Nebraska’s Natural Resources Districts returned to Washington, D.C., after a three-year hiatus due to the pandemic. NRD staff and directors visited with federal partners and the Nebraska delegation throughout the conference.
"May you live in interesting times." An old English greeting or a Japanese curse? The origin may be uncertain, but the words are apropos for us today.

Welcome to Kearney and the NARD annual meeting! You can get your news from many sources today and many of the lead stories cover natural resources concerns, such as water shortages in the southwestern states, extreme climate events like wildfires, flooding or record-breaking storm events. At the NARD summer meeting in Bismarck, North Dakota, we went around the table at the Natural Resources Committee meeting and each delegate voiced the primary concern in their state. The top two were water issues, too much or too little, and the loss of farmland to urban expansion.

Mark Twain said challenges make life interesting. However, overcoming them is what makes life meaningful. Thank goodness we have locally led NRDs in Nebraska to work out solutions and manage the challenges we face in "interesting times."

There are no easy answers but coming together to compare notes, learn new things and honor deserving award winners is a great way to energize and gear up to take on the challenges. I don’t know of a group with employees, managers and directors who are better qualified or more creative in meeting these challenges head on than the NRDs in Nebraska. Job well done!

Have a great annual meeting!

The NARD Executive Committee includes the NARD president, vice president, secretary/treasurer, past president, and chairs from the Legislative and Information & Education Committees. The NARD Board of Directors includes representation from each of the 23 NRDs and meets five times annually to help guide the Association. To avoid duplication of costs, the same members serve on the NARD Risk Pool Board, which governs the health insurance program.

NARD President Dr. Orval Gigstad has served on the Nemaha NRD board since 1993 and the NARD board since 1996. He also serves as chair of the National Association of Conservation Districts Northern Plains Region. A practicing veterinarian for more than 45 years, he operates the Arbor Valley Animal Clinic in Syracuse. NARD Vice President Martin Graff has served on the Middle Niobrara NRD board 28 years and on the NARD Board since 2018. He farms with his wife, Brenda, and sons near Ainsworth. Off the farm, Graff serves on the East Woodlawn Cemetery Board and is active in the Elks Club helping with youth sports.

NARD Secretary/Treasurer Ryan Reuter is a sales manager with Betaseed and ACH Seeds (sugar beets). He has served on the North Platte NRD and NARD boards since 2018. Reuter and his wife Amie live in Minatare and have two daughters, Avery and Addison. NARD Past President Jim Eschliman has served on the Lower Loup NRD board 17 years and the NARD board since 2016. Eschliman also serves on his local co-op board and the Cattlemen’s Beef board.

After selling his dairy cows in 2018, he considers himself retired and resides near Ericson with his wife, Deb.

James Meismer of the Twin Platte NRD serves as the Legislative Committee chair, and Jim Johnson of the South Platte NRD serves as the Information & Education Committee chair.

The NRD Managers Committee includes managers and assistant managers from all 23 districts. The committee meets five times annually to coordinate NRD activities with state and federal agencies, conservation partners and other parties to protect Nebraska’s natural resources. Lower Loup NRD Manager Russ Callan is chair and Lower Big Blue NRD Manager Scott Sobolitka is vice-chair. The Managers Committee elects a new chair at the March meeting.
NRD Conservation Award Winners

Nebraska’s NRDs have a history of recognizing landowners, producers and partners for their great stewardship of the land and our natural resources.

The Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD) coordinates an annual recognition program to provide awards for outstanding efforts in conservation. Districts nominate individuals for the various awards and the NARD board of directors select the winners in June. Award nominations are due to the NARD on May 1. To learn more about the individual awards, visit nrdnet.org/news/conservation-awards.

Once winners are selected, the awards are presented at the NRD Annual Conference each September. Congratulations to our 2023 award recipients and thank you for your dedication to preserving and protecting Nebraska’s natural resources for the next generation.

Award nominations are due to the NARD on May 1. To learn more about the individual awards, visit nrdnet.org/news/conservation-awards. Once winners are selected, the awards are presented at the NRD Annual Conference each September. Congratulations to our 2023 award recipients and thank you for your dedication to preserving and protecting Nebraska’s natural resources for the next generation.

NRD Hall of Fame Inductees

Hall of Fame - Director

Longtime Columbus resident Darwin Anderson was first elected to the Lower Loup NRD board nearly half a century ago on Nov. 5, 1974. He was 33 at the time. Anderson took his oath of office on Jan. 14, 1975, and has been a dedicated public servant ever since.

In his time with the Lower Loup NRD, Anderson has attended nearly 600 board meetings (so far), racking up more than 115,000 miles traveling to headquarters and back home again. This does not include the many miles traveled to public meetings and hearings, monthly Programs and Projects Committee meetings, and other Lower Loup NRD and NARD events. In addition to his many other roles with the agency, Anderson served as secretary of the Lower Loup NRD board of directors for 25 years.

Anderson is a skilled woodworker known for the intricate wooden creations he donates to causes such as the NARD Foundation silent auction, the Lower Loup NRD annual awards dinner, and other events. Lower Loup NRD staff members cherish the high-quality pens turned on Anderson’s lathe.

Hall of Fame - Employee

Kent Miller is the only general manager the Twin Platte NRD has ever known. Kent was hired in July 1973 when Nebraska’s NRD system was just being established, and he is the only remaining original manager within the NRD system.

Miller has been involved in many instrumental projects during his 50-year career including work with irrigation canal entities, the Nebraska Cooperative Republican Platte Enhancement (NCORPE), Water Data Program, and the Perkins County Canal Project South Platte Compact. Miller is currently a member of the Mid Plains Community College Board of Governors and has served on the board intermittently since 1975. Miller has a Bachelor of Science degree and a Master of Science degree, both in civil engineering from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In 1975 he was certified as a Professional Engineer in both Nebraska and Colorado.

Hall of Fame - Supporter

Many NRDs have worked with James Cannia across his varied career. Cannia started his career in 1980 with Kiewit Mining and Engineering and later worked for the University of Nebraska Conservation and Survey Division, North Platte NRD, Nebraska Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Geological Survey, and Exploration Resources International (XRI). Later, he co-founded Aqua Geo Frameworks, a company specializing in airborne electromagnetic (AEM) surveys and hydrogeologic framework models. He spent his nearly 40-year career advancing Nebraska’s capacity to conserve and protect its groundwater resources. His contributions to Nebraska groundwater are numerous, including advancements in monitoring and modeling, management of integrated groundwater and surface water supplies, advocacy and awareness of the importance of groundwater, and the adoption of innovative technologies to characterize groundwater resources. The impact of Cannia’s work is felt throughout Nebraska and his legacy will live on for generations to come.
NRD Washington, D.C. Conference

AFTER 3-YEAR HIATUS, NRDs RETURN TO D.C. TO VISIT DELEGATION

Nebraska’s Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) were represented by more than 55 directors and staff in Washington, D.C., March 20-22, 2023. Nebraska’s NRDs advocate for strengthening tools to preserve and fund natural resources projects, which includes influencing policymakers from the ground up with a unified voice. This grassroots advocacy culminates with a visit to Washington, D.C., allowing NRD staff and directors to engage with congressional leaders and hear from our elected officials in person.

“Going to D.C. is an opportunity to advocate for Nebraska by sharing our personal stories, and also hear federal perspectives on issues that could impact us locally,” said Dr. Orval Gigstad, NARD president. “While on Capitol Hill, conference attendees spent a day meeting with Nebraska senators and congressmen and participated in a two-day session with federal agencies and conservation partners. NRDs help deliver several federal programs locally, and these partnerships equate into real dollars for Nebraska agriculture and communities.”

The most effective lobbyists are the people who work and live among our natural resources,” said Dr. Orval Gigstad, NARD president.

While on Capitol Hill, conference attendees spent a day meeting with Nebraska senators and congressmen and participated in a two-day session with federal agencies and conservation partners. NRDs help deliver several federal programs locally, and these partnerships equate into real dollars for Nebraska agriculture and communities. Gigstad, who has served on the Nebraska NRD board since 1993, also serves as chairman of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) Northern Plains Region on behalf of Nebraska’s NRDs. NACD provides a unified national voice for the more than 3,000 conservation districts across the U.S. including Nebraska’s 23 NRDs. NACD’s member-driven board of directors selects conservation policy priorities, which are used to develop and review environmental and natural resources legislation and to secure adequate federal funding for natural resources conservation programs.

On March 21, National Water Resources Association (NWRA) Executive Vice President and Nebraskan native Dale Nellor spoke to NRD attendees. His career in Washington, D.C., started with an internship in 2000 and 2001 sponsored by the Nebraska Association of Conservation Districts. Neilor went on to work for Sen. Chuck Hagel and several agriculture organizations on Capitol Hill.

“The project is important to northeast Nebraska residents and having the ability for the NRD to work closely with federal representatives and their staff puts a face to the name and builds connections for us and for them. Those interactions and relationships have been helpful in securing additional funding. I would encourage directors and staff to get to know their state representatives and the Washington, D.C., conference provides an ideal platform to do just that.”

Several NRD Managers visited Capitol Hill to speak to Nebraska representatives. From left: Scott Nelson, Little Blue NRD; Michelle Glenn, Lower Niobrara NRD; Mike Murphy, Middle Niobrara NRD; Annette Sudbeck, Lewis & Clark NRD; and David Eigenberg, Upper Big Blue NRD.
The tour included several stops featuring conservation projects that protect both urban and rural natural resources. Some of the 2023 tour highlights included:

- Upper Prairie-Silver-Moorees Flood Reduction Project (Grand Island)
- State Fairgrounds Outdoor Learning Area (Grand Island)
- Wood River Flood Control - Hall County Park (Grand Island)
- Crane Viewing Decks (Alda and Gibbon)
- Elm and Turkey Creeks Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (Elm Creek)
- B1 Reservoir and Wildlife Management Area (Lexington)
- Cozad Ditch Company Headgates (Gothenburg)

The NRD Basin Tour explores a different water basin each year. The hosting NRD showcases conservation projects, partnerships and the local communities in which they live and work.

In 2023, the NRDs sold more than $98,000 conservation trees and shrubs statewide. NRDs expect to plant more trees through partnerships with NRCS, Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) and Executive Travel.

NFS is heading up the Nebraska Forest Restoration Partnership, which brings together NFS, NRDs, and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to address declines in the state’s forests and windbreaks. Using a $4.3 million grant from NRCS, partners will work directly with landowners to increase the scale and pace of forest restoration statewide. This includes planting 1.5 million trees, providing new management of 30,000 acres of declining forests, increasing the health and resiliency of 7,000 acres of vulnerable forests and restoring 250 linear miles of agricultural windbreaks.

Executive Travel, a Lincoln-based travel management company, has committed to planting a tree for every airline ticket they sell with a goal of planting one million trees. Through the initiative, the company hopes to offset the carbon footprint from airline travel. For 2024, Executive Travel has committed another $65,000 in cost-share funding. This marks a contribution of $190,000 from Executive Travel since the partnership began in 2022.

Nebraska’s NRDs were featured in the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) July edition of Forestry Notes. The article highlighted Nebraska’s tree planting efforts and our partnership with the Nebraska Forest Service to serve the entire state with forestry professionals.

Promotion of the NRD Conservation Tree Program continues with advertising on Big Red Wrap-Up during the Husker football season and booths at various events including Husker Harvest Days, Nebraska Ag Expo and the Women in Ag Conference.

The Conservation Trees for Nebraska booklet received an update this year. This spring, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) updated their boarding guidelines for between trees and between rows of windbreaks. Those changes were included in the booklet as well as new photos and a few new tree species. This booklet last received an update in 2017. The refreshed content will be distributed as tree sales ramp up through this fall and winter.

The annual NRD Forestry Workshop was hosted by Upper Loup NRD in Thedford Aug. 9-10, 2023.

In addition to presentations and roundtable discussions, attendees learned more about the Upper Loup NRD recycling program and toured the Bovee Fire scar. The Bovee Fire burned through Halsey National Forest in October 2022 and destroyed the State 4-H campground.

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FORESTRY BOOKLET GETS AN UPDATE

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The Conservation Trees for Nebraska also matches the online content at www.nrdtrees.org.
STATE ENVIROTHON MAKES A SPLASH AT LAKE MAC

Pelicans and turkeys welcomed high schoolers from across Nebraska to Lake McConaughy for the 31st annual Nebraska State Envirothon April 26, 2023. Dawson County Envirothon Club took home the championship along with $1,500 and represented Nebraska at the National Conservation Foundation (NCF) Envirothon in New Brunswick, Canada in July.

Envirothon is an environmental education program for high school students that combines classroom learning and outdoor activities. This year’s competition was hosted at the University of Nebraska’s Cedar Point Biological Station at Lake McConaughy near Ogallala.

“Envirothon allows students to get outdoors and learn about natural resources in a hands-on environment,” said Dr. Orval Gigstad, Nebraska Association of Resources Districts president. “The activities are designed to help students become environmentally aware, action-oriented adults, but also exposes them to many exciting career opportunities.”

During the state competition, five-member teams were tested on their knowledge of aquatics, forestry, policy, range, soils and wildlife, as well as prepared and delivered an oral presentation focusing on a current environmental issue. The 2023 oral presentation theme “Adapting to a Changing Climate” challenged teams to propose a solution to a complex problem before a panel of judges.

The NARD Foundation awarded cash prizes to the top three teams at the state competition:

- **First Place ($1,500):** Dawson County Envirothon Club
- **Second Place ($1,000):** Milford
- **Third Place ($500):** Ord

Additional prizes were awarded to the top teams in each testing category:

- **Aquatics:** Concordia
- **Forestry:** Concordia
- **Policy:** Dawson County Envirothon Club
- **Range:** Milford
- **Soils:** Milford
- **Wildlife:** Milford
- **Oral Presentation:** Dawson County Envirothon Club

Eighty-six teams competed in the regional contests during February and March, and 14 teams qualified to participate at the state competition.

NCF-ENVIROTHON IN NEW BRUNSWICK

After taking the top spot at the State Envirothon, Dawson County Envirothon Club went on to represent Nebraska at the NCF-Envirotlon July 23-28, 2023, at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, Canada.

In addition to tests in aquatics, forestry, soils, wildlife and a current environmental issue, teams prepared a 20-minute presentation on this year’s theme, “Adapting to a Changing Climate.” The NCF-Envirotlon included 49 teams from the U.S., Canada, China and Singapore.

Top places went to the following:

- **First:** Massachusetts
- **Second:** Pennsylvania
- **Third:** Ontario, Canada

The 2024 NCF-Envirotlon will be hosted in Geneva, New York.

From left, LPNNRD General Manager Eric Gottschalk, LPNNRD Director Robert Hilger (David City), LPNNRD Director Kelly Thompson (Fremont), LPNNRD Lead Water Specialist Russell Oakland, LPNNRD Director Bill Sauger (Fremont), and NRCs State Conservationist Rob Lawson.

Flood Control Plan Approved for Saunders County

The Lower Platte North NRD and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) recently approved the Upper Wahoo Creek Watershed Plan.

The Upper Wahoo Creek Watershed Plan focuses on constructing 10 floodwater-reduction dams within a 100-square-mile-area in the Wahoo Creek Watershed, generally located west of Wahoo, in Saunders County. This is the first Watershed Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) plan approved in Nebraska since funding for watershed operations was reestablished by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2017.

The $19.7 million project includes 10 wet dams on sites south of Prague, west of Weston and west of Wahoo.

“Our district selected sites that have the greatest potential to reduce flood damages to agriculture, county roads and bridges, urban land, improve water quality, and enhance wildlife and aquatic habitats,” said Lower Platte North NRD General Manager Eric Gottschalk.

In addition to the Nebraska NRCs WFPO funding, the Lower Platte North NRD received funding for the Wahoo Creek Watershed from the Nebraska Legislature in 2022.
As Nebraskans continue to seek the peace and tranquility of the outdoors, Nebraska's NRDs continue to invest in recreation area improvements throughout the state.

This year, the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts Foundation launched the NRD Recreation Exploration program.

The NRD Recreation Exploration program is designed to inspire individuals and families to venture into the great outdoors and explore the state's natural beauty. The program aims to foster a deeper connection with nature while offering participants the chance to win a grand prize of $1,500 in Scheels gift cards.

The NRD Recreation Exploration program invites participants to embark on an adventure through more than 80 diverse NRD recreation areas. From the rolling grasslands of the Sandhills to the tranquil shores of the Platte River, Nebraska boasts an abundance of breathtaking landscapes.

By actively participating in the NRD Recreation Exploration program, participants not only stand a chance to win prizes but also instill a love for the outdoors, promote physical activity, and encourage environmental stewardship.

The NRD Recreation Exploration program is supported by the NARD Foundation and Scheels, a leading sporting goods retailer.

For more information about the NRD Recreation Exploration program, including a list of recreation areas, visit nrdnet.org/recreation.

**Groundwater Tech Training Going Virtual**

The groundwater technician training will soon be available as an online tutorial. NRDs hire groundwater technicians to inspect chemigation systems; measure and record static water levels; inspect and service flow meters; and conduct water sampling practices.

Groundwater technicians must sit through a training course and pass an examination administered under the Water Well Standards Licensing Program.

The new online training will have five interactive learning modules composed of videos, animations, flip cards, and knowledge checks. Participants will be able to sit through the training any time of the year and work through it at their own pace. The goal of creating an online training is to train and license groundwater technicians year-round. Project partners include multiple NRDs, University of Nebraska Lincoln, Nebraska Dept. of Environment and Energy, U.S. Geological Survey, and McCrometer.
In September 2022, Upper Niobrara White NRD hosted state Range Judging in Dawes County with 42 schools competing. Teams from West Holt took top honors in both the Senior and Junior Divisions. 2022 was another record year for Land Judging with 103 schools and 1,832 students participating in regional competitions. North Platte NRD hosted state Land Judging near Scottsbluff in October 2022 with 33 schools competing. Five teams – Norfolk, Hampton, Southwest, Bayard and Lewiston – took honors at state Land Judging and went on to compete at national Land Judging May 2-4, 2023, in Oklahoma City. This year, Nebraska Land Judging will start scoring contests electronically using Scantron cards and machines. This will increase efficiency with scoring and allow NRD hosts to handle more contestants with fewer volunteers. Special thanks to our NRD hosts, NRCS range specialists and soil scientists, and the Nebraska Society for Range Management, who help make Range and Land Judging a success. This year, state Range Judging will be hosted by Lower Big Blue NRD Sept. 26-27, 2023, and state Land Judging will be hosted by Lower Loup NRD Oct. 25, 2023.

Nebraska’s NRDs participated in the Largest Classroom Days (Aug. 23, Aug. 29, Aug. 30) at the Nebraska State Fair. South Platte NRD Information and Education Coordinator Yolanda Rinkas talks to students about Nebraska’s water resources.

On dual trips to western Nebraska, nearly a dozen state senators toured parts of Colorado to survey the area that could be part of the proposed Perkins County Canal. The Perkins County Canal project is intended to ensure Colorado sends the water Nebraska is entitled to in the 1923 South Platte River Compact. Due to good precipitation in western Nebraska, the South Platte River flows were running quite high during the spring and summer, which demonstrated the need to capture the water and retine for later use.

During the Legislative session, LB 819 provided for transfers of funds from the state Cash Reserve Fund including a one-time transfer of $574.5 million from the Cash Reserve Fund to the Perkins County Canal Project Fund in FY 23-24. The bill modifies use of the Perkins County Canal Project Fund by authorizing the Department of Natural Resources to utilize the fund to identify the optimal route and purchase land for and develop, construct, manage, and operate the Perkins County Canal.

During the annual managers retreat hosted by Lower Loup NRD, managers and partners toured Nebraska Distillers Products Aug. 29. The company turns distillers grains leftover from ethanol production into a pelleted feed product for livestock.


Right: Gov. Jim Pillen speaks with Twin Platte NRD General Manager Kent Miller about the Perkins County Canal Project.
A GLIMPSE OF ACTIVITIES IN THE natural resources districts

In May, Upper Big Blue NRD hosted a delegation of scientists, policy makers, and business people from Mato Grosso, Brazil. There was a robust discussion about how Nebraska’s NRDs manage groundwater for agriculture and all beneficial uses across the state. These leaders were eager to learn more about the unique and successful system of governance in Nebraska that provides local control and local solutions through the NRDs. The delegation was visiting for the 2023 Water for Food Global Conference hosted by the University of Nebraska’s Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute.

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In June, Upper Big Blue NRD staff and directors attend a field day near Sterling.

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MANAGING WATER RESOURCES:

**Lower NRD Program Highlights**

**Lower Elkhorn**
- LENCNRD worked with farmers, residents, conservation partners, and agricultural professionals on projects that positively impact water quality and quantity. LENCNRD maintains flood risk structures in the Aowa Creek Watershed and is currently looking at addressing the South Creek Watershed in Dixon County. LENCNRD continues to promote BMPs across the district with a focus on the Bow Creek Watershed and Bazzle Groundwater Management Area.

