noted all reservoir levels are lower than what was predicted during the February CARC meeting, and there are near-record inflows for spring. As of May 22, 2002, Hugh Butler, Swanson, Enders, and Bonny (CO) reservoirs are at historical lows for May.

Hayes noted the website addresses for the Drought Monitor, CARC, and the National Drought Mitigation Center. Ibach said he plans to add a link from the CARC site to the Nebraska Agricultural Statistics Service's weekly crop and weather report.

State Climatologist Al Dutcher reviewed a series of precipitation maps detailing precipitation totals for 30- and 60-day time frames and looking at those totals as a percent of normal precipitation. He noted, in the past 30 days, the area feeding the Platte River has received 20-40 percent of normal precipitation and a sliver of the eastern part of the state has received slightly above-normal rainfall.

Dutcher said the 60-day precipitation maps show the southwest and part of the Panhandle at 20 to 40 percent of normal. From January to present, almost the entire western one-half of the state is 60 percent below normal in precipitation. Dutcher also reviewed precipitation levels from as far back as September 2001, noting that, because the winter was relatively warm, some of the precipitation that fell during that time made its way into the soil profile.

Dutcher cautioned that even though the Drought Monitor shows the eastern portion of Nebraska to be in normal conditions, it's "barely normal" and conditions won't have to change much to expand the drought in that direction.

Dutcher reported on soil moisture levels taken from a sampling of automated soil moisture probes across the state. He noted the maps are reflecting what the soil moisture probes are showing relative to the dry conditions and where the worst areas are located. CARC member, Mark Kuzila noted the soil moisture probes, because of their general location over grassy areas, may actually be showing a best-case scenario, meaning conditions are actually worse than reflected.

John Pollack, National Weather Service, reviewed the 6- to 10-day forecast noting a definite change to a warmer weather pattern. He said he is optimistic that a change in wind flow pattern will provide a chance for Gulf of Mexico moisture to move up into Nebraska and possibly hold for a 15-day period.

Phil Soenksen, United States Geological Survey, reviewed stream flow conditions, noting that, in the southwest, several streams are showing new record lows for the May 22<sup>nd</sup> date. The northeast and the southeast are showing normal stream flow levels.

Craig Head, Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation, told the Committee about a new project his organization is undertaking called the Crop and Weather Scout Report. Farm Bureau members have volunteered to give weekly weather and crop updates; Head will be responsible for compiling the information into a report. He highlighted information from a number of counties in the southwest and northwest districts. Ibach asked if the information could be made available on-line. Head agreed to work with Steve Soberski to create a clickable map format for the information to be available on-line.

Scott Keller, Nebraska Agricultural Statistics Service, reported on topsoil and subsoil moisture conditions across the state. He reviewed NASS's May 1 hay stocks report, noting that while stocks have actually rebounded from 2001 levels, he is anticipating high usage in the west. Alfalfa and hay prices have come back down from levels which increased during the drought of 2000.

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

the public water supply drought impacts. He said there are no public water supply systems having difficulties, at this point, due to the drought, although as irrigation picks up, problems could surface. Three communities that often have difficulties, Guide Rock, Verdon, and Grant, are making infrastructure improvements. He said the HHS Regulation and Licensure field office staff is maintaining close contact with those communities that have a history of drought-related problems, and they are conducting public information meetings in two communities regarding drought mitigation.

Ibach gave a report on Governor Johanns' recent activities regarding the drought, as well as Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA) activities. He noted the Governor toured the western part of Nebraska and NDA reactivated its Hay Hotline. He said NDA partnered with Susan France, Department of Natural Resources, to provide radio reports on the irrigation water situation; he indicated that should be continued.

Ibach also talked about the problems ranchers in Custer and Dawson counties are having with grasshoppers.

Steve Soberski presented a report on anticipated surface water irrigation deliveries.

Brian Wolford, Nebraska Farm Service Agency (FSA), updated the Committee on FSA activities regarding disaster declarations. Currently, FSA is receiving updated condition reports and would ask the counties that appeared to have severe conditions to turn in more detailed Disaster Assessment Reports (DARs). These DARs will then be reviewed by the State Emergency Board, which then recommends to Governor Johanns the counties that should be identified as candidates for disaster designations. The USDA Secretary makes the final determination. To qualify, a county must have a 30 percent loss in any one crop enterprise. Wolford said FSA wants to get as many counties qualified as possible and will continue to monitor conditions throughout the summer.

Wolford also talked about emergency grazing of Conservation Reserve Program acres. He said the State FSA Committee met this morning to discuss the matter and will probably ask to have some qualifying counties released for this program.

Wolford said FSA is looking into the grasshopper situation to determine if a disaster designation can be gained for the affected counties. He also talked about the Livestock Assistance Program and the Noninsured Assistance Program.

Ibach asked about the criteria used to determine county qualifications for the various programs. He offered NDA's assistance.

CARC member Richard Nelson talked about the 2000 drought and the spike Nebraska had in mental health program usage. He said HHS will work to promote information about available assistance programs.

CARC member Don Wilhite mentioned that the new head of the USDA Risk Management Agency (RMA) visited the UNL campus yesterday and talked about the need to revise the provisions for prevented planting insurance coverage, particularly as it relates to continuous drought situations. Bobbie Kriz-Wickham, NDA, noted that NDA has received calls on this issue from producers in the southwest part of Nebraska and that clarification is needed from RMA.

Kriz-Wickham also highlighted the “National Drought Preparedness Act of 2002,” a bill that was introduced in the House of Representatives and the Senate recently. The bill would create a National Drought Council, a National Office of Drought, and a Drought Assistance Fund. Wilhite talked about the bill and expressed some concerns regarding the agency designated to chair the Council.

Ibach summarized the results of the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:10 a.m.

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