

CARC Meeting

September 23, 2002

Nebraska State Office Building, Room Lower Level A

The meeting was called to order at 1:45 p.m. by Chairman Greg Ibach.

CARC members present were: Greg Ibach, Elbert Dickey, Richard Nelson, Steve Soberski on behalf of Roger Patterson, Bill Meyer on behalf of Roger Lempke, Dayle Williamson, Don Wilhite, and Barb Cooksley. Merwin Fricke, John Erickson, and Mark Kuzila were absent.

The minutes from the June 20, 2002, meeting were unanimously approved.

Mark Svoboda, with the National Drought Mitigation Center, began by discussing the year-to-date departures from normal for precipitation. He said that based on the deficits shown in these maps, the state will need to rely on precipitation this winter and next spring more so than in years past.

He reviewed the USDA Topsoil Moisture Report, the short- to very-short category. Sixty-three percent of the state is in this category. He noted those states to the west, such as Colorado, also have topsoil that is drier than the five-year mean. This is significant because runoff from snowfall or rains may soak into the dry soils rather than reaching streams and rivers that feed into the Platte River.

Svoboda reviewed Standardized Precipitation Index maps for January 1 to September 16, 2002, April 2 to September 16, 2002, and August 5 to September 16, 2002. The 37-week and 24-week maps show a great deal of orange and red coloring, signifying severely and extremely dry conditions. The August 5 to September 16 map shows that some rainfall was received in extreme drought areas, particularly the northwest and the central Panhandle in Nebraska. He reviewed index figures for January 1 to September 16, 2002, noting that Alliance, Kimball, Broken Bow, Imperial and Auburn all set new precipitation deficit records.

Svoboda reviewed the U.S. Drought Monitor, showing a series of the maps to display how the drought has expanded eastward, peaked in late July, reflected a bit of relief in August, and is now in a relatively stable pattern over the past couple weeks.

He also showed the U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook map, including predictions through December 2002. The map forecasts some improvement through the central part of Nebraska. He noted some weather officials feel an El Nino pattern in the Pacific Ocean could bring this short-term improvement, but because Nebraska is located in a transitional zone, the El Nino impact is tough to call. He also said that in an El Nino year it is typically dry in the area of the Rocky Mountains that feed the North Platte River.

State Climatologist Al Dutcher reviewed a series of precipitation maps detailing precipitation totals for September to date, 30- and 60-day time frames and looking at those totals as a percent of normal precipitation. He noted that in the past 30 days, areas near Holt and Knox counties and the northwest and central Panhandle of Nebraska have received 180 percent of normal precipitation for that time period. He also said the map reflected that the eastern part of the state, particularly the southeast, has turned very dry. In reviewing the precipitation accumulation from April 1 to date, Dutcher said much of the map shows oranges and yellows,

representing 40-60 and 60-80 percent of normal precipitation, with only a small area near Sioux City at above normal.

Dutcher reported on soil moisture levels taken from a sampling of automated soil moisture probes across the state. He predicted that soil moisture profiles will be varied going into next season, and that the amount of moisture remaining for next crop year will be greatly influenced by the crop that was planted in the same area this season.

He felt that tropical storm activity in the Gulf of Mexico coast area may hold some potential for moisture in Nebraska, particularly in the eastern one-half of the state.

Mike Hayes, with the National Drought Mitigation Center, detailed reservoir levels. He noted that Lake McConaughy is at 573,800 acre/feet, which is 33 percent of capacity and 45 percent of average. He said the lake has about one-half of the volume it had on June 20, when it was at 61 percent of capacity. Inflows to the lake are at 450 cubic feet per second (cfs), while normally it would be 1,100 to 1,200 cfs. Officials are estimating a 2003 spring peak of 700,000 to 850,000 acre/feet, which would be the lowest spring peak since the lake was filled in 1948. CARC member Don Wilhite said he is concerned that the estimate may be optimistic, based on an assumption of normal stream flow.

Hayes suggested that CARC's Risk Assessment Committee get together this fall to begin looking at needs and options for next season based on the weather and reservoir reports that have been given.

Hayes reviewed reservoir levels from the Republican River Basin, including Bonny (CO), Hugh Butler, Swanson, Enders, and Strunk. He also noted that Harlan County Reservoir is at 52 percent of capacity, compared to 76 percent at this time in 2001.

