

# Nebraska Association of Resources Districts

# ANNUAL REPORT

## 2025



*Upper Elkhorn NRD staff add weed barrier to a new homestead windbreak planting near O'Neil, Nebraska.*

*More than 572,000 conservation trees and shrubs were sold statewide through the NRD Conservation Tree Program for planting in Spring 2025.*



# NARD PRESIDENT’S LETTER: MARTIN GRAFF



**Martin Graff**  
**NARD President**  
Ainsworth, Nebraska  
Middle Niobrara NRD

Once again, good old Nebraska weather has blessed much of our state with timely rains. It seems every year brings its own set of challenges—yet

in many ways, they feel familiar. In 2025, we’ve faced budget cuts at both the state and federal levels, the merging of state agencies, a new NDWEE director, and the loss or reduction of key funding sources for major projects. Despite these obstacles, Nebraska’s NRDs remain committed to their mission: protecting lives, property and the future. That resilience is our strength. But we can’t do it by standing still. We must keep moving forward—sharing our stories, building partnerships, and

making our voices heard. That’s why I urge every NRD to send delegates to the NRD Washington, D.C., Conference, March 28–April 1, 2026. This is our chance to sit across the table from decision-makers and ensure they understand the real challenges we face and the solutions we can deliver. Thank you to everyone who supported the NARD Foundation by joining the golf and shooting outings on Sunday—it’s your support that makes our work possible. Over the next few

days, take time to learn, share, reconnect with old friends, meet new ones, and, most importantly, thank the NARD staff for their tireless efforts. Let’s make this conference a turning point—a time to sharpen our focus, strengthen our connections, and remind ourselves why we do this work. The challenges are real, but so is our resolve. Together, we can lead, innovate, and keep Nebraska’s natural resources thriving for the next generation and beyond.



NARD President Martin Graff, left, welcomes Sen. Tom Brandt to the NRD Legislative Conference. Sen. Brandt serves as the chair of the Legislature’s Natural Resources Committee.



NARD President Martin Graff greets Joe Krahn and Ann Terry with the National Special Districts Association (NSDA). This year, NARD became members of NSDA to access additional grant funding for NRDs.

# MEET THE NARD EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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 Martin Graff has served on the Middle Niobrara NRD

Board 30 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 Vice President 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 Secretary/Treasurer Mason

Hoffman is a farmer from Juniata and has served on the Little Blue NRD Board since 2016 and on the NARD boards since 2021. Hoffman and his wife Michelle have three children, Mara, Natalie and Theodore (Tate). NARD Past President Dr. Orval Gigstad has served on the Nemaha NRD Board since 1993 and the NARD Board since 1996. He also serves on 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. Terry Martin of the Upper Republican NRD serves as the Legislative Committee chair, and Bob Hilger of the Lower Platte North NRD serves as the Information & Education Committee chair.



2025 NARD Executive Committee



Martin Graff  
**President**



Ryan Reuter  
**Vice President**



Mason Hoffman  
**Secretary/Treasurer**



Dr. Orval Gigstad  
**Past President**



Terry Martin  
**Legislative Chair**



Bob Hilger  
**I&E Chair**

# MEET THE NRD MANAGERS COMMITTEE

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 Niobrara NRD Manager Wade Ellwanger is chair and Nemaha NRD Manager Kyle Hauschild is vice chair. The Managers Committee elects a new chair at the March meeting.



Wade Ellwanger  
**Chair**



Kyle Hauschild  
**Vice Chair**



# NRD CONSERVATION AWARD WINNERS

Nebraska's NRDs have a history of recognizing landowners, producers and partners for being great stewards 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: [www.nrdnet.org/news/conservation-awards](http://www.nrdnet.org/news/conservation-awards). Once winners are selected, the awards are presented at the NRD Annual Conference each September. Congratulations to our 2025 award recipients and thank you for your dedication to preserving and protecting Nebraska's natural resources for the next generation.



Nebraska Memorial Forest  
**Community Conservation**

The Nebraska Memorial Forest has a goal to plant 7,500 trees for 7,500 Nebraskan Fallen Heroes. Each tree is individually dedicated and named for a Nebraska military or first responder fallen hero.



Matt & Jill Keating  
**Tree Planter of the Year**

The family plants between 500-1,000 trees annually on their land near Atkinson. Since 2012, they have planted more than 13,000 trees for protection and habitat.



Jake Miller (7M Ranch)  
**Grassland Conservation**

The Miller family operates 7M Ranch near Culbertson with crops, cattle and sheep focusing on regenerative agriculture emphasizing soil health and sustainable livestock management.



Joel Miller  
**Educator of the Year**

Miller has been a 7-12th grade agriculture teacher in Nebraska for 21 years and currently teaches at Hampton Public Schools. He also serves as the Nebraska Land Judging Coordinator.



Bow Creek Mentor Group  
**Water Conservation**  
Formed in 2021, producers voluntarily participate to learn practices to improve water quality and soil health. The peer-to-peer group is creating passionate advocates for conservation.



James "Hank" McGowan  
**Soil Conservation**

Second-generation farmer McGowan is committed to restoring soil on his farm in McCool Junction. He has also started sharing his passion with others looking to add soil health practices.



Mark Seier  
**Director of the Year**

A long-time educator, Seier has served on the Lower Platte North NRD board since 2015. He has been instrumental in advocating for and supporting projects that enhance water quality and quantity.

# NRD HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES

## Hall of Fame - Director



James Meisner  
Paxton, NE  
Twin Platte NRD

James Meisner served 34 years on the Twin Platte NRD Board from 1991-2025. His impact extends statewide through 28 years on the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD) Board, where he chaired the Legislative Committee and led key discussions at annual conferences. During his 34 years, he attended every NARD Annual Conference and Legislative Conference. He also served on the NARD Benefits Committees. A strong advocate for sound water policy, Meisner served on the 2002-2003 Water Policy Task Force, whose work led to the passage of LB 962, establishing integrated management of groundwater and surface water in Nebraska. He also contributed to conservation at the federal level as an advisor to the Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust. A respected farmer, rancher, and veterinarian, Meisner is known for his lifelong commitment to protecting Nebraska's natural resources.

## Hall of Fame - Employee



John Miyoshi  
Wahoo, NE  
Lower Platte North NRD

With 33 years of service, John Miyoshi is recognized for his leadership and dedication to conservation. As Lower Platte North NRD general manager, Miyoshi oversaw multi-million-dollar budgets and led major projects in soil conservation, water quality/quantity, and flood control. Miyoshi championed innovation, especially in GIS and data management, helping NRD and NRCS staff work more efficiently. He played a key role in landmark projects like the Sand Creek Environmental Restoration Project (Lake Wanhoo), the Western Sarpy/Clear Creek Levee Project, and rural water systems for Bruno and Colon. Known for building strong partnerships across all levels of government, Miyoshi brought people together around shared goals—even on controversial efforts. His legacy includes the establishment of the Lower Platte North NRD's Ground Water Quality and Quantity Management Area, reflecting his lifelong commitment to protecting Nebraska's resources.

## Hall of Fame - Supporter



Martha "Marty" Link  
Lincoln, NE  
Retired Water Quality Division Administrator

With a 32-year career at the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality(now the Department of Water, Energy and Environment), Marty Link is known for her leadership, technical expertise, and partnerships with Nebraska's NRDs. A professional geologist and Buffalo County native, Link played a pivotal role in groundwater protection through the Groundwater Management Area Program and later supervising the groundwater, wellhead protection, and nonpoint source programs. Link championed collaboration with NRDs, mentored staff, and helped shape local groundwater management plans. She also secured funding for the NRD/NDEE liaison position to ensure ongoing coordination. Link's commitment to partnership, innovation, and communication made her a key figure in advancing water quality efforts. Her legacy reflects a deep passion for natural resources and a unique ability to connect with everyone—from farmers to EPA officials.



# NRD Washington, D.C. Conference Greeted by Blooming Cherry Trees

Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) were represented by nearly 50 directors and staff in Washington, D.C., March 31 to April 2, 2025.

Nebraska's NRDs advocate for strengthening tools to preserve and fund natural resources projects, which includes engaging policymakers from the grassroots level with a unified voice.

This grassroots advocacy culminates with a visit to

Washington, D.C., allowing NRD staff and directors to meet with congressional leaders and discuss local priorities with national partners on federal legislation and programs.

"Those who work and live among our natural resources are some of our most effective spokespeople," said Martin Graff, Nebraska Association of Resources Districts president. "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."

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. Some of the federal topics and speakers included:

- Watershed Programs, Financial Assistance Programs, and Technical Service Providers with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Nonpoint Source Branch
- Waters of the United States (WOTUS) with the American Farm

- Bureau Federation
- Policy and Program Updates from the National Association of Conservation Districts
- Corporate Sustainability and Precision Conservation Management with PepsiCo
- Low Carbon Fuels with Cultivating Conservation
- Trade Policy with the U.S. Grains Council

"We are grateful to our Nebraska federal delegation

for their support and championing the cause of conservation alongside the Natural Resources Districts," Graff said. "Their dedication and partnership have been instrumental in securing vital funding and resources that enable us to protect and preserve Nebraska's precious natural resources for generations to come."

Back in Nebraska, advocacy efforts continued by hosting elected officials in the Natural Resources

Districts and engaging in public outreach.

"Locally, NRDs will continue to share our successes and concerns with our elected officials to ensure more informed decision making," Graff said. "It is important that our elected officials know what the needs of locally led conservation are so that NRDs can receive adequate support to continue protecting lives, property and the future."



Little Blue NRD Assistant Manager Tyler Goeschel and Director Jessi Hoeft arrive on Capitol Hill for the Nebraska Breakfast and meetings.



Left: Water Strategies, LLC, shared water-related policy relevant to NRDs. From left, NARD Executive Director Dean Edson, Water Strategies President Kris Polly, and Legislative Staff Lane Simpson and Drake Wood.

Right: NARD President Martin Graff welcomes NRCS Chief of Staff Colton Buckley, left, and NRCS Central Region Conservationist Curtis Elke, right, to meet with NRD attendees on April 1, 2025.



Left: More than half of the districts were represented at the Washington, D.C., Conference. From left, Lower Elkhorn Manager Brian Buckner, Lower Loup Manager Russ Callan, Nemaha Manager Kyle Hauschild, Central Platte Manager Lyndon Vogt, Lower Niobrara Manager Wade Ellwanger, Lower Republican Asst. Manager Nick Simonson, Middle Niobrara Manager Mike Murphy, Little Blue Asst. Manager Tyler Goeschel, Lower Platte South Former Manager Mike Sousek, Upper Big Blue Manager David Eigenberg, and Lewis & Clark Manager Annette Sudbeck.

Below: On March 31, 2025, attendees and guests toured Antietam National Battlefield to learn about the 23,000 soldiers who were killed or wounded after 12 hours of combat on Sept. 17, 1862, near Sharpsburg, Maryland.



Lower Loup NRD Manager Russ Callan questions Senator Deb Fischer during federal delegation meetings in Washington, D.C., April 2, 2025. NRD representatives used the time to discuss projects and programs in their districts and learn more about federal government processes.