**Upper Elkhorn**
- UBNRDN has added trailers to their Forestry Workshop and hosted the annual NRD activities. The ULNRD also worked with producers to comply with new water rules and will be submitting to the NRCS. As part of the Integrated BMPs across the district with a focus in the Bow Creek Watershed. The program includes 10 structures and is the first Watershed Planning and Construction Outline plan approved in Nebraska since 2017. Staff continue to work on BMPs with landowners in the Shell Creek Watershed to improve soil and water conditions and reduce nitrate contaminants.

**Upper Platte**
- LPSNRD is working on a $2.9M stream stabilization project for Antelope Creek in Lincoln and a $1M sinking fund and work plan development for Salt Creek. LPSNRD is working toward the latest conservation easement for the Pritchard County Corridor: Haines Branch south of Denton. Secured a $.8M agreement for evaluation and rehabilitation for the East-Lined Connector Trail.

**Central Platte**
- UBNRDN has upgraded several recreation areas with new equipment and amenities, including Pioneer Trail (Aurora), Bruce L. Anderson (York), Smith Creek (Uehling), Yellow Trail (Uehling), and Overland Trail (York). The District worked with the City of Geneva on improving tree resources and walking trails, the City of York on flood planning, and the Village of McCook in Junction for municipal water quality improvement. UBNRDN also began work with several other agencies on a multi-year project to restore water quality in Lake Hastings.

**Lower Big Blue**
- UBNRDN is developing the 32-mile creek watershed plan and environmental assessment with NRCS. This area includes 65,734 acres — mostly managed by the Public Water Project has secured $6.6M in funding to create a new clean drinking water source for rural water users. The current planning efforts are anticipated to begin in the coming year.

**Lower Missouri River**
- The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program has secured $6.6M in funding for the Neosho Creek Watershed. This project includes 10 structures and is the first Watershed Planning and Construction Outline plan approved in Nebraska since 2017. Staff continue to work on BMPs with landowners in the Shell Creek Watershed to improve soil and water conditions and reduce nitrate contaminants.

**North Platte**
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**Nemaha**
- NNRD continues to focus on flood control and conservation on private lands. In FY23, 12+ miles of terraces were constructed. The district hosted the NARD Foundation Map commemorating the Steamboat Trace grand reopening following 2019 flooding. AEM highs are anticipated late in the season.

**Lower Republican**
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**Upper Republican**
- In December, LBNRDN imposed a stay on well drilling and the expansion of irrigated acres. This action was taken due to need for area-specific management strategies. The LBNRDN intends to emerge from the districtwide moratorium with a comprehensive and district-wide framework for managing irrigated acres, groundwater across variable aquifer formations. The District has evaluated aquifer characteristics using known well depths, transmissivity, and airborne geologic surveys.
**Nitrogen Dashboard**

**INNOVATIVE TOOL TO IMPROVE FERTILIZE EFFICIENCY, WATER QUALITY**

The Nebraska Corn Board, Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD), USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and 17 of Nebraska’s 23 NRDs are developing a nitrogen dashboard in partnership with Longitude 103, a leading provider of agricultural technology solutions. Producer Connect, a web and mobile application suite, allows producers to access their crop reporting data and includes a fertilizer recommendation tool based on yield goals. This collaborative effort aims to empower agriculture producers to optimize inputs, which will enhance agricultural profitability, water quality and irrigation efficiency.

Nebraska’s agriculture economy depends on groundwater and fertilizer; however, the overuse of fertilizer can come at a cost by contaminating groundwater, which most Nebraskans depend on for drinking water. “With the growing concern of increased nitrate in groundwater, it is essential for NRDs and agr producers to work together to address the problem,” said Dr. Orval Gigstad, NARD president. “By developing a tool that is mutually beneficial for both agr producers and our natural resources it’s a win-win situation. We applaud the Nebraska Corn Board for helping lead the way.”

The partnership between the Nebraska Corn Board, NRCs, and the NRDs exemplifies the commitment of key stakeholders to fostering a thriving agricultural industry while protecting our water quality and quantity. The Nebraska Corn Board has generously contributed funds to assist with the development of Producer Connect, recognizing the potential it holds in transforming the landscape of modern farming.

“We are proud to support this innovative initiative to provide agriculture producers with more tools for nitrogen management,” said Kelly Brunkhorst, Nebraska Corn Board executive director. “By empowering producers with their own data, we can improve fertilizer efficiency, maximize profits and protect our valuable water resources.”

The involvement of a majority of Nebraska’s NRDs underscores the collective determination to promote responsible farming practices throughout the state. The NRDs along with the NARD Foundation have made financial contributions and are actively applying for grants to help develop and maintain the software for future years.

Producer Connect will be free to producers and offer a wide range of features designed to simplify nitrogen and water management. Ag producers will have a password-protected log in and only be able to see their own data.

Producer Connect is currently in its initial stages of development and is expected to launch in January 2024. The initial roll out will be in Phase II and Phase III Groundwater Quality Management Areas and areas that have irrigation allocations.

**To ensure water infrastructure safety, Nebraska’s NRDs partnered with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) on several dam assessments. In 2022, nine floodwater reduction dam assessments were completed with four NRDs – Lewis & Clark, Lower Elkhorn, Lower Platte North and Lower Platte South. The cities of Norfolk and Plattsmouth were also joint local partners. Dam assessments are detailed inspections that analyze the current hazard classification, determine if the dam meets current design standards and evaluate if any deficiencies are present. In some cases, corrective action may be listed to address deficiencies or to meet design standards. Dam assessments are funded under the NRCS Watershed Rehabilitation Program, which was authorized in 1981. “NRCS is pleased to provide technical and financial assistance to partners like NRDs and communities for addressing dam safety,” said Nebraska State Conservationist Rob Sullivan. “Our purpose is to help local sponsors identify any needed improvements to ensure long-term structural integrity. NRC’s first focus is to complete assessments on dams that provide flood protection upstream of towns and cities. Because of their location, these structures are classified as “high hazard” by the state of Nebraska and thus receive top priority for review.” While local sponsors have done a great job operating and maintaining dams over the years, repairs or alterations may be needed as infrastructure ages,” said NRCS Dam Safety Engineer Bob Sullivan. “Many of these structures were built 40 to 60 years ago.” On behalf of participating NRDs, the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD) coordinates the dam assessments with NRCS and local engineering firms. “Completing these assessments is the first step in securing additional federal funding to help address any dam deficiencies that may be found,” said NARD Executive Director Dean Edson. “This program is vital in helping NRDs protect the lives, property, and future of Nebraskans.” This partnership continued in 2023 with 18 additional dam assessments across seven NRDs including: Lower Big Blue, Lower Platte South, Nemaha, North Platte, Upper Nubrara White, Lower Elkhorn and Papio-Missouri River.

**NRCS and NRDs Partner on Statewide Dam Assessments**

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Nebraska has made gains in nitrogen management through split application and irrigation efficiency, but there are opportunities for improvement. Nebraska’s agriculture economy depends on groundwater and fertilizer; however, the overuse of fertilizer can come at a cost by contaminating groundwater, which becomes a liability to Nebraska’s economy. For more than 40 years, levels of nitrate in Nebraska’s groundwater, surface water, and air quality have increased. More than 40 years, levels of nitrate across Nebraska have been increasing.

Nitrogen is an essential element for plant growth and vital to Nebraska’s agriculture industry. However, when not managed properly it becomes a liability to groundwater, surface water, and air quality. For more than 40 years, levels of nitrate in Nebraska’s groundwater, surface water, and air quality have increased. More than 40 years, levels of nitrate across Nebraska have been increasing.

Jennifer Swanson
Director of Water Quality Initiatives

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“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”
– Helen Keller

Dustin Wilcox
NARD Programs and Partnerships Director

For more than five decades, Nebraska’s NRDs have consistently demonstrated the potential of collaborations in achieving conservation successes. These partnerships extend across a spectrum of stakeholders, including state and federal agencies, local communities, counties, private enterprises, individual landowners, and associations. Whether forming coalitions, cooperatives or consortiums, NRDs have partnered to foster a thriving agricultural industry while protecting our water quality and quantity.

Middle Republican NRD General Manager Jack Russell, right, and McCormerle President Pete Oveson look at new telemetry monitors installed in the District this spring. Middle Republican is one of the 17 NRDs participating in the soon-to-be-released Nitrogen Dashboard.

THE POWER OF CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIPS
A look back at the NRDs’ conservation partnership efforts this past year

NRDs, NARD, NRCS & NE Corn Board collaborate to develop nitrogen dashboard

Jennifer Swanson, NRCS, and the NRDs exemplify the commitment of key stakeholders to foster a thriving agricultural industry while protecting our water quality and quantity. This collaborative effort aims to empower agriculture producers to optimize inputs, which will enhance agricultural profitability, water quality and irrigation efficiency. The dashboard – Producer Connect – is a web and mobile application suite that allows producers to access their crop reporting data, receive a personalized nitrogen recommendation based on yield goals, and an economic analysis of different fertilizer application rates, and will allow for communication between the producer and the local NRD. The producer will be able to sign up for notifications to receive reminders of reporting and conservation program application deadlines.

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Economic partnerships have proven that collective action can yield remarkable results in protecting lives, properly, and the future. Nowhere is this more apparent than within the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD). Under the leadership of the NARD board, your association continues to focus on its mission of ensuring NRDs are partnered to accomplish collectively what may not be accomplished individually to conserve, sustain, and improve our natural resources and environment. Throughout the year, these cooperative efforts coordinated through NARD have led to partnerships with statewide implications. NARD joined forces with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to pursue and implement new agreements aimed at securing funding and delivering statewide benefits. One such agreement, executed alongside private consultants, has enabled the completion of 27 dam assessments. Additionally, NARD’s collaboration with NRCS included the coordination of Cooperative Conservation Agreements and Technical Assistance grants targeting priority conservation needs. This year also witnessed the renewal of agreements between NARD and private sector partners. Notably, an agreement with Executive Travel Inc. was extended, providing support for tree plantings across the state. Since 2006, this partnership has channeled nearly $200,000 in direct cost-share to landowners planting conservation trees.

Furthermore, there was a strengthening of the partnership between NARD and the Department of Natural Resources (NeDNR). As NRDs and NeDNR continue their collaborative efforts to implement integrated management plans, NARD and NeDNR built on that momentum to renew an agreement to foster and further strengthen the partnership. These efforts will further advance and promote the success of joint water planning activities statewide. Equally noteworthy, the past year ushered in exciting new partnerships between NARD and organizations dedicated to improving nutrient management. Under NARD board leadership, a concerted effort was initiated, uniting the majority of NRDs, the Nebraska Corn Board, and other agricultural sector partners. Together, we are working toward addressing water quality concerns. History has shown that a proactive partnership approach is essential to tackle our most complex natural resources management challenges. Nebraska’s NRDs represent an unparalleled system for locally led natural resources management. When NRDs unite and collaborate with all stakeholders, they forge an effective path forward to benefit generations to come.

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**Lower Platte South NRD** hosts a table at Lincoln Earth Day helping students make flowers with cupcake liners.

A pollinator habitat planting activity with York area fourth graders, in partnership with Pheasants Forever and the Upper Big Blue NRD.

Fourth graders check out worms during a Natural Resources Day in April hosted by South Platte NRD and ESU 13 in Sidney.

Below: In May 2023, residents brought more than 388 loads of e-waste to the Papio NRD electronics collection sites in Blair, Telodorn, Walthill, and Dakota City. Funding is provided through a Litter Reduction & Recycling Incentive Grant with the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy.

Lower Republican and Tri-Basin NRDs celebrated 30 years of Water Jamboree! Lower Republican General Manager Todd Sel presents Gina Ellis of Southern Valley with a plaque for 40 years of volunteering.

**Lower Republican** General Manager Todd Filipi presents Gina Ellis of Southern Valley with a plaque for 40 years of volunteering.

In May, Lower Republican and Tri-Basin NRDs celebrated 30 years of Water Jamboree! Lower Republican General Manager Todd Sel presents Gina Ellis of Southern Valley with a plaque for 40 years of volunteering.

**Lower Platte North NRD** hosts a Test Your Well night with the Johnson-Brock Science Club to test water for nitrate.

Lewis & Clark NRD demonstrate how to test a private well outside of Omaha with Creighton High School students participating in the Know Your Well program.

Nemaha NRD hosts a Test Your Well night with the Johnson-Brock Science Club to test water for nitrate.

Lower Nebraska NRD hosts an 8th grade conservation day with students from schools around their district.

During the Natural Resources Festival, Upper Elkhorn NRD fifth graders examine animal tracks during a Wildlife CSI lesson.

Lower Platte North NRD Water Resources Manager Daryl Andersen (left) and Assistant Manager Ryan Chapman show students at the Fremont Middle School Field Day how point source and non-point source contamination works with a groundwater model.

In May, North Platte NRD Resource Conservation Coordinator Todd Filipi received the Nebraska State Foresters Award, presented by Nebraska State Forester John Erixson. Filipi was recognized for his contributions to Nebraska forests and his commitment to conservation.

Lower Big Blue NRD, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, and Nebraska City Tourism & Commerce, plant an Osage Orange tree at the Wilber Arboretum.

In May, Lower Nebraska White NRD hosted a Conservation Festival at Chadron State Park with more than 200 8th graders from across the district.

Right: Tri-Basin NRD Field Office Secretary Tammy Reese asks water-related questions to 8th graders at the Water Jamboree near Martin County Reservoir.

This year, Upper Republican NRD opened up public land in northern Chase County.
The first session of the 108th Legislature adjourned sine die June 1, 2023, on day 88 of the 90-day session. The second session of the 108th Legislature is scheduled to convene on Jan. 3, 2024. Regular sessions generally last 90 legislative days in odd-numbered years and 60 legislative days in even-numbered years.

An on-going filibuster on abortion and gender-affirming care slowed the legislature. Due to time constraints, the process for moving legislation forward included filing amendments to incorporate multiple bills into advancing legislation. Of the more than 800 measures introduced, 291 bills were all amended into just 33 bills, not including 19 appropriation bills, that were passed into law.

This year, the NARD tracked 48 bills and three constitutional amendments. Thirteen bills NARD supported were passed and signed into law. The following are a few key bills of interest to Nebraska’s Natural Resources Districts.

**LB 531e: Change provisions of the Economic Recovery Act (McKinney)**
The Legislature gave final approval to the bill on a 37-8-4 vote June 1. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed into law by Gov. Pillen June 6.

**LB 565e: Provide a grant program related to hydrogen hub designations (Bostelman)**
Senators gave final approval to the bill on a 41-0-8 vote on May 23. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed into law by Gov. Pillen May 30. This bill included an amendment to add LB 217, which extends the sunset date for the scrap tire recycling grant program under the Waste Reduction and Recycling Incentive program from June 30, 2024 to June 30, 2029.

**LB 217: Modify the definition of “grant program” (McKee)**
The legislation was introduced by Sen. Galen M. Otte to modify the definition of “grant program” to include funding for projects that promote the use of renewable energy sources, electric vehicles, or other forms of alternative energy.

**Budget Bills**

The state budget is structured on a two-year basis. It is passed in odd-numbered years and adjustments are made during legislative sessions held in even-numbered years. The legislation passed LB 814e on a 42-3-4 vote and LB 818e on a 41-3-5 on May 18. Both bills included emergency clauses and were signed into law with line-item vetoes by Gov. Pillen May 24. LB 814e and LB 818e appropriate funds for the expenses of Nebraska State Government for the biennium ending June 30, 2025.

For natural resources programs, the budget highlights include:

4-H Camp (LB 281)
Create the Youth Outdoor Recreation Innovation Cash Fund, transfer $10 million from the Cash Reserve Fund, and clarify matching requirements. This provides funding to rebuild the Halsey 4-H Camp that was destroyed by the Bovee Fire in 2022.

Precision Agriculture Infrastructure Grant Program (LB 361)
Transfer $1 million each year from the Cash Reserve Fund to the General Fund and appropriate funds to the Public Service Commission to carry out the Precision Agriculture Infrastructure Grant Program.

Lincoln Drinking Water Source (LB 785)
Includes $1.79 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to the Department of Natural Resources for grants and to appropriate funds for purposes of providing capital assistance for a rural drinking water project that serves rural water connections and at least four communities in two contiguous counties to convert to ground water sources and to provide for water system infrastructure and distribution. This would be funding for the Cedar Knox Rural Water project sponsored by the Lewis and Clark NRD. Unfortunately, the additional funding was vetoed by Governor Pillen.

**Water Resources Cash Fund**
Amends the Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund to authorize transfers to the Water Resources Cash Fund, subject to a limitation that funds transferred be expended in accordance with the purposes of the Environmental Trust Fund Act.

**Surface Water Irrigation Fund (LB 125)**
States that investment earnings from the Surface Water Irrigation Fund shall be credited to the fund.

**State Game Fund (LB 744)**
Amend language in the State Game Fund statute to permit use of the fund for wildlife damage payments.

**Game and Parks Contingency Fund**
Transfer $1 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to the Department of Natural Resources for grants and to appropriate funds for purposes of providing capital assistance for a rural drinking water project that serves rural water connections and at least four communities in two contiguous counties to convert to ground water sources and to provide for water system infrastructure and distribution. This would be funding for the Cedar Knox Rural Water project sponsored by the Lewis and Clark NRD. Unfortunately, the additional funding was vetoed by Governor Pillen.

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**State Game Fund (LB 744)**
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**Economic Recovery Contingency Fund**
Transfers $1 million from the Cash Reserve Fund to the Water Resources Cash Fund and for the Cedar Knox Rural Water project, which is to provide additional funding for the Cedar Knox Rural Water project sponsored by the Lewis and Clark NRD.

First Session of 108th Legislature Continued

Perkins County Canal (LB 819)
Provides for transfers of funds from the state Cash Reserve Fund including a one-time transfer of $574,500,000 from the Cash Reserve Fund to the Perkins County Canal Project Fund in FY 23-24. The bill modifies use of the Perkins County Canal Project Fund authorizing the Dept. of Natural Resources to utilize the fund to identify the optimal route and purchase land for and develop, construct, manage, and operate the Perkins County Canal. Language is also added that any fees collected for water delivery may be credited to the fund.

Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Fund
Maintains General Fund funding at $1,806,112 and $50,000 in Cash Funds for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25.

Water Well Decommissioning
Appropriates $70,000 in Cash Funds for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25.

Water Resources Cash Fund
A $7 million transfer from the Environmental Trust Fund in both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25.

Nebraska Resources Development Fund
The bill includes no additional appropriations. However unexpended balances existing on June 30, 2023, would be re-appropriated.

Nebraska Water Sustainability Fund
An appropriation of $10,865,033 for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25. Unexpended balances existing on June 30, 2023, would be re-appropriated.

Water Projects
A Cash Fund appropriation of $87,800,000 for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25. Includes $62.8 million in Cash Funds from the Perkins County Canal Project Fund and $25 million Cash Funds from the Jobs and Economic Development Initiative (JEDI) Fund in both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25. A Federal Fund appropriation of $177.2 million in FY 23-24 for a grant to a municipality for water project. A Federal Fund appropriation of $2 million in FY 23-24 for a grant to a first class city located in first congressional district for purposes of constructing riverfront improvement project.

Critical Infrastructure Fund
A $10 million Cash Fund appropriation in FY 23-24 for funding a portion of the cost of a wastewater system. Unexpended balances existing on June 30, 2023, would be re-appropriated.

Department of Natural Resources Operations
$22,436,156 in FY 23-24 and $22,919,860 in FY 24-25. Included in the appropriation is $1.3 million in Federal Funds for each fiscal year for enhanced data collection. Unexpended balances existing on June 30, 2023, would be re-appropriated.

Environmental Trust
$21,309,636 for FY 23-24 and $21,381,666 for FY 24-25. Includes $7 million transfer to the Water Resources Cash Fund in both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25.

Statewide Drinking Water Facilities Loan Fund (NDEE)
$12,710,000 in FY 23-24 and $12,810,000 in FY 24-25.

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
$2,804,862 in General Funds for both FY 23-24 and FY 24-25.

Governor Vetoes
On May 24, Gov. Pillen signed LB 814e and LB 818e with several line-item vetoes. These line-item vetoes reduced the overall appropriations previously passed by the Legislature by more than $140 million. Relating to natural resources, the vetoes included eliminating the $7 million appropriation for NDEE to provide a grant to the Cedar/Knox rural drinking water project. The Governor’s veto message noted the project had already received significant investment from state funds. Additionally, the veto action reduced the $300,000 appropriation increase in FY 23-24 and FY 24-25 for interstate water litigation within the Attorney General’s office. The Governor’s veto message noted existing interstate water litigation funding is sufficient to meet the state’s needs.

Carry-Over Bills
As this was the first session, there will be several bills that carry over to the second session in 2024.

2023 Legislative resolutions of Interest to NRDS

LR 133: Examine any issues within the jurisdiction of the Natural Resources Committee of the Legislature that may arise during the interim (Botstem)
The Natural Resources Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.

LR 156: Examine the impact and increased frequency and intensity of wildfires in Nebraska and the sufficiency of the firefighting response to such wildfires (McDonnell)
The study should focus on reviewing the resources available in Nebraska to fight wildfires, the limitations and burdens placed upon the present resources used in fighting wildfires in Nebraska, and the development of additional state-supported resources to assist in fighting wildfires. The study includes but is not limited to:

- Identifying different resources presently available in fighting wildfires, including those resources supplied by Nebraska’s volunteer firefighters, the State Fire Marshal, the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, the Nebraska Forest Service, and the Game and Parks Commission;
- Examining the policies and procedures presently used by each of the above entities to fight wildfires, and if state-funded wildfire
The study will be conducted by the Natural Resources Committee and includes but is not limited to:

- Reviewing the historical and current level of Mesonet funding and the sources from which that funding is derived;
- Reviewing the current scale of the Mesonet system in Nebraska and whether such scale is consistent with the needs of Nebraska’s agricultural producers and other current and potential users of Mesonet data;
- Reviewing any other issues relevant to Nebraska’s Mesonet system.

LR 224: Examine laws governing the ring-necked pheasant upland game bird in hopes of improving the population of the species for increased hunting and tourism in Nebraska (Brewer)

The study will be conducted by the Natural Resources Committee and includes but is not limited to:

- Examining laws governing how the Game and Parks Commission regulates pheasant hunting in Nebraska, specifically those laws and programs that concern federal and state revenue sources relating to pheasants;
- Examining laws and programs that govern what can be done to improve pheasant habitat in Nebraska;
- Examining laws and programs that govern what can be done to reduce the impacts nest predators have on the pheasant population;
- Examining laws and programs that govern youth hunting, specifically the practice of early youth hunting on public land with released birds;
- Examining the thoughts and opinions of individual citizens and sportsman groups that have experience and knowledge of the aforementioned subject.

LR 238: Examine the location of recreational vehicle parks, entertainment venues, and other recreational development and the impact of zoning regulations related to flooding on locating such facilities. (McDonnell)

The study will be conducted by the Urban Affairs Committee and includes but is not limited to:

- Examining the rules, regulations, and ordinances for flood plains or floodways relating to obstructions, permanent structures, recreational vehicle parks, other recreational venues, and recreational development;
- Examining the subsequent risk of potential property loss due to lack of enforcement of rules, regulations, and ordinances in flood plains or floodways;
- Evaluating eminent life, safety, and financial loss facing Nebraskans under the current rules, regulations, and ordinances in flood plains and floodways and enforcement of those rules, regulations, and ordinances.

LR 247: Examine issues related to Legislative Bill 133 introduced in the 108th Legislature, First Session (Cavanaugh, J)

The study will be conducted by the Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee and includes but is not limited to:

- Examining current laws regarding the use of eminent domain by nonpublic or private entities and how the process differs, if at all, from the process used by political subdivisions;
- Examining which public and nonpublic entities have the right of eminent domain;
- Determining whether a public hearing prior to the use of eminent domain should be required;
- Examining other potential policy changes regarding the use of eminent domain that the Legislature may consider.

LR 250: Consider improvements to the Property Assessed Clean Energy Act and property assessed clean energy financing for real estate development projects (McDonnell)
The Urban Affairs Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.
NARD WELLNESS PROGRAM PROMOTES HEALTHY LIVING

NARD, WorkWell Inc. and the Nebraska Safety Council offer an employee wellness program to promote a safe and healthy work environment. The wellness program provides tools and resources to NRD employees and board members to help them be successful in making healthy lifestyle choices.

The wellness program was created as an add-on to the existing Risk Pool Health Insurance Program. NARD board members and NRD managers saw the creation of a wellness program as a way to keep insurance premiums low and continue to save tax payer dollars. NARD aids the 23 NRD wellness delegates to coordinate individual wellness programs. The main objective is to create a fun, friendly, non-intimidating wellness program that challenges employees to meet their district’s wellness goals.

Participants in the wellness program have shown improvements in their health, including weight loss, increased physical activity, healthier eating habits, increased health screenings and flu shots. Because of the success of the NRD wellness program, many of the NRDs have received the Governor’s Excellence in Wellness Award.

GET THE SCOOP: EMPLOYEE RETIREMENT PROGRAM

The 2022-23 year has been hard on the markets and retirement funds. The S&P 500 index is trying to battle back from a 20% drop last year, but inflation and other external factors are holding up progress. Unfortunately, our retirement programs are tied to the market.

As of June 30, 2022, the NARD 414(h) retirement fund equity value dropped by 20% to $44,322,094. By June 30, 2023, the fund has grown 12% to $49,940,860.

The defined contribution program allows each employee to determine their own investments, providing the flexibility for the employee to determine the amount of risk and potential rate of return they feel most comfortable with. Because it is a defined contribution program and not a defined benefit plan, there is no financial liability to the local NRDs or the NARD.

The NRD Employee Benefits Committee meets four times annually to review details of the program and suggest changes in investment options to the NARD Board, which governs the program. The committee includes the NARD Executive Committee and 13 NRD employees representing all areas of the state.

As of June 30, 2022, the voluntary NARD 457 retirement fund equity value also dropped by 20% to $4,987,597. By June 30, 2023, the fund had rebounded to $5,898,267. The program allows NRD employees to set aside additional pre-tax income for retirement and has the same investment options as the NARD 414(h) plan.

Mark Geist and Jonathan Beukelman of UBS Financial Services provide the Nationwide investment platform for the plans. Since they have been involved, the NARD investment levels have increased almost four-fold. Benefit Plans Inc. of Omaha provides the reporting and compliance work for the plans.

The Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD) has operated a licensed health risk pool for NRD employees since 2006. The program is governed by the NARD Risk Pool Board, which includes NARD board members. The NARD Risk Pool Stop/Loss Committee meets five times annually to review details of the program and suggest changes. The committee includes the NARD Risk Pool executive committee and 13 NRD employees representing all areas of the state.

During the last 16 years, the average annual NARD health insurance premium increase has been 4.8% while the national annual average has been 10.9%. This is very rare in the insurance industry. If premium changes followed the national average, premiums would almost be double what they are today.

This year, many things went in a positive direction—fewer overall claims, reduced claims for lasers, reduced reinsurance renewal rates, and no lasers in reinsurance for FY 23-24. The last three fiscal years had losses and reserves were used to pay the claims. This year, the Risk Pool shows a $2.3 million profit, reversing losses in each of the last three years.

In FY 22-23, the Risk Pool experienced six claims over $100,000, with only one at the $175,000 maximum liability. This is down from 11 experienced at the end of FY 21-22 with six over $175,000. Further, last fiscal year an additional $601,000 of medical was paid out for lasered individuals compared to only $117,000 this year. For FY 23-24 we do not have a lasered individual, which limits additional risk exposure.

NARD HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAM UPDATE

After two recent renewal meetings, the Stop Loss Committee recommended no proposed change for medical and dental premiums for FY 23-24. Subsequently the NARD Risk Pool Board approved those rates. Thus, all coverage will remain the same as FY 22-23.

The program operated as it was set up to do—working off reserves built up in the “good years” to cover losses in the “bad year.” The program has built reserves of $6.4 million to allow for annual premium changes to be limited. Mid-American Benefits provides the third-party claims processing, and Mill Willnerd of Willnerd and Associates works with the NARD to ensure all state and federal reports are filed. As part of the Affordable Care Act, an annual federal premium tax based on the number of employees and family members enrolled in the plan is assessed. These taxes totaled $5,351 in FY 22-23. In addition, the Risk Pool pays $35,884 in state premium taxes to retain a license to operate the insurance company. The NARD Risk Pool Board has opted to pay the taxes from reserves rather than assess each employer or district for the tax.

The program is audited annually by independent auditors. In addition, the program is audited by the Nebraska Department of Insurance (NDOI) every four years. The program has been audited four times by the NDOI, with the most recent in 2021. The audits have never found any major operational, structural, or financial problems with the operation of the NARD Risk Pool.

Chart 1: Shows the actual NARD insurance premium compared with the national average.

Chart 2: Shows the NARD annual premium increase (percent) compared to the national average premium increase.
The NARD Foundation builds partnerships to engage young Nebraskans to learn more about natural resources. Through these educational programs, your commitment and generosity inspires and grows the next generation of Nebraska naturalists. In the last year $28,195 was raised through the NARD Foundation silent auction,affle, Ron Bishop memorial golf tournament and the 5K fun run. Learn more about a few of the programs supported by the NARD Foundation.

**Nebraska Envirothon**
An environmental competition for high school students designed to test knowledge in seven areas of ag and natural resources. Top teams receive cash prizes and paid registration to compete at the international NCF-Envirothon. The 2023 Nebraska State Envirothon was hosted at Cedar Point Biological Station near Lake McConaughy. The 2023 NCF-Envirothon was hosted in New Brunswick, Canada, with 49 teams from the U.S., Canada, China and Singapore competing. Nebraska was represented by Dawson County Envirothon Club.

NAYI
Annually, the Foundation supports the Nebraska Agriculture Youth Institute and participates in the career fair. The event welcomed 270 junior and seniors [a record!] to UNL East Campus July 10-14, 2023. Nebraska FFA
The Foundation sponsors the Nebraska FFA Natural Resources Speaking Leadership Development Event, Building Communities Chapter Award, Environmental & Natural Resources Career Development Event, Outdoor Recreation Proficiency Award, and State Officer Development. This March, more than 6,000 FFA students were in Lincoln for the Nebraska FFA Convention.

**ACE Camp**
Adventure Camp about the Environment (ACE) is a three-day natural resources camp put on by NRDS. Targeted at middle school students, campers learn about natural resources during a fun summer camp experience. Nebraska LEAD
The LEAD program provides young adults with skills and experiences needed to become leaders and advocates for agriculture. Many LEAD graduates go on to serve on NRD boards.

**NRD Recreation Exploration**
The NRD Recreation Exploration challenges participants to get outdoors and visit NRD recreation areas between March 1 and September 15. Visitors submit photos of their visits for a chance to win prizes monthly and a grand prize of $1,500 in Scheel’s gift cards.

For the first time since 2018, the 5K was hosted to raise funds for the NARD Foundation. Nemaha NRD hosted the 5K Depot Dash on Steamboat Trace Trail, which coincided with the trail’s dedication to test school students. An environmental Nebraska Envirothon supported by the NeDNR Program. Learn more about a 5K fun run.

In the last year Nebraskans to learn and grow. Optimism always wins out.

**Executive Director's Letter**

**The Nebraska Association of Resource Districts (NARD) staff is honored to work for NRD directors and staff by aiding with legislation, free programs, water quality and quantity management, growth of youth programs, benefit programs and public relations.**

For the 26th consecutive year, the NARD has balanced its budget and added reserves, which is a testament to involvement from NRD board members and staff. NARD manages the health insurance risk pool and releases NARD programs, which continue to grow and benefit NRD staff.

The Association also manages the NARD Foundation, which has grown significantly during the last 16 years thanks to annual fundraisers and member involvement. What started out as a small foundation in 1997 with $4,100 funding an internship in Washington, D.C., has grown to fund a variety of natural resources educational programs that reach thousands of individuals in Nebraska.

**Banner Year for Water Fund**
NARD worked with Gov. Pillen, the Nebraska Legislature, NeDNR Director Tom Riley and other partners to help secure the largest funding for water in Nebraska history. During the last two years, NARD has worked with the South Platte Basin Coalition to secure funding for the Perkins County Canal, The South Platte, Twin Platte and Central Platte NRDS worked with Nebraska Public Power, Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District and Western Conservation to develop and maintain Nebraska’s water under the 1923 South Platte River Compact.

These efforts have paid off as we were able to secure $347.5 million for the Perkins County Canal project. In addition, other legislation was passed to allow for a design-build process to be used to construct the canal. On a broader note, there were 48 bills and three constitutional amendments on the NARD watch list. Of those, 13 that were supported by NARD passed and were signed into law. Seven bills were opposed and remain in committee. Thanks goes out to the lobbying team of Zulkoski | Weber!

**Corporate Partners**
NARD is taking the lead to develop new working relationships with public and private entities to address water quality. The NARD, 17 NRDS, the Nebraska Corn Board and NRCS have partnered together to develop a nitrogen dashboard to improve nutrient management. These partnerships have led to more opportunities to expand services and programs that protect our natural resources. Jennifer Swanson’s job has changed to Director of Water Quality Initiatives, moving her away from daily Executive Travel has committed an additional $65,000 in cost share for the spring 2024 planting season, which will further enhance the beauty and sustainability of Nebraska’s landscapes. The NARD staff looks at challenges as opportunities to learn and grow. Optimism always wins out.
Jan. 3, 2024 – First Day of 108th Nebraska Legislature 2nd Session
Jan. 22-24, 2024 – NARD Legislative Conference, Lincoln
Jan. 24, 2024 – NARD Board Meeting, Lincoln
Feb. 10-14, 2024 – NACD Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA
March 4-5, 2024 – NARD Water Programs Conference, Kearney
March 10-11, 2024 – NARD Board Meeting
April 24, 2024 – Nebraska State Envirothon, Ponca State Park
April 26, 2024 – Arbor Day
June 9-10, 2024 – NARD Board Meeting
June 10-11, 2024 – NARD Basin Tour
June 23-26, 2024 – ACE Camp at Camp Kaleo, Burwell
Aug. 24-Sept. 3, 2024 – Nebraska State Fair, Grand Island
Sept. 10-12, 2024 – Husker Harvest Days, Grand Island
Sept. 22-24, 2024 – NARD Annual Conference, Kearney
Sept. 24, 2024 – NARD Board Meeting, Kearney
Nov. 10-11, 2024 – NARD Board Meeting

Background: An irrigation well electrical safety class is hosted at the Sandhills Interactive Natural Resources Educational Center (SINREC) at the Middle Niobrara NRD in Valentine.

Five Electrical Safety Classes were held across Nebraska with training provided by the Nebraska Rural Electrical Association, local public power districts, and the Nebraska State Electrical Division. The training consisted of a classroom presentation followed by hands-on training at a pivot location. The goal was to provide hands-on training for NRD Groundwater Technicians who work around high-voltage pivots.