He detailed 2002 estimated drought economic losses for Nebraska, South Dakota, Kansas, Montana, and from the wildfire season. Ibach noted that Nebraska's \$1.4 billion was estimated in mid-July and may be updated after harvest to reflect actual losses. Wilhite said members of the media have been asking for a national drought loss figure, and while the National Drought Mitigation Center doesn't have such an estimate, he guessed the figure in the \$20-\$25 billion range.

John Pollack with the National Weather Service reviewed the weather patterns from June to present, noting the current pattern will continue to be cool and dry. He doesn't expect any positive influence in Nebraska from the tropical storm systems coming through the Gulf of Mexico.

He reviewed the monthly and seasonal outlooks for temperature and precipitation. He said the October outlook map indicates climatology, or equal chances of normal, above-normal, or below-normal temperatures and precipitation for Nebraska. For the October through December period, he said the maps show climatology for precipitation, with the potential for above normal temperatures. The late winter precipitation outlook is more favorable to a normal precipitation pattern.

Steve Soberski with the Department of Natural Resources handed out a summary of Water Administration for the 2002 season. He said he will continue to work with the Nebraska Farm Bureau to provide updated information on the Crop and Weather Scout Report, available on the CARC web site. He said he also would continue to update the CARC web site.

Phil Soenksen with United States Geological Survey reviewed stream flow conditions, showing statewide data and then focusing on 11 different stations throughout the state in more detail.

Scott Keller with the Nebraska Agricultural Statistics Service presented the committee with information on soil moisture supplies, pasture conditions, hay prices, and dryland corn. He noted that sorghum yields this year were the lowest per acre since 1974, and the corn production level is anticipated to be under one billion bushels in Nebraska, which is the first time in a number of years it has dipped below that level. He said pasture and range conditions in Nebraska are 86 percent poor and very poor, which is reflected in the prices that producers have been paying for hay. Keller said prices for hay and alfalfa are at record levels. He noted that there is usually a spread between alfalfa and other hay prices, but that this spread isn't apparent this year, which reflects the high demand for forage. NASS is forecasting a dryland corn yield of 59 bushels/acre, compared to about 110 bushels/acre in 2001.

CARC member Dick Nelson, with Health and Human Services - Regulation and Licensure, reported on the public water supply drought impacts. He said the number of systems with problems related to the drought have dropped considerably over the past two weeks. August 19 was the high point for problem systems, with 59 on the list.

Hayes asked whether work by the CARC Municipal Water Supply, Health and Energy Subcommittee was helpful to Regulation and Licensure in dealing with the drought this year. Nelson said he felt it was because there seems to be improved coordination with irrigators and the adoption of water management plans by a number of communities. He said his staff will continue to work with communities that have water quality and quantity issues related to drought.

Ibach reported on the status of the Roadside Haying program, the droughtcentral.org website, the Hay Hotline and activities of the Nebraska Mediation Service. Ibach referenced the drought-related work of the staff at the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. CARC member Elbert Dickey, Dean and Director of the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension, said his staff continues to work on drought preparedness presentations, particularly looking at what producers need to consider should the drought continue through to next year. He said they are looking to cooperate with three other states in starting a financial mentoring program, modeled after a program previously used, and are waiting to hear about approval of a grant request for that program.

Mark Wilke with the Farm Service Agency noted that all 93 Nebraska counties have been declared a disaster by USDA Secretary Ann Veneman. This opens up the low-interest loan program and several other federal program opportunities for producers and small businesses. He said his offices are getting requests for the low interest loan program, particularly in western Nebraska.

Wilke noted emergency haying and grazing on Conservation Reserve Program acres is to end on November 30. He said the deadline to sign up for 2003 Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program coverage for pasture and hay is September 30. He also mentioned FSA currently is working on distributing assistance to Nebraska's livestock producers through two new federal programs, the Feed Assistance Program and the Livestock Compensation Program.

Ibach asked Dickey to utilize the Cooperative Extension staff to encourage cooperation between crop

producers and livestock producers following harvest. Livestock producers can use corn and soybean stubble as supplemental livestock forage. Ibach also noted the importance of encouraging crop producers to not till under fields. Crop residue helps improve soil and moisture conservation through the fall and winter.

The committee also talked about possible grasshopper concerns for next season. Ibach expressed the need to be prepared to deal with the matter in the spring.

Wilhite said the NDMC is partnering with the federal Risk Management Agency to conduct statewide risk assessment workshops, targeting drought related needs.

The committee decided it will next meet in mid- to late-January.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:42 p.m.

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