NARD President Martin Graff welcomes U.S. Senator Deb Fischer to speak with NRD representatives at the U.S. Capitol April 2, 2025.



**Save the Date!**  
**NRD Washington, D.C., Conference**  
**March 28-April 1, 2026**



# Niobrara Basin Hosts '25 Tour

More than 80 elected directors and staff from Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) along with state and federal conservation partners gathered in Valentine June 9-10, 2025, for the annual NRD Basin Tour hosted by the Middle Niobrara and Lower Niobrara NRDs.

Each year, the NRD Basin Tour explores a different watershed offering a firsthand look at local conservation projects, natural resources challenges, and successful partnerships. This year's focus was the Niobrara River Basin – an ecologically diverse and economically vital region in north central Nebraska.

"The Niobrara River is a cornerstone for our communities, supporting agriculture, recreation, and wildlife," said Mike Murphy, Middle Niobrara NRD general manager. "Everything we do ties back to responsible water management—handled locally, with long-term sustainability in mind."

The Niobrara River is Nebraska's only National Wild and Scenic River, designated in 1991, and draws tens of thousands of visitors each year. According to the National Park Service, in 2023, more than 80,000 people visited the Niobrara National Scenic River, generating \$8 million in visitor spending and supporting 111 local jobs.

The Niobrara River is not only a scenic treasure, it's also essential to the state's agricultural economy. The basin spans 11,600 square miles and includes

more than 617,000 irrigated acres. It lies at the heart of the Nebraska Sandhills, where ranching is central to the state's role as a global leader in beef production. Cherry County, located in the Sandhills, is the top beef-producing county in the United States with nearly 166,000 cows. Half of Nebraska's 23 million acres of rangeland and pasture are located in the Sandhills, making it the prime region for raising cattle.

In 2014, five NRDs—Lower Niobrara, Middle Niobrara, Upper Elkhorn, Upper Loup, and Upper Niobrara White—joined forces to form the Niobrara River Basin Alliance. One of their major milestones was securing a legal transfer of senior water rights formerly held by Nebraska Public Power District for use at the now defunct Spencer Dam. The Alliance, in partnership with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, successfully converted the water rights for instream basin management and uses such as agriculture, recreation, and fish and wildlife habitat. This marks Nebraska's first instream flow right jointly held by NRDs and Nebraska Game & Parks Commission.

"This collaboration protects more than just water—it preserves a way of life that depends on it," said Wade Ellwanger, Lower Niobrara NRD general manager. "By working together across district lines, we're showing how local leadership and shared vision can drive lasting resource stewardship."

# Basin Tour Continued

Tour participants visited a variety of natural resources landscapes and project sites, including:

- CSS Potato Farm (southwest of Cody)
- Dick Minor Ranch & Snake River Headwaters (Gordon)
- Niobrara Valley Vineyards (Nenzel)
- Fort Niobrara Scenic Overlook (east of Valentine)
- Windbreak Project (east of Valentine)
- Cub Creek Reservoir (east of Norden)
- Shane Lechtenberg's Drip Irrigation Field (west of Mills)
- Lower Niobrara NRD Office (Butte)
- Spencer Dam and the Niobrara River Basin Alliance (Spencer)

As Nebraska continues to face challenges related to water use, drought, and changing environmental conditions, events like the NRD Basin Tour provide critical opportunities for education, partnership building, and strategic planning.



Above: NRD Basin Tour attendees take a trailer ride on the Minor Ranch in a remote section of the Sandhills. From left, Lower Platte North NRD Director Andrew Tonnies, Lower Loup NRD Assistant Manager Tylr Napstek, Lower Loup NRD Water Programs Specialist Jason Moudry, and Central Platte NRD General Manager Lyndon Vogt.



Above: NRD Basin Tour attendees visit the remnants of Spencer Dam, which was damaged during the 2019 Bomb Cyclone. Nebraska Public Power District discussed the plan to decommission the dam. Attendees also learned about the Niobrara River Basin Alliance and their work to obtain the water rights associated with Spencer Dam.



Above: Tour attendees learn about drip irrigation west of Mills, Nebraska. Lower Niobrara NRD Manager Wade Ellwanger, right, introduces Shane Lechtenberg, who first installed drip irrigation in 2013 to improve water-use efficiency and reduce inputs.



Left: Basin Tour attendees enjoyed dinner and a sunset at Niobrara Valley Vineyards near Nenzel, Nebraska. From left, Niobrara Valley Vineyard Founder and Middle Niobrara NRD Director Tim Nollett, Upper Loup NRD Director Chris Higgins, and Middle Niobrara NRD General Manager Mike Murphy.

## LOWER NIOBRARA NRD HOSTS ANNUAL NRD MANAGERS RETREAT

Lower Niobrara NRD hosted the annual NRD Manager retreat on the Santee Sioux Reservation near Niobrara, Nebraska, Aug. 25-27, 2025.

In addition to hearing from partner agencies and conducting regular business, managers heard presentations from Practical Farmers of Iowa and the Nebraska Soil Health Coalition.

A meeting highlight included dinner with a sunset view of the Missouri River and Gavin's Point Dam in Crofton, Nebraska.





# Conservation Tree Program

In 2025, the NRDs sold more than 572,000 conservation trees and shrubs statewide.

NRDs continue to explore new ways to promote and expand tree plantings through partnerships with NRCS, Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) and Executive Travel.

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 2025, Executive Travel committed another \$50,000 for conservation tree cost-share funding. This marks a 4-year total of \$240,000 and 206,680 trees planted with Executive Travel since the partnership began in 2022.

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 Nemaha NRD tree planting crew plants shrub rows for wildlife habitat on a landowner's property.



After many years of contracting out tree planting, Lewis & Clark staff started machine planting in 2025. From left, Reed Trenhaile, Miles Lammer, Dustin Weinandt, and Cole Fiedler.

## 2025 FORESTRY WORKSHOP IN PANHANDLE

The annual NRD Forestry Workshop was hosted by North Platte NRD in Scottsbluff Sept. 8-9, 2025.

In addition to presentations, partnership meetings, and roundtable discussions, attendees had the opportunity to tour forestry projects in western Nebraska. The tour included information on the Wild Cat Hills, wildfire recovery, wildfire prevention efforts, and equipment demonstrations. Attendees also participated in an active windbreak rehabilitation project.

The annual workshop allows NRD forestry staff to meet with partners and learn from one another in a relaxed in-field environment.

An additional forestry field training session is planned at Lower Loup NRD's Agaard Farm near Ord, Nebraska, Oct. 7, 2025. Nebraska Forest Service and veteran NRD tree planters will provide insight and hands-on experiences. A few topics will be site prep, windbreak design/maintenance/renovations, tree spacing, species selection, machine planting, and more.



Top: Attendees tour the damage from the Carter Canyon Fire (July 2022), which was sparked by a lightning strike in the rugged Wildcat Hills south of Gering.



Right: NRD Forestry Workshop attendees gather around a tree planter machine.

## CHAMPION TREE NAMED IN LOWER LOUP NRD

In late January 2025, it became official that Nebraska had a new champion tree! This massive eastern cottonwood was named both the Nebraska and national champion for its species. Measuring 85 feet tall with a 120-foot canopy spread and a trunk circumference of 37.2 feet, this giant stands proudly in southern Wheeler County at Lower Loup NRD's Pibel Recreation Area.

What makes the tree especially unique is its single large trunk, which helped it obtain that champion status.

Since its designation, this giant has received many visitors flocking to Pibel Lake to see it in person!

Below: Lower Loup NRD Information and Education Coordinator Alan Bartels measures the champion cottonwood tree with help from Riverside Elementary School (Cedar Rapids) fourth graders.



Right: Fifth graders plant trees in Chadron during Upper Niobrara White NRD's annual Conservation Festival hosted in May.

Background: A windbreak in Cherry County adds protection during a late spring snow.



# STATE ENVIROTHON DODGES RAIN IN OMAHA METRO

High school students from across Nebraska gathered April 30, 2025, in Omaha for the 33rd annual Nebraska State Envirothon. Dawson County Envirothon Club earned the championship title and a \$1,500 prize, securing their spot to represent Nebraska at the National Conservation Foundation (NCF) Envirothon.

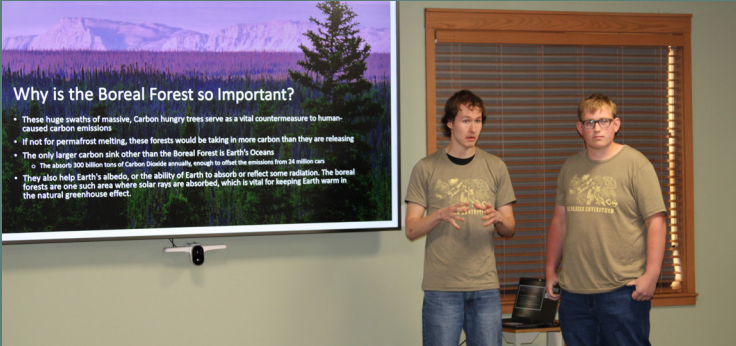
Envirothon is an environmental education program for high school students that combines classroom learning and outdoor activities. The competition rotates around the state, and this year's competition was hosted at Papio NRD's Chalco Hills Recreation Area.

"Envirothon allows students to get outdoors and learn about natural resources in a hands-on environment," said Martin Graff, Nebraska Association of Resources Districts (NARD) president. "The activities are designed to help students become environmentally aware, action-oriented adults, but also exposes them to 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. Some of the immersive test questions require students to identify live animals, measure trees, distinguish range grasses and determine soil texture.

The 2025 oral presentation theme "Roots and Resiliency: Fostering Forest Stewardship in a Canopy of Change" challenged teams to develop a sustainable management plan for a section of the Boreal Forest.

"Students work together to research the current environmental issue, and consider the hypothetical impacts," Graff said. "It is important to train students to think critically and problem solve, because they'll encounter difficult issues in their lives and their future careers."



Students from Mitchell High School give their oral presentation to a panel of judges. Students did in-depth research on the Boreal Forest.



Dawson County Envirothon Club takes home the Nebraska Envirothon Championship April 30, 2025. From left, Jaelin Wolfinger, Parker Walahoski, Casey Wahlgren, Brooklyn Reiman, Paige Walahoski and Papio NRD Director Tim McCormick.

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

- **First Place (\$1,500):** Dawson County
- **Second Place (\$1,000):** Concordia Lutheran of Omaha
- **Third Place (\$500):** Tri-County

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

- **Aquatics:** Dawson County
- **Forestry:** Tri-County
- **Policy:** Dawson County

- **Range:** Dawson County
  - **Soils:** Dawson County
  - **Wildlife (tie):** Dawson County and St. Paul
  - **Oral Presentation:** Dawson County
- Seventy teams competed in the regional contests during February and March, and 14 teams qualified to participate in the state competition.

The Dawson County Envirothon Club went on to represent Nebraska at the NCF-Envirothon July 20-26, 2025.



St. Paul students work together at the Forestry Station April 30, 2025.

# '25 NCF-ENVIROTHON HOSTED IN CALGARY, CANADA

After taking the top spot at the State Envirothon, Dawson County Envirothon Club went on to represent Nebraska at the NCF-Envirothon July 20-26, 2025, at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta, 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, "Roots and Resiliency: Fostering Forest Stewardship in a Canopy of Change."

Nebraska had a top 10 oral presentation score placing No. 8 with 177.33 points out of 200! Overall, the team placed 25th with 514.33 points.

Top places went to the following:

- **First:** Massachusetts (620.67 pts)
- **Second:** Maryland (619.67 pts)
- **Third:** New York (571.67 pts)

The 2025 NCF-Envirothon included 50 teams from the U.S., Canada, China.

The 2026 NCF-Envirothon will be hosted at Mississippi State University in Starkville, Mississippi, July 19-25, 2026.



Above: NARD Public Relations Director Megan Grimes and the Nebraska team at the NCF-Envirothon Awards Ceremony July 25.



Far left: The team takes a lunch break during the NCF-Envirothon Training Day July 21.

Left: The team gives their 20-minute oral presentation to a panel of judges. They scored 8 out of 50 teams on their oral presentation!

## NACD ANNUAL MEETING

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) hosted their annual meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah, in February. NARD and Nemaha NRD Director Dr. Orval Gigstad stepped down as the longtime NACD Northern Plains Region chair and now serves as vice-chair. We thank him for his national service.

NACD's 80th annual meeting will be hosted in San Antonio, Texas, Feb. 14-19, 2026.

Nebraska representatives attended the NACD annual meeting in Salt Lake City in February 2025. From left, Lower Platte North NRD General Manager Eric Gottschalk, Education Coordinator Sydney Abbott, NARD Public Relations Director Megan Grimes, NRCS State Conservationist Rob Lawson and Nemaha NRD Director Dr. Orval Gigstad. Not pictured: Papio NRD Director Tim Fowler, who serves on the NACD Urban and Community Resource Policy Group.





# ACE CAMP: MIDDLE SCHOOL OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE

Adventure Camp about the Environment, better known as ACE Camp, welcomed 15 campers from nine NRDs June 22-25, 2025.

This year, 6th & 7th-grade campers came from all over the state with most receiving scholarships from their local NRD.

The four-day adventure camp provides students an opportunity to dive into different hands-on activities with a natural resources focus. Sessions educate youth on Nebraska's water resources, wildlife, soil, trees, grasslands, technology and more. Students attending gain a better awareness of possible careers in natural resources by learning from professionals working to conserve them every day.

During their stay, campers also took part in fishing, tubing, swimming, water rockets and campfires.

Roxy Hoagland of Doniphan, Nebraska, was a first-time ACE camper this year.

"I really enjoyed this camp because there were kids like me," Hoagland said. "The other students were nature lovers like me and I felt like I could be myself around them and the adults. Being outside with other kids and adults that have the same interests as me and learning more about nature is something extraordinary and I will never forget it. I felt accepted by people and not worried about being seen as weird for loving the outdoors, fish, snakes, turtles, being dirty, and bugs. I was myself!"

ACE Camp started in 2010 and was previously hosted at the Nebraska 4-H Camp near Halsey, but after it was destroyed by the Bovee Fire in 2022, the camp relocated to Kamp Kaleo near Burwell.

Since its inception, 502 middle schoolers (238 female and 264 male) have attended camp. Of these campers, 37% are urban and 63% are rural.

Thank you to the various NRDs and partner agencies that commit time and resources for this annual summer camp!



Lower Platte South NRD Environmental Educator Adam Sutton helps ACE Camper Gavin with a large bluegill.



ACE Camper Kaedyn holds a western hognose snake.



The 2025 ACE Camp included 15 middle-school-aged children participating in a variety of natural resources activities including: water quality, fishing, atlatl, geocaching, forestry, range, wildlife, soils, paleontology, entomology, birding, nature photography, hydrology, career exploration and water rockets.



ACE Camper Roxy holds up a 16" largemouth bass caught during the fishing session.



ACE Campers Leela and Shawnee use their GPS devices during the Geocache session.

Left: Papio NRD Education Program Supervisor Austen Hill and Natural Resources Educator Kaylyn Kelley show off a pair of box turtles for ACE campers. Annually, Papio NRD educators bring native snakes and turtles to showcase during the ACE Camp wildlife session.

# EDUCATION FESTIVALS BRING LAUGHTER & LEARNING

Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts are leaders in hands-on conservation education, with every NRD across the state hosting events to engage students in the science of our natural world. From unique one-day events to large annual festivals, NRDs are providing unforgettable learning experiences that spark curiosity and environmental stewardship.

At the Nebraska Children's Groundwater Festival—hosted by Central Platte NRD—a teacher from Newell

Elementary in Grand Island shared that it was the best field trip she had taken her students on, thanks to the variety of interactive activities that kept them excited and engaged all day.

Some of these annual NRD educational festivals include:

- Central Platte NRD: Nebraska Children's Groundwater Festival
- Little Blue NRD: Water/Earth Jamboree
- Lower Big Blue NRD: Fishing Derby
- Lower Loup NRD: MUDFEST
- Lower Niobrara

- NRD: 8th Grade Conservation Day
- Lower Platte North NRD: Spring Conservation Sensation
- Lower Platte South NRD: Annual Field Trips for High Schools
- Lower Republican & Tri-Basin NRDs: Water Jamboree
- Middle Republican NRD: 4th Grade Tree Program
- Nemaha NRD: Watershed of Wonders Day Camp
- North Platte NRD: Water Expo and WET
- Northeast Nebraska NRDs: Wonderful

- World of Water
  - Papio NRD: World O! Water and Water Works
  - South Platte NRD: Natural Resources Day
  - Upper Loup NRD: 8th Grade Field Day
  - Upper Niobrara White NRD: Conservation Festival
- Thanks to the dedication and creativity of Nebraska's NRDs, thousands of students each year are learning to value and protect the natural resources that sustain our communities.



A child gets up close and personal with a snapping turtle during the Papio NRD's annual World O! Water event Sept. 6, 2025.



Above: Upper Loup NRD's annual 8th grade Field Day invites students into the river to learn.

Right: Lower Platte North NRD Operations and Maintenance Manager Bob Heimann hands out trees to students during the annual Spring Conservation Sensation for 5th & 6th graders.



Students from Shoemaker Elementary in Grand Island participate in the Incredible Journey, a lesson on the water cycle, during the Nebraska Children's Groundwater Festival on May 13, 2025.



Left: Students participate in the Casting Creativity activity during Water Jamboree April 30, 2025. Water Jamboree is an annual event hosted by Lower Republican and Tri-Basin NRDs.

Right Bottom: Students at the South Platte NRD Natural Resources Day learn about rocks at a station.





# PARTICIPATION UP (AGAIN) FOR 2024 RANGE & LAND JUDGING

In September 2024, Upper Republican NRD hosted state Range Judging in Chase County with 60 teams competing. Teams from West Holt took top honors in both the Senior and Junior Divisions. 2024 was another record year for Land Judging with 118 schools and 1,994 students participating in regional competitions. Lower Elkhorn NRD hosted state Land Judging near Norfolk in October 2024 with 44

schools competing. Five teams – Alma, Elmwood-Murdock, North Bend, Falls City, and Norfolk – took honors at state Land Judging and went on to compete at national Land Judging May 1, 2025, near Reno, Oklahoma. The Falls City team did particularly well at National Land judging placing 11th as a team out of 93 teams with Bowdy Jones placing ninth and Dayton Snethen placing 25th

out of 363 individuals. Special thank you 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 for students across Nebraska. In 2025, state Range Judging was hosted by Lower Niobrara NRD Sept. 24, 2025, and state Land Judging by Lower Platte North NRD Oct. 22, 2025.



A student checks the soil profile during State Land Judging near Norfolk on Oct. 16, 2024.



A student measures slope during State Land Judging hosted near Norfolk Oct. 16, 2024.



Alma took first place during the 2024 State Land Judging competition and went on to Nationals.



Lower Elkhorn NRD Grants Coordinator Julie Wragge, left, and Office Assistant Ali Watts use a ScanTron machine to score.



# NRD RECREATION *Exploration*

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 District's Foundation launched the third annual NRD Recreation Exploration. 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 hills 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.

- 2025 NRD Recreation Exploration Winners:
- March (\$100): Tanner Hawkins, York
  - April (\$100): Rhonda Zimmer, Lincoln
  - May (\$100): Rachel Beckmann, Lincoln
  - June (\$100): Barbara Shaefer, Pierce; Zachary Autobee, York
  - July (\$100): Matt Alberts, Norfolk; Kim Langan, Columbus
  - August (\$100): Julia Sueper, Madison; Mike Langan, Columbus
  - September (\$100): Larry Wenzel, Norfolk; Megan Davis, Lincoln
  - Second Runner-Up (\$300): Tamra Kuder, Clarkson
  - Runner Up (\$500): Tanner Hawkins, York
  - Grand Prize (\$1,500): Rachel Dyrda, Omaha

The NRD Recreation Exploration Program is supported by the NARD Foundation and Scheels, a leading sporting goods retailer. Visit [www.nrdnet.org/recreation](http://www.nrdnet.org/recreation).



Anna Allen of Stanton, Nebraska, takes the kids on Lower Elkhorn NRD's section of the Cowboy Trail for National Ride a Bike Day!



David Bell of Plattsmouth caught the new state record redear sunfish at Nemaha NRD's Duck Creek Recreation Area on July 6. The fish was 12.5 inches and weighed 2 pounds.



Water covers the dock at Lewis & Clark NRD's Buckskin Hills WMA southwest of New Castle, Nebraska, after a heavy rain in Dixon County.

Between July 9-11, 2025, northeast Nebraska endured another round of severe weather triggering a tornado watch, a flood advisory, and multiple severe thunderstorm warnings. Powerful storms dumped nearly four inches of rain across Dixon County making conditions ripe for flash flooding, erosion, and infrastructure strain.

Thanks to decades of thoughtful investment and infrastructure planning, Lewis & Clark NRD's Aowa Creek Watershed flood control structures did exactly what they were designed to do—protect lives, property, and the future.



# A GLIMPSE OF ACTIVITIES IN THE *natural resources districts*



Lower Big Blue NRD current and former board members Doug and Harold Stokebrand look on as UNL personnel conduct a vadose zone study on their farm near DeWitt.



The 2025 Lower Loup NRD field season included technicians working with UNL Hydro-geologist Susan Lackey on test holes drilled north of Fullerton. The holes were drilled at the base of the aquifer as research in response to well interference issues in an area with little saturated thickness.



©Three Pillars Media, courtesy of JEO Consulting Group

Above: The Papio NRD named four of its upcoming flood reduction reservoirs and recreation areas that will be located in the Omaha metro: Forest City, Sergeant Mad Bear (Kuruks Tičaris), Marlin Petermann, and Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte recreation areas.

Left: Ken and Cheryl Seim install McCrometer CONNECT a remote weather sensor in the Middle Republican NRD south of Stockville, Nebraska.



Upper Big Blue NRD Water Resources Technician Aiden Bishop assists with collecting soil samples for a vadose zone study in January 2025.



The plunge pool spillway outlet is placed for site 27 of the Wahoo Creek Watershed dams. This is one of three dams currently under construction in the Lower Platte North NRD with completion slated for fall of 2026.



Upper Loup NRD Resources Technician Matt Schatz takes weekly river samples for the Ambient Stream Monitoring Program.



Lower Platte South NRD staff install telemetry units on wells, which will automatically collect and transmit data from the remote source.



Tri-Basin NRD Land Resources Manager Dalton Refior ignites a prescribed burn April 6, 2025, west of Smithfield in Gasper County. The Platte Republican Diversion (PRD) pasture and surrounding properties totaling almost 1,400 acres of grassland were treated.



Nemaha NRD Field Technician Tomas Chalé Aké and seasonal staff remove debris from a riser on one of the district's watershed dams during routine maintenance.



Little Blue NRD Operations Supervisor Tim Hecke works to clear a beaver dam from Liberty Cove Recreation Area near Lawrence, NE.



PROGRAMS THAT  
MAKE A *difference*

2025  
NRD PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

• • • UPPER NIOBRARA WHITE • • • • •

Due to increasing nitrate in groundwater, the UNWNRD Board designated the entire district as a Phase I water quality area. Additional monitoring will be conducted to establish the extent of the contamination and specific education efforts will be undertaken. In partnership with NDWEE, 15 telemetry units were added to monitor and transmit daily groundwater levels. From 2007 to 2024 average water use districtwide was 10.5 inches. Upper Niobrara groundwater model updates continue and expect to be completed by July 2026.

• • • NORTH PLATTE • • • • •

NPNRD continues focus on nitrates in groundwater. The District began the process of registering surface water acres and prepares for the launch of annual water and soil sampling requirements for all irrigators beginning in water year 2026. Staff are working closely with producers to ensure a smooth transition and support long-term water quality improvements across the District.

• • • SOUTH PLATTE • • • • •

SPNRD and partners showcased a demonstration plot of Sentinel Ag’s N-Time, an image-based nitrogen management tool, on Aug. 7. The District planted 60 bur oak seedlings for the Bur Oak Gall Trial, a project headed by the Nebraska Forest Service. The goal is to identify a gall-resistant seed source for future distribution across the Great Plains.

• • • UPPER REPUBLICAN • • • • •

URNRD updated its real-time groundwater measurement wells to provide more accurate readings. Improvements were also made to the Rock Creek Augmentation Project’s monitoring, control, and metering systems. URNRD is now three-quarters of the way done automating all flow meters in the district so irrigators can view real-time water usage.

• • • • • MIDDLE NIOBRARA • • • • •

MNNRD continues work on the Long Pine Creek & Cherry County WFPOs despite funding challenges. The District distributed nearly 85,000 conservation trees, planted 46 windbreaks, and laid 82,000 ft of weed barrier. There is a Legislative interim study on assuming local administration of the Niobrara National Scenic River. MNNRD is open for new groundwater acres and expanded uses. Forestry projects using District equipment for brush management and wildfire recovery help feed the wood boiler heating the office.

• • • LOWER LOUP • • • • •

LLNRD measured spring static water levels in 454 wells and issued 3,562 chemigation permits. Tree sales were up by 10,000 (61,168). Davis Creek Rec Area road paving phases 1-2 were completed in May 2025. Píbel Lake Recreational Trails Program Grant was approved with 2026 construction anticipated. Vadose Zone partnership continues with USGS/ UNL – Water Sustainability Fund Grant funds would allow expansion in district and set up one site each with Central Platte & Upper Big Blue NRDs.

• • • • • TRI-BASIN • • • • •

TBNRD farmers responded enthusiastically to the new statewide Nitrogen Reduction Incentive Program (NRIP). The district approved 110 applications, enrolling 16,000+ acres in the program. TBNRD has operated a Groundwater Quality Management Area since 1989 with phased controls in place districtwide since 1992. Producers have adjusted their application of nitrogen fertilizer, which has led to stabilization and even declines in groundwater nitrate levels.

• • • LOWER REPUBLICAN • • • • •

LRNRD was awarded nearly \$10 million in EPA grant funding to expand capacity for the Rural Water Project to provide drinking water for the Village of Riverton and other rural customers. LRNRD also secured grant funding from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and NE Department of Water, Energy and Environment for telemetry-enabled irrigation flow meters.

• • • LOWER NIOBRARA • • • • •

LNNRD added a water technician on staff to increase capacity. The District implemented a Nitrate Management Program and Nitrate Reduction Cost-Share Program to incentivize landowners to adopt BMPs. LNNRD hosted Tailgate Talks to provide landowners with hands-on learning experiences and strengthened local relationships. LNNRD also played a key role in the inaugural Northeast Nebraska Ag Conference.

• • • • • UPPER ELKHORN • • • • •

UENRD data analysis expanded with the incorporation of additional static water level data collected by staff districtwide. The District will install a new Mesonet weather station and monitoring wells to fill a gap in data collection. UENRD replaced aging equipment to improve its tree planting program and the installation of conservation weed mulch.

• • • • • CENTRAL PLATTE • • • • •

CPNRD received three Bureau of Reclamation WaterSmart grants to support its partnering surface water irrigation districts. Funding will improve irrigation efficiency by upgrading checks and gates, automated turnout gates and installing 100 telemetry-enabled flow meters. The improvements are expected to save over 6,300 acre-feet of water annually, which will remain in the Platte River for recreation, water supply, and other beneficial uses.

• • • LITTLE BLUE • • • • •

Due to groundwater level declines, LBNRD set allocations and a stay in two separate areas. LBNRD is 90% complete with the planning phase of the 32-Mile Creek WFPO Project. The LBNRD has also secured funding for replacing broken or outdated irrigation meters. A public hearing was hosted in Jefferson County Aug.14, for the public water project, which seeks to add two municipal water wells.

• • • • • LEWIS & CLARK • • • • •

LCNRD is working with farmers, students, conservation partners, and ag professionals to positively impact water quality/quantity. LCNRD continues to promote BMPs across the district with a focus on the Bow Creek Watershed and Bazile Groundwater Management Area. Cedar-Knox Rural Water Project has finished Phase I, which includes water distribution line, tank upgrades, and attaching to the Yankton, SD, municipal water system.

• • • • • LOWER ELKHORN • • • • •

LENRD now has a Source Water Protection Specialist focused on BMPs in priority Wellhead Protection Areas in the LENRD and LCNRD. Maple Creek, Battle Creek, and North Fork Elkhorn River WFPOs are at or near completion. LENRD began collecting samples for a groundwater monitoring project funded through NET. The district selected 561 wells for voluntary participation, which are tested for nitrate/nitrite, glyphosates, herbicides, and others. Sampling will be completed by Nov. 2026.

• • • • • LOWER PLATTE NORTH • • • • •

LPNNRD funded several 4-H and FFA projects, empowering youth to make an impact in their communities. The District made significant infrastructure progress completing the final bend of the Shell Creek Watershed benching project and construction began on the first three of nine Wahoo Creek Watershed dams. The District moved into their new office at Lake Wanahoo NRD Recreation Area.

• • • • • UPPER BIG BLUE • • • • •

UBBNRD and Nebraska Forest Service partnered to expand the district’s tree program. The NRD has approved funding for parks in Hamilton & Seward Counties, and an agriscience education center in York County. A 5-year vadose study will soon provide insights into the nitrogen load in the soil profile. Work continues with Giltner on drainage improvements. The district received a NEMA grant to update the Hazard Mitigation Plan, which was approved in May 2025.

• • • • • LOWER BIG BLUE • • • • •

LBBNRD was authorized for federal funding on the Little Indian WFPO. The plan calls for construction of 24 dams - 21 would utilize existing footprints. The funding is vital as current structures have exceeded their design life. The Indian Creek Watershed spans 48,425 acres in Gage County and includes Beatrice. The dams would control a combined drainage area of over 25 square miles.

• • • • • PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER • • • • •

The Papio NRD has three flood mitigation reservoirs currently underway. Forest City Recreation Area and Sergeant Mad Bear (Kuruks Tičaris) Recreation Area, both located in Gretna, are expected to open this fall. Marlin Petermann Recreation Area, located in northwest Omaha, is anticipated to open in 2027.

• • • • • LOWER PLATTE SOUTH • • • • •

LPSNRD hosted four public open houses for the Groundwater Management Plan. Feedback will guide development of the updated plan. The district’s Hazard Mitigation Plan has also been revised. Ongoing management of MoPac and Homestead Trails includes bridge repairs and general maintenance to ensure safety and accessibility. LPSNRD recently completed the Piening Water Quality Basin project aimed at managing stormwater runoff and improving water quality. Environmental education programs continue to engage both youth and adults in fun, interactive learning experiences.

• • • • • NEMAHA • • • • •

NNRD slip-lined 12 watershed structures to extend the life of aging outlet pipes. Staff continue ongoing maintenance of dams – spraying weeds, removing trees, and clearing debris. The Elevated Nitrate Study entered its final phase, with sampling completed and results expected in spring 2026. NNRD added two new observation wells. Duck Creek Rec Area improvements include an outlook shelter, sidewalk, and beach expansion.





Papio NRD hosted several e-recycling events. Residents brought more than 29,000 lbs. of e-waste to the Blair, Tekamah, Walthill, and Dakota City recycling collections to responsibly dispose of computers, TVs, radios, etc.



Upper Niobrara White NRD has a joint project with the Nebraska Forest Service to replant Poderosa Pine after wildfires. The hand plant crew of 15 from Hayden, Idaho, plant up to 20,000 trees per day!



Central Platte NRD Information/Education Specialist Marcia Lee, left, and Lower Platte South NRD Communications Coordinator Jodi Delozier prepare to greet students at the Nebraska State Fair Largest Classroom Days.



An attendee adds ideas to a brainstorm board at the Ag Industry Symposium held in York March 2025.



Lewis & Clark NRD installs new water distribution lines during Phase I of the Cedar-Knox Rural Water Project.



Students view the Upper Republican NRD's water table and learn how pollution can lead to contamination of water.



Little Blue NRD Field Office NRCS Secretaries Katie Lepant and Rita Peshek hand out trees during Husker Harvest Days.



Lower Big Blue NRD Water Resources Specialist Ryan Thomas completes installation of a new water meter and cellular meter interface unit on the District's Beatrice West Rural Water Project.



Above: North Platte NRD Public Communications Specialist and Educator discusses "Tools and Technology Through Time" as she shows fourth-grade students various irrigation techniques.

Right: Lower Niobrara NRD hosts a Tailgate Talk for producers to learn more about Pivot Bio on-farm research.

Left: Middle Niobrara and Lower Niobrara NRD staff work together to place signage for the Nebraska Memorial Forest honoring veterans in Brown, Keya Paha and Rock counties ahead of Memorial Day.



Children roast marshmallows at a Lower Elkhorn NRD Stars, Strolls and Smores event.



Little Blue NRD hosts a tire recycling event in Jefferson County, which helps with illegal dumping and leaching.



The access road through Lower Loup NRD's Davis Creek Recreation Area was repaved during a project completed in May 2025.



The inaugural Northeast Nebraska Ag Conference was hosted in December 2024 by four NRDs and the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources.



# A DECADE IN THE MAKING: TECH TRAINING GOES VIRTUAL

*How Persistence Brought the Online Groundwater Technician Training Program to Life*



**Jennifer Swanson**  
Director of Water Quality Initiatives

For nearly a decade, the idea of developing an online training program for groundwater technicians hovered just out of reach—discussed in meetings and occasionally budgeted for, but never fully approved or implemented. Year after year, the need remained clear: coordinating the hiring of seasonal technicians with strict training and testing deadlines was a persistent challenge, and remote training solutions were becoming increasingly essential to provide the flexibility needed to train and hire NRD groundwater technicians year-round. Still, the project sat in limbo—until persistence turned

possibility into progress.

### The Power of Persistence

What made the difference wasn't a sudden influx of resources or a dramatic change in direction. It was the quiet, steady drumbeat of persistence. Dedicated advocates refused to let the idea die. We continued to meet, refine the

*"A river cuts through rock, not because of its power, but because of its persistence."*

—James N. Watkins

program outline, build partnerships, and educate stakeholders about the long-term value of online training.

We didn't wait for permission—we prepared for it. So when the window of opportunity finally opened—when leadership changed and funding aligned – we were ready. Implementation began almost immediately because the groundwork had been laid, patiently and deliberately, over the course of many years.

### Launching the Program

The online groundwater technician training program officially launched in May 2025. Designed with flexibility in mind, the curriculum includes interactive modules, video demonstrations, interactive diagrams and matching activities. It provides foundational knowledge in chemigation,

groundwater sampling, measuring static water levels, flow meters, and licensure —everything needed to prepare a new generation of water professionals for field success.

Since launching eight individuals have completed the online training and three of those individuals have

taken and passed the NRD Groundwater Technician Examination.

### A Lesson for Future Projects

The story of this program is more than just a win for groundwater education—it's a testament to the power of sustained effort. In an age where results are expected quickly, this project serves as a reminder that some of the most meaningful work takes time. It also takes people who are willing to stay committed through uncertainty, who recognize that "not now" doesn't mean "never."

Persistence isn't flashy. It often goes unnoticed in its early stages. But in this case, it was the difference between an unrealized vision and a lasting contribution to the NRDs.



NRD groundwater technicians discuss best practices when doing chemigation inspections at the 2025 Water Programs in March.

# PIONEERS IN WATER MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION

*Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts Lead the Way*



**Dustin Wilcox**  
NARD Programs and Partnerships Director

Water has always been at the heart of Nebraska's story. From the diaries of early settlers to the trails pioneers traced along rivers and the homesteads they built on their banks, access to reliable water shaped our state's identity from the very beginning.

A stark reminder of that struggle is etched into history: a carving on a deserted 19th-century shack in Nebraska reads, "30 miles to water,

20 miles to wood, 10 miles to hell, and I've gone there for good." This haunting inscription reflects the perilous value of water in a time and place where survival depended on it.

Building on that legacy, successive generations of Nebraskans pioneered innovations to harness and protect our water resources. Early leaders constructed canals, dams, and irrigation systems to tame rivers and sustain supplies.

Those innovative pioneers were followed by a generation of visionaries who advanced well-drilling techniques to tap the state's vast groundwater reserves. Later pioneers innovated new water delivery and irrigation methods, boosting efficiency

and protecting the reliability of water supplies.

Through every generation, Nebraskans recognized water's irreplaceable worth—not only for their own time, but for those to come. While other states struggled with dwindling supplies, economic decline, and crisis-driven responses, Nebraska leaders chose a different path. They blazed a trail in natural resources management with the creation of our Natural Resources Districts (NRDs).

Today, that NRD system continues to serve as a leading model for successful water management. While other states swing a pendulum between inaction and over-regulation, Nebraska's NRDs strike a thoughtful

balance—protecting natural resources while also supporting economic growth. This water-management approach sustains communities, safeguards existing users, and encourages future development.

The strength of the NRD model lies in its grassroots foundation. Locally elected directors, landowners, and citizens carry forward the spirit of Nebraska's pioneers—taking responsibility for protecting our resources with wisdom and foresight. Thanks to their leadership, Nebraska continues to turn today's challenges into opportunities, ensuring that our natural resources and the communities that rely on them thrive for generations to come.



In 1974, center pivot irrigation is used in Holt County, Nebraska.



# Agency Merger Prioritizes Water

## NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT & ENERGY NOW DWEE

On May 7, 2025, Governor Jim Pillen ceremonially signed LB 317 into law, officially merging the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy (DEE) into a new entity: the Nebraska Department of Water, Energy and Environment (DWEE). The consolidation, introduced on the Governor's behalf by Sen. Tom Brandt, aims to streamline operations, enhance collaboration, and ensure the sustainable management of Nebraska's critical natural resources. "Water is our life blood, and our pot of gold is the Ogallala

Aquifer," said Gov. Pillen. "This merger is timely and essential for future generations, especially as our bioeconomy continues to grow." Sen. Brandt noted that the new department will strengthen outreach and support to Nebraska's agricultural community while cutting bureaucratic red tape and simplifying permitting processes. Jesse Bradley, who was serving as interim director for both DNR and DEE, will lead the new agency. A geologist by training, Bradley has worked in Nebraska water planning for nearly two decades. Joining him in



Gov. Jim Pillen signs LB 317 creating the Nebraska Department of Water, Energy and Environment (DWEE). From left, Chief Water Officer Matt Manning, DWEE Director Jesse Bradley, Gov. Pillen, Sen. Tom Brandy, and Sen. Barry DeKay.

leadership is Matt Manning, the newly appointed chief water officer. Manning, an engineer with experience in both public and private sectors, currently leads development on the Perkins County Canal project. The agency officially

began operations on July 1, 2025, in tandem with the new fiscal year. Top priorities include the continued development of the Perkins County Canal project and convening the new Water Quantity and Quality Task Force in June.

## WATER QUANTITY AND QUALITY TASK FORCE BEGINS GOAL SETTING

With the creation of the Nebraska Department of Water, Energy and Environment, a new Water Quantity and Quality Task Force was formed. Over the next 12 to 15 months, the Task Force will meet to identify short-, mid-, and long-term goals, along with corresponding action items to be pursued. The Task Force will focus on actionable solutions and consider avenues that encourage greater adoption of technologies and solutions by Nebraskans. Members of the Task Force, appointed by the Governor, represent a cross-section of interests and industries. The Task Force convened their first meeting in Kearney June 2, 2025.



The Water Quantity and Quality Task Force meets in Kearney June 2, 2025. The Task Force has 20 members with five members representing Natural Resources Districts.

## PERKINS COUNTY CANAL

### Legal Fight Begins for Water

During the last three 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 Irrigation to promote securing Nebraska's water under the 1923 Compact. These efforts paid off as funding remains secure, despite repeated efforts to raid the funds for other purposes. This year, legislation was also passed to clarify previous legislation that allows the Department of Natural Resources to use design build. On July 16, 2025, Nebraska filed a lawsuit against Colorado seeking to have the U.S. Supreme Court assert water rights to the South Platte River that crosses state lines. "We're going to fight like heck," said Gov. Pillen. "We're going to get every drop of water. We've been losing to Colorado on this issue for too long. It's time we win." Nebraska Attorney General Mike Hilgers noted, "The Court's intervention is needed to stop Colorado's violations of the Compact and to resolve what has turned into an irreconcilable conflict over the design and operation of the Perkins County Canal."



From left, State Senators Dan McKeon, Paul Strommen and Barry DeKay visit the South Platte River April 7, 2025.

## THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE!

- ### 20 YEARS
- Rollie "Skip" Amsberry, Lower Loup (director)
  - Dave Deines, North Platte (director)
  - James Eschliman, Lower Loup (director)
  - Robert Hilger, Lower Platte North (director)
  - Pete Lapaseotes, North Platte (director)
  - Michael Lorenz, Lower Loup
  - Dwayne Margritz, Central Platte (director)
  - Craig Matulka, Lower Platte South
  - Mike Murphy, Lower Elkhorn
  - Marvion Reichert, Central Platte (director)
  - Jay Richeson, Central Platte (director)
  - Dean Rohr, Lower Big Blue (director)
  - Rodney Skleba, Lower Big Blue (director)
  - Shane Storer, Twin Platte (director)
  - Mary Zakrzewski, Upper Elkhorn
- ### 25 YEARS
- Joe Anderjaska, Middle Republican (director)
  - Eric Gottschalk, Lower Platte North
  - Julie McBride, Lower Loup
  - Joe Wahlgren, Twin Platte (director)
  - Shelly Lippincott, Central Platte
  - Jim Thompson, Papio-Missouri (director)
- ### 30 YEARS
- Martin Graff, Middle Niobrara (director)
  - Gary Kruse, Lower Loup (director)
  - Robert Lorenz, Lower Big Blue (director)
  - Dave Saalfeld, Lower Platte North (director)
  - Carey Tejkl, Lower Elkhorn
  - John Thorburn, Tri-Basin
- ### 35 YEARS
- John Albert, Lower Platte South
  - Bob Andersen, Lower Platte South (director)
  - Jill Breunig, Lower Platte North
  - Peggy Griffin, Lower Loup
  - Connie Hansen, Lower Platte South
  - Steve Sandberg, Upper Niobrara White (director)
  - Beth Walsh, Upper Elkhorn
- ### 40 YEARS
- Larry Reynolds, Tri-Basin (director)
- ### IN MEMORIAM
- John Conley, Papio-Missouri (director)
  - Randy Furstenu, Upper Elkhorn (director)
  - Wayne Heathers, Middle Republican
  - Leroy Hoesing, Lewis & Clark (director)
  - Bob Petersen, Twin Platte (director)
  - Dennis Piper, Papio-Missouri
  - Ladd Reeves, Central Platte
  - Norman Stokebrand, Lower Big Blue (director)



# THE 1ST SESSION OF 109<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATURE

The first session of the 109th Legislature adjourned sine die June 2, 2025, on Day 89 of the 90-day session.

The second session of the 109th Legislature is scheduled to begin Jan. 7, 2026. Regular sessions generally last 90 legislative days in odd-numbered years and 60 legislative days in even-numbered years.

During the session 715 bills were introduced and 18 constitutional

amendments were proposed. A total of 209 bills were passed, with 113 additional bills incorporated to those measures as amendments.

One constitutional amendment was passed and will move to the general election for voters to determine whether legislators will be allowed to serve a third consecutive term.

This year, NARD tracked 48 legislative bills and eight

constitutional amendments. The following are a few key bills of interest to Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts.

**LB 36 - Adopt the Safe Battery Collection and Recycling Act, provide for the Home Weatherization Clearinghouse and for mitigation of incidental taking of threatened or endangered species habitat, change provisions relating to the Water Recreation**

**Enhancement Act, groundwater allocation, and permits and stamps issued by the Game and Parks Commission, and create the Research Excellence Cash Fund (Brandt)**

The bill includes provisions of six different bills that were before the Natural Resources Committee. The Legislature gave final approval to LB 36 by a 43-6-0 vote on May 14. Gov. Pillen signed the bill into law

# FOCUSED HEAVILY ON BALANCING BUDGET

May 20, 2025.

The original language of LB 36 was eliminated and the following bills were added with amendments:

- LB 309 as amended adopts the Safe Battery Collection and Recycling Act.
- LB 344 amends the Nebraska Groundwater Management and Protection Act pertaining to ground water allocations for municipalities and

municipal-served and self-served commercial or industrial users in the fully appropriated and over-appropriated areas of the state.

- LB 459 as amended establishes the Home Weatherization Clearinghouse.
- LB 480 provides the Game & Parks Commission the authority to administer and carry out additional projects under the

Water Recreation Enhancement Act.

- LB 562 allows an increase to the caps for fees charged by the Game & Parks Commission, to raise the number of certain permits, and to clean up and remove redundant language.
- LB 590 authorizes the Nebraska Department of Transportation to establish and operate a

mitigation bank or in-lieu-fee program for construction projects in areas where an endangered species habitat may exist.

- LB 595e creates the Research Excellence Cash Fund, which could be a potential funding source for Mesonet.

Background: The Lower Platte South NRD hosts a tour for the Legislature's Natural Resources Committee. Senators learn about the Antelope Valley Project in downtown Lincoln. The Lower Platte South NRD, partnering with the City of Lincoln and the University of Nebraska, completed the project in 2012. The \$246 million, 600-square-block project along Antelope Creek through central Lincoln had three major components: community revitalization, transportation, and flood control. Besides creating a beautiful open waterway through the heart of Lincoln, the project removed several hundred acres and 800 homes and businesses from the floodplain.



# FIRST SESSION OF 109TH LEGISLATURE CONTINUED

**LB 59 - Provide for the disbursement of funds of a natural resources district by electronic payment systems (Sanders)**

The Legislature gave final round approval to LB 59 47-0-2 vote on March 6. Governor Pillen signed LB 59 on March 11, 2025.

The bill adds electronic funds transfer and automated clearinghouse transfer to the list of authorized payment methods by NRDs. The Natural Resources Districts would join most of Nebraska's citizens and businesses who regularly avail themselves to the benefits of electronic payment systems.

**LB 167e - Change the sunset date for the Nebraska Litter Reduction and Recycling Act (Clouse)**

The Legislature gave final approval to LB 167e on a 47-1-1 on Feb. 21. The bill contained the emergency clause and was signed by Gov. Pillen on Feb. 25, 2025.

The bill changed the sunset date for the Nebraska Litter Reduction and Recycling Act from

September 30, 2025, to September 30, 2030.

**LB 317e - Merge the Department of Natural Resources with the Department of Environment and Energy and change the name to the Department of Water, Energy, and Environment and provide, change, and eliminate powers and duties (Brandt at the request of the Governor)**

The Legislature gave final approval to the bill on a 34-12-3 vote on May 1. The bill included an emergency clause and was signed into law by Gov. Pillen on May 6, 2025.

The merged Department shall exercise the powers and perform such duties that were assigned to both DEE and DNR prior to the merger. As introduced, the Director of Environment and Energy shall be renamed the Director of Water, Energy, and Environment and shall be appointed by the Governor as the agency director. The Director of Natural Resources shall be renamed the Chief



Senators view the Western Irrigation District headgate during a tour of the Perkins County Canal Project April 4, 2025. From left, State Senators Tom Brandt, Mike Moser, Rick Holdcroft and Margo Juarez.

Water Officer and would retain the authorities previously prescribed for the administration of the duties of DNR. The Chief Water Officer shall have at least five years' experience in a position of responsibility in irrigation work, shall be appointed by the Governor, and shall report directly to the Director of Water, Energy, and Environment.

In addition to the merger, the bill also proposes to:

- Repeal outdated and duplicative sections, including provisions relating to the Conservation Corporation Act, the Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Act, and the Nebraska Soil Survey Fund.

- Eliminate the requirement for NRDs to prepare and adopt annual Long Range Implementation Plans.
- Transfers duties related to locating State Game Refuge Boundaries from DNR to the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission.

**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 legislature passed LB 260, LB 261 and LB 264, which appropriate funds for the expenses of the Nebraska State Government for the biennium ending June 30, 2027.

The process to get a balanced budget took several turns. Senators started out with a projected deficit of \$432 million in November, revised to \$124 million at the beginning of the session and jumped back to \$396 million due to the Nebraska Economic Forecasting Board revised forecast. After budget bill passages this session, the forecast for the next two-year budget cycle still shows a \$133 million projected deficit. If tax receipts do not pick up, more cuts will need to be made in the next budget cycle.

For natural resources programs, the budget highlights include:

**Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Fund**

Eliminate the General Fund funding that had previously been at \$1,806,112 and appropriate a \$2 million cash transfer from the Nebraska Environmental Trust to the Soil and Water Fund in FY25-26 and FY26-27.

**Water Resources Cash Fund**

Transfer \$3 million from the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) to the Water Resources Cash Fund for FY25-26 and nothing for FY26-

27. Senators also eliminated language requiring the Water Resources Cash Fund to reimburse NET any interest earned each month. It includes language that the funds need to be used in accordance with the goals of NET, which includes conserving, enhancing and restoring groundwater and surface water.

**Water Well Decommissioning**

Appropriate \$70,000 in cash funds for both FY25-26 and FY26-27.

**Natural Resources Water Quality Fund**

Appropriate \$1,187,500 in cash funds for both FY25-26 and FY26-27.

**Water Sustainability Fund**

Appropriate \$10,865,033 for both FY25-26 and FY26-27. Transfer \$8 million from the Nebraska Environmental Trust to the Water Sustainability Fund in FY25-26.

**Water Projects**

Appropriate \$65.3 million for FY25-26 and \$62.8 million for FY26-27. Includes \$67.8 million in cash funds from the Perkins County Canal Project Fund for both FY25-26 and FY26-27, and \$4.4 million in cash funds from the Jobs and Economic Development Initiative

(JEDI) Fund for FY25-26.

**Department of Natural Resources Operations**

Appropriate \$22,489,487 in FY25-26 and \$22,646,492 in FY26-27. Unexpended balances existing on June 30, 2025, for subprograms 19, 20, 21, and 24 would be re-appropriated. This includes the Water Resources Cash Fund.

**Nebraska Environmental Trust**

Appropriate \$26,602,651 for FY25-26 and \$26,622,563 for FY26-27. An \$8 million transfer to the Water Sustainability Fund in FY25-26. A \$2 million transfer to the Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Fund in both FY25-26 and FY26-27.

**Department of Environment and Energy**

Appropriate \$94,208,055 for FY25-26 and \$94,884,639 for FY26-27 for Administration, Water Quality, Land Quality and Air Quality programs.

**Drinking Water Facilities Loan Fund (NDEE)**

Appropriate \$12,990,000 in FY25-26 and \$12,990,000 in FY26-27.

**Nebraska Game & Parks Commission Wildlife Conservation**

Appropriate \$46,477,873 for FY25-

26 and \$46,548,193 for FY26-27.

**Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Habitat Development**

Appropriate \$12,980,821 for FY25-26 and \$13,085,071 for FY26-27.

**Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Planning and Trails Coordination**

Appropriate \$3,065,289 for FY25-26 and \$2,460,735 for FY26-27. Provide \$544,000 in cash funds in FY25-26 and \$250,000 in FY26-27 for emergency repair and maintenance on the Cowboy Trail facilities. Reappropriate up to \$5.4 million from the MoPac Trail.

**Nebraska Game & Parks Commission Niobrara Council**

Appropriate \$178,500 for both FY25-26 and FY26-27. Part of the appropriation is \$125,000 in estimated federal funds.

**University of Nebraska Robert B. Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute**

Appropriate \$500,000 in General Funds for both FY25-26 and FY26-27. Funds shall be used to support water and agricultural research and existing collaborative initiatives to implement best practices in water conservation.



# FIRST SESSION OF 109TH LEGISLATURE CONTINUED

## University of Nebraska State Nebraska Forest Service

Appropriate \$2,804,862 in General Funds for both FY25-26 and FY26-27.

## Water Recreation Enhancement Fund

Transfer \$32.7 million from the Water Recreation Enhancement Fund to the General Fund. Use of funds is limited to water and recreational projects pursuant to the Water Recreation Enhancement Act or for campground expansion projects, road repair projects, and general infrastructure and maintenance projects, with two-thirds used for projects at the Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area and one-third used for projects at the Lake McConaughy State Recreation Area.

## Jobs and Economic Development Initiative (JEDI) Fund

Transfer \$4.4 million from the Jobs and Economic Development Initiative (JEDI) Fund to the General Fund in FY25-26.

## Perkins County Canal Fund

Modify the Perkins County Canal Fund to direct interest,

after July 1, 2025, to the General Fund. Previously, interest was credited back to the fund prior to a change in 2023 crediting it to the Inland Port Authority Fund. The interest is budgeted to result in \$18,550,800 reallocation to the General Fund in each FY25-26 and FY26-27.

## Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Transfer \$2.5 million from the State Recreation Road Fund to the State Park Cash Revolving Fund before June 30, 2025. The Select File amendment requires the State Treasurer to transfer \$5 million from the Economic Recovery Contingency Fund to the State Park Cash Revolving Fund

in FY25-26. A similar transfer is made in FY26-27.

## Halsey 4-H Camp

The State Treasurer shall transfer the remaining balance of the Youth Outdoor Education Innovation Fund to the General Fund.

## Trails

Transfer \$3.35 million from the Trail Development and Maintenance Fund to the General Fund.

## Surface Water Irrigation Infrastructure Fund

Transfer \$2.5 million from the fund to the General Fund for both FY25-26 and FY26-27. Transfer the interest from the fund to the General Fund from July 1, 2025, through June 30, 2027. In 2022, the Legislature

approved \$50 million to the fund to provide upgrades to surface water irrigation systems. The program is operated through NeDNR contracts with various irrigation districts.

## Outdoor Recreation Fund

Transfer \$500,000 from the Nebraska Outdoor Recreation Development Cash Fund to the General Fund in FY25-26 and a similar amount in FY26-27. This is a fund for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

## Carry-Over Bills

As this was the first session, there will be several bills and constitutional amendments that carry over to the second session in 2026.

# 2025 LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTIONS OF INTEREST TO NRDS

## LR 123: Interim study to examine the collection, use, and protection of agricultural data in Nebraska (Jacobson)

The interim study shall include, but not be limited to, the following: The types of agricultural data being collected and utilized by corporations and other entities; the existing legal and contractual frameworks governing the ownership, use, and transfer of agricultural data; the potential for unfair trade practices and consumer protection issues arising from the unauthorized use or sale of farmers' and ranchers' data; best practices for data protection and security in the agricultural sector; the impact of data sharing and aggregation on market transparency and competition; and methods of protecting the data from third-party sales and unauthorized usage.

The Banking, Commerce and Insurance Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.

## LR 158: Interim study to examine the feasibility of the State of Nebraska assuming the administration of the 76-mile stretch of the Niobrara River that has been designated as a national scenic river (Storer, Brandt)

Since its designation in 1991, the Niobrara National Scenic River has been administered by the National Park Service. Unlike many national park sites, the National Park Service owns very little of the land along the Niobrara. Management of the river, including natural features and recreation, is primarily through partnerships with and facilitation of landowner stewardship efforts.

The Natural Resources Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.

## LR 163: Interim study to examine the impact of lead and other environmental pollutants on the health and well-being of Nebraska communities (McKinney)

The Urban Affairs Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a



The Papio-Missouri River and Lower Platte South NRDs hosted an airboat tour of the lower Platte River for state senators in June 2025. State Senators Rob Clements, Tom Brandt, Bob Hallstrom, Jane Raybould, and Jason Prokop were all in attendance.

report of the findings.

## LR 168: Interim study of the purposes, uses, and utility of the Noxious Weed and Invasive Plant Species Assistance Fund and associated grants award pursuant to the Noxious Weed Control Act (Ibach & 11 Co-sponsors)

The Agriculture Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.

## LR 192: Interim study to investigate public notice requirements in Nebraska, including those mandated under the Open Meetings Act and the Administrative Procedure Act (Sanders)

The Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.

## LR 198: Interim study to examine the process of creating the Technology Committee of the Legislature as a new standing committee and combining the Agriculture Committee of the Legislature and the Natural Resources Committee of the Legislature (Kauth)

The Natural Resources Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.



Governor Jim Pillen addresses attendees at the Senators Reception during the NRD Legislative Conference in January 2025. The annual Senators Reception allows NRDs to socialize with their senators outside the Capitol.



# 2025 LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTIONS OF INTEREST TO NRDS

**LR 225: Interim study to examine the need for and implementation of a Green Amendment and the implications of adopting LR22CA, 2025 (Dungan)**

During the session, Senator Dungan introduced the “Green Amendment” to provide the right to a clean and healthy natural environment and that the state and political subdivisions serve as trustee of the natural resources of Nebraska.

The Natural Resources Committee is charged with conducting the study

and making a report of the findings.

**LR 235: Interim study to examine the approval process, personnel involved, and costs associated with controlled burn permits (Wordekemper & seven Co-sponsors)**

The Natural Resources Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.

**LR 255: Interim study to examine the fiscal, constitutional, and administrative implications of adopting LR12CA,**

**2025, which proposes reforms to Nebraska’s property tax system (Andersen and five Co-sponsors)**

The Revenue Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.



Governor’s Summit session, “Water Quality and Quantity Through Technology That Saves Producers Money,” includes from left, NDWEE Director Jesse Bradley, Middle Republican NRD Director Joe Anderjaska, and Lewis & Clark NRD Director Jeff Steffen. Not pictured Middle Republican NRD Director Tracy Zink.

**LR 257: Interim study to examine foreign and domestic threats to Nebraska agriculture (Bostar)**

The Agriculture Committee is charged with conducting the study and making a report of the findings.

# PRODUCER CONNECT GOES LIVE

Producer Connect begins statewide roll out this fall. Producer Connect, a web and mobile application suite, allows producers to access their crop reporting data and includes a fertilizer recommendation based on yield goals. This collaborative effort aims to empower producers to optimize inputs, which will enhance agricultural profitability, water quality and irrigation efficiency.

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 additional funding to help develop and maintain Producer Connect for years to come. Initial investment was also provided by the Nebraska Corn Board, NRCS, Central Valley Ag, Corteva, Dept. of Natural Resources, and Nebraska Cooperative Council.



Upper Elkhorn NRD Water Resources Manager Joslynn Vanderslice and Lower Republican NRD Assistant Manager Nick Simonson serve on the Producer Connect Steering Committee.

# GET THE SCOOP: EMPLOYEE RETIREMENT PROGRAM

The past three years were hard on the markets and retirement funds. The S&P 500 index has battled back from a 20% drop three years ago, and now the markets have reached all-time highs.

In FY 2021-22, the NARD 414(h) retirement fund equity value dropped by 20% to \$44,322,094 by June 30, 2022. For the current year end of June 30, 2025, the fund has rebounded to \$62,706,566.

The work of the NRD Benefits Committee, with the guidance from UBS Financial Services, helped make changes to the investment options over the past two years to give employees better options and it is paying off.

The defined contribution program allows each employee to determine their own investments, providing 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.

Similar to the NARD 414(h) program, as of June 30, 2022, the voluntary NARD 457 retirement fund equity value also dropped by 20% to \$4,987,597. By June 30, 2025, the fund had rebounded to \$6,835,810. 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 of UBS Financial Services provides the Nationwide investment platform for the plans and provides quarterly reports to the NRD Benefits Committee. Nationwide representatives set up regional meetings for employees to attend to learn more about investments. Employees have the option of attending in person or virtually. Since they have been involved, the NARD investment levels have increased almost four-fold. Benefit Plans Inc. of Omaha provides reporting and compliance work for the plans.

# LB 344: MUNICIPAL & INDUSTRIAL WATER USE UPDATES

LB 344 was wrapped into LB 36 as part of the Natural Resources Committee Bills. LB 344 updates language set to expire on Jan. 1, 2026, regarding allocations and limits placed on municipal water use in fully and over-appropriated areas. The old law allowed municipal water use greater than 25 million gallons that commences prior to Jan. 1, 2026, may be subject to controls under Integrated Management Plans. The changes are as follows:

- On and after Jan. 1, 2026, any new or expanded commercial or industrial user served by a municipal water source that commences water use at a rate in excess of 25 million gallons annually, expands water use to a rate in excess of 25 million gallons annually, or at any time exceeds water use of 25 million gallons annually shall be subject to the controls of an integrated management plan, rule, or order and provide a mitigation report to the natural resources district within which such user is located.
- The mitigation report shall include (i) annual water use, (ii) annual volume of water returned to the municipal system or discharged to another location, (iii) source of water used to mitigate the new or expanded consumptive use, and (iv) any other information deemed necessary by the applicable natural resources district or the Department of Natural Resources.
- The mitigation report shall be approved by the applicable natural resources district and the Department of Water, Energy, and Environment prior to Jan. 1, 2026, or prior to commencement of the new or expanded use.



# NARD HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAM UPDATE

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 18 years, the average annual NARD health insurance premium increase has been 4.36% while the national annual average has been 10.73%. This is very rare in the insurance industry. If premium changes followed the national average, premiums would almost be triple 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 2025-26. In the FY 2019-20 and FY 2021-22 there were losses and reserves were used to pay the claims. In FY 2022-23, the Risk Pool showed a \$2.3 million profit, and FY 2024-25 showed a \$1.8 million profit, reversing losses of past years.

In FY 2024-25, the Risk Pool experienced 10 claims more than \$100,000, with four at the \$175,000 maximum liability. This is up from eight experienced at the end of FY 2023-24 with one over \$175,000. For FY 2025-26, there are no lasered individuals, which limits additional risk exposure. The Risk Pool ended FY 2024-25 with a \$628,583 profit.

After two recent renewal meetings, the Stop Loss Committee recommended no proposed change for medical and dental premiums for FY 2025-26. Subsequently the NARD Risk Pool board approved those rates. This is the third year in a row of no increases. Thus, all premium levels will remain the same as they were since FY 2022-23.

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 \$8.3 million to allow for annual premium changes to be

limited. Milt Willnerd of Willnerd and Associates works with 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 \$1,961 in FY 2024-25. In addition, the Risk Pool paid \$39,280 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 employee 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.

### Change of Claims Processing

The Stop Loss Committee accepted bids from claims processors to ensure NRD employees get the best claims discounts and processing possible. Three companies bid on the line of business. The committee selected the Blue Cross/Blue Shield Nebraska network to process claims beginning Jan. 1, 2025, which the NARD Risk Pool board approved. The better discounts provided savings to the plan, which allowed the committee to keep the rates the same for the third year in a row.

The Blue Cross/Blue Shield Nebraska network provides more health and dental provider access and better discounts on services. The move will reduce costs and provide more healthcare provider options for employees.

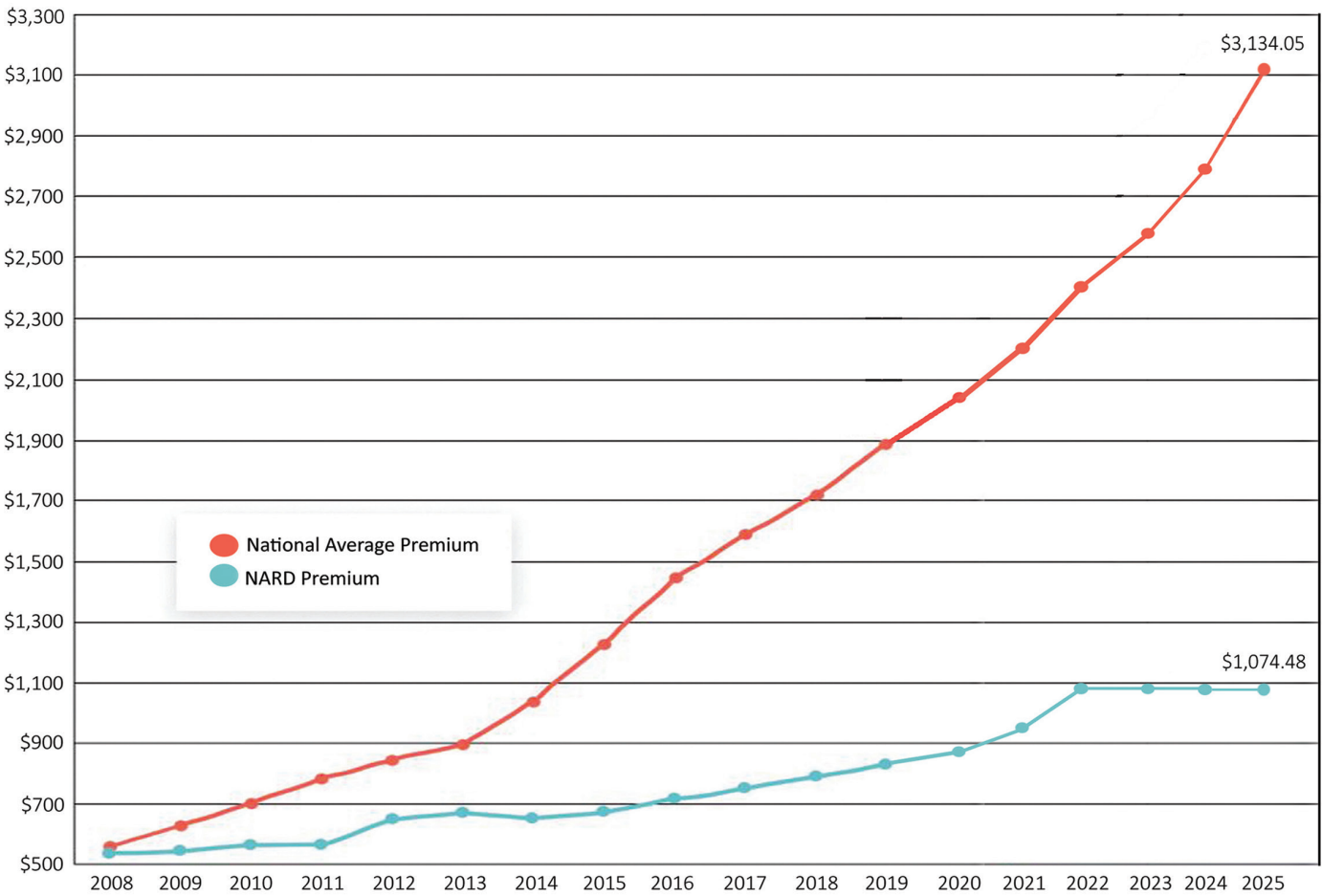


Chart 1: Shows the actual NARD insurance premium compared with the national average.

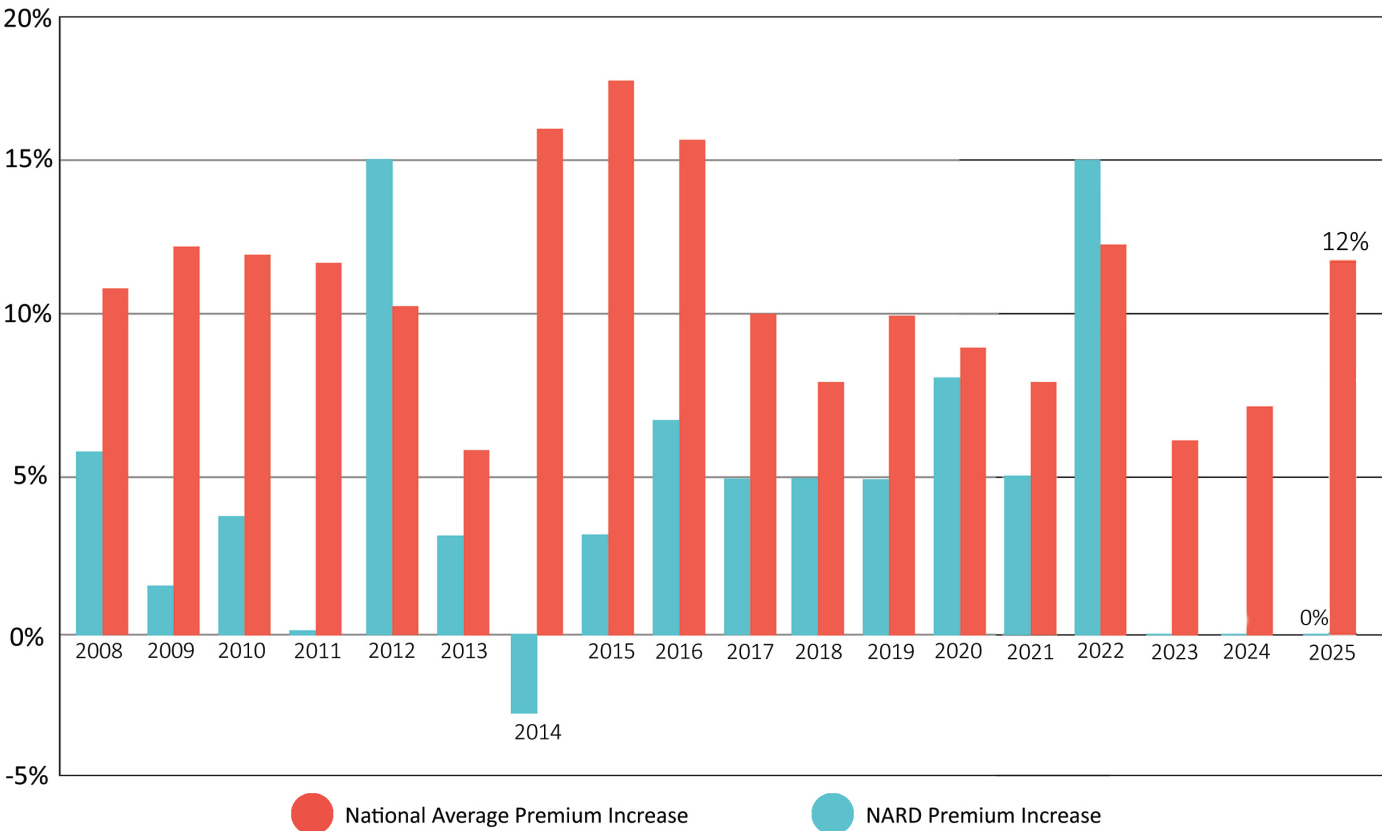


Chart 2: Shows the NARD annual premium increase (percent) compared to the national average premium increase.



# NARD FOUNDATION PROUD TO SUPPORT EDUCATION

The NARD Foundation has grown significantly during the last 28 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 nearly \$30,000 for natural resources educational programs that reach thousands of individuals in Nebraska.

Learn more about a few of the programs supported by the NARD Foundation.

### Nebraska Envirothon

Envirothon is 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.

### NRD Recreation Exploration

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

### NAYI

Annually, the Foundation supports the Nebraska Agriculture Youth Institute and participates in the career fair. NAYI is in

its 54th year, making it the longest running ag youth program of its kind in the nation. The event welcomed 250+ junior and seniors to UNL East Campus July 7-11, 2025.

### 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 April, 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. The camp was hosted June 22-25, 2025, at Kamp Kaleo in Burwell.

### Ag in the Classroom

Ag in the Classroom delivers ag literacy programming to K-12 students and teachers across Nebraska. The program promotes an understanding of the connection and value of agriculture in the lives of all people. In 2024, there were 901 classroom visits and \$73,050 in scholarships awards.

### Nebraska LEAD

The LEAD program provides adults with skills and experiences needed to become leaders and advocates for agriculture. Many LEAD graduates go on to serve on NRD boards. To learn more and apply to LEAD, visit [lead.unl.edu](http://lead.unl.edu).

### Producer Connect

Producer Connect is a web and mobile application suite designed to empower agricultural producers with the tools they need to optimize inputs, enhance agricultural profitability, improve water quality, and increase irrigation efficiency.

# EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S LETTER

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

For the 28th 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 retirement programs, which continue to grow and benefit NRD staff.

### Nebraska Legislature

During the regular 90-day legislative session, NARD worked with Gov. Pillen, the Nebraska Legislature, and other partners to help secure funding for NRD programs.

Twenty-five senators were sworn into office Jan. 8, 2025, as the 109th Nebraska Legislature convened for its first session. That number comprises six re-elected members and 19 newly

elected senators – including two who were appointed and one non-incumbent who returned after previously serving in the Legislature.

Term limits make it clear we need to work with new senators more locally to educate them on the importance of Nebraska's NRD system to protect and enhance natural resources.

Gov. Pillen announced this summer that he wants to cut another \$500 million out of the state budget next year. If there are additional revenue shortfalls, funding cuts could have significant impacts. As funding continues to be targeted for property tax relief, it is extremely important to reach out to your state senator and make sure they understand what your district is doing to protect lives, property and the future!

### Corporate Partners

NARD is taking the lead in developing new working relationships with public and private entities to address water quality. These

partnerships have resulted in the development of Producer Connect, a nitrogen dashboard to improve nutrient management, which is now available for use.

Partners on the project include 17 of Nebraska's 23 NRDs (and growing), the Nebraska Corn Board, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Central Valley Ag, Corteva, Dept. of Natural Resources, and the Nebraska Cooperative Council. These partnerships have led to more opportunities to promote practices and programs that protect our natural resources.

We are now working with the Nebraska Department of Water, Energy, and Environment to assist with upgrades to Producer Connect and securing funding for future maintenance.

Producer Connect has not gone unnoticed. Recently, NARD was invited to the Kansas Water Conference to showcase Nebraska's current and new efforts on water quality initiatives with



**Dean Edson**  
Executive Director

the web application.

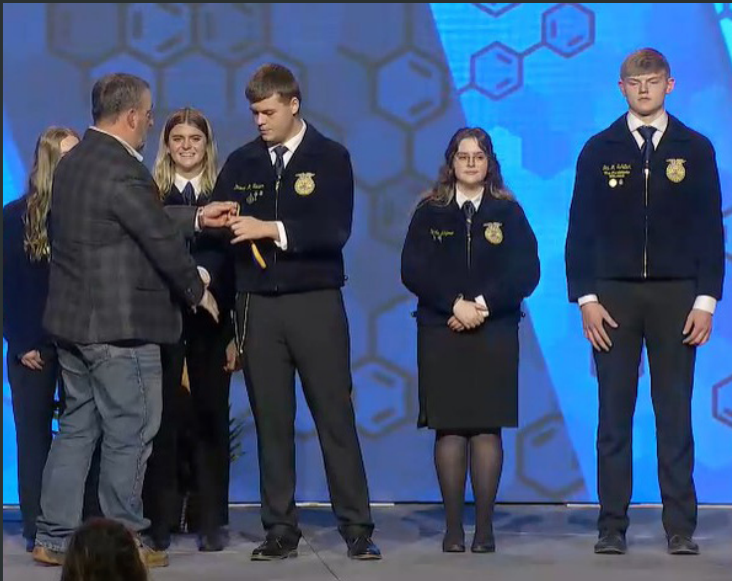
By extending and growing our partnerships in the agri-business sector we can enhance conservation in a way that is mutually beneficial for agriculture and our natural resources and transform the landscape of modern farming.

### Federal Connections

There have been a flurry of changes at the Federal level this year. It is important to build connections with Nebraska's federal delegation and their staff as well as federal agencies.

I encourage every district to send representatives to the Washington, D.C., Conference March 28 to April 1, 2026.

The NARD staff look at challenges as opportunities to learn and grow. Optimism always wins out.



Left: North Platte NRD and NARD Director Ryan Reuter distributes awards during the State FFA Convention on April 4, 2025.





## Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts

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## SAVE THE DATE | 2026 EVENTS

- Jan. 7, 2026 – First Day of 109th Nebraska Legislature, 2nd Session (60-Day)
- Jan. 26, 2026 – Managers Meeting, I&E Staff Meeting, Administrative Meeting, Lincoln
- Jan. 27-28, 2026 – NRD Legislative Conference, Lincoln
- Jan. 28, 2026 – NARD Board Meeting, Lincoln
- Feb. 15-19, 2026 – NACD Annual Meeting, San Antonio, Texas
- March 2-3, 2026 – NARD Water Programs Conference, Kearney
- March 4, 2026 – NRD Managers Meeting, Lincoln
- March 8-9, 2026 – NARD Board Meeting, Lincoln
- March 28 to April 1, 2026 – NRD Washington, D.C., Conference
- April 29, 2026 – Nebraska State Envirothon, Hastings
- June 3, 2026 – NRD Managers Meeting
- June 7-8, 2026 – NARD Board Meeting
- June 8-9, 2026 – NRD Basin Tour
- July 19-25, 2026 – NCF-Envirothon, Starkville, Mississippi
- Aug. 24-26, 2026 – NRD Managers Retreat, Nemaha NRD
- Sept. 15-17, 2026 – Husker Harvest Days, Grand Island/Wood River
- Sept. 27, 2026 – NARD Foundation Ron Bishop Memorial Golf Tournament, Kearney
- Sept. 28-29, 2026 – NRD Annual Conference, Kearney
- Sept. 29, 2026 – NARD Board Meeting, Kearney
- Nov. 4, 2026 – NRD Managers Meeting
- Nov. 8-9, 2026 – NARD Board Meeting



A herd of deer gather near  
the Platte River south of  
Gothenburg, Nebraska.