

**Nebraska State Report
Big Blue River Compact Annual Meeting
May 13, 2020**

Welcome

I would like to extend thanks to the Kansas Department of Agriculture for hosting the Big Blue River Compact annual meeting this year, and for making accommodations to hold the meeting by video conferencing due to the COVID-19 situation. I would also like to thank all of the natural resources districts, partnering state and local agencies, and producers who continue to work to protect the water resources of the Blue River basins.

I would also likely to extend a thank you to the staff in the Department for quickly adapting operations to primarily being conducted via telecommuting. In mid-March the Department activated a continuity-of-business plan to keep team members and the public safe during the current pandemic. While all of our offices remain open, team members who can work remotely are doing so at this time. Field office operations have continued largely un-impacted to date and are expected to continue in a normal capacity going forward.

Water Supply Conditions

The 2019 water supply conditions were well above average over much of the state and the Big Blue and the Little Blue River Basins were no exceptions. The precipitation across the Blue River basins was generally at or above 150 percent of average for the year. As a result, there were no calls for surface water administration, and all stateline targets pertaining to the Blue River Compact were met throughout 2019. Additionally, the Blue River near Seward like so many other streams and rivers in Nebraska during 2019 reached a record peak stage. The new record stage of 24.11' occurred on March 14, 2019 surpassing its previous record high of 22.83' on June 16, 1967.

Overview of Statewide Water Planning

The Water Planning Division continues to make advances in integrated management planning in partnership with all twenty-three NRDs across Nebraska. Significant achievements in 2019 included adoption of a new voluntary IMP for the Little Blue NRD, adoption of the first Republican River Basin-wide plan, and initiation of the second ten-year increment of planning in the Upper Platte River Basin, which required completion of an updated basin-wide plan and five individual integrated management plans. In addition, the Water Planning Division worked with five NRDs on voluntary IMP development in the Niobrara, Blues, and Nemaha river basins, which when complete, will result in all NRDs in the state having completed at least one iteration of integrated management planning.

Integrated Water Management in the Blue River Basins

Integrated management planning in the Little Blue and Big Blue River Basins has continued to progress since our last Compact meeting.

Little Blue River Basin Planning

In the Little Blue River Basin, both voluntary IMPs for the Little Blue NRD and Tri-Basin NRD were adopted and became effective in August 2019 and mid-April 2020, respectively. While no formal basin plan exist, the NRDs and the Department did coordinate IMP development as much as possible between the NRDs. These efforts included having joint NRD and Department meetings to guide IMP development, Board members and/or staff attending the neighboring NRD's stakeholder meetings, and holding two joint (both NRDs) stakeholder meetings as a part of plan development.

The Department views the Little Blue Basin IMPs as an important first step in improved coordination and communication between NRDs and the state, leading to more holistic water management across the basin. Both IMPs have action items to promote data sharing, cooperative development of data and tools, and collaborative research/studies. Furthermore, both IMPs specify that annual meetings will be held with all four Blue Basin NRDs to share and compare data and evaluate management actions across the basins.

Big Blue River Basin Planning

IMP development also has continued to progress in the Upper Big Blue River Basin. As we reported last year, the IMP process for the Upper Big Blue NRD is unique as it is the first time that the Department, the Nebraska Department of Energy and Environment and a NRD have coordinated development of both a water quality plan and water quantity plan simultaneously. This was essentially accomplished by holding a collaborative public participation process to concurrently develop goals and objectives for both a 319 water quality plan and a voluntary IMP.

In 2019, the public participation process for the Upper Big Blue NRD plans concluded with an open house held in April to share information about the joint water quality and water quantity planning process and answer questions from the public. The open house was well attended by thirty-plus members of the public, and resulted in additional feedback via written comment cards submitted by several attendees. Voluntary IMP writing, a public hearing process and adoption of the Upper Big Blue NRD plan are subsequent steps slated for 2020.

Progress was also made on voluntary IMP development for the Lower Big Blue NRD. NRD and Department staff planned the public participation process and identified stakeholders. The Department and NRD are planning to have three to four stakeholder meetings over a period of one year. The first stakeholder meeting was planned for March 2020, but has been postponed due to the current COVID-19 situation.

Voluntary Water Use Reporting

To compliment integrated management planning activities, the Department continues to expand the use of our voluntary online water use-reporting tool that is currently being used by water users throughout the State of Nebraska. We continue to be pleased with these response rates, which

shows interest from the community in collaborative monitoring of surface water use. The Department will continue requesting this data across the State moving forward and incorporating this information into future planning efforts.

Legislative Updates

The 2020 legislative session was scheduled to conclude in April but adjourned early with 17 days remaining due the COVID-19 situation. The legislature will likely reconvene some time before Dec. 31, 2020 to conclude business. Important business remaining includes adoption of mid-biennial budget adjustments. Full budget impacts of COVID-19 have not been identified as the duration of closures and impacts of federal stimulus dollars will need to be weighed.

Water Sustainability Funds

The Nebraska Water Sustainability Fund, established in 2014, accepted its fifth round of applications in July 2019. The Department reviewed all of the applications and moved fifteen forward to the Nebraska Natural Resources Commission. The Commission approved ten of those applications, which resulted in over \$15.3 million dollars of new funding for water sustainability projects and studies in 2019.

The sixth round of applications for the Water Sustainability Fund must be submitted between July 16 and July 31, 2020. The Commission is anticipating that over \$8 million will be available for new applications.

Projects currently underway in the Blue River basins include; three groundwater recharge projects underway in the Little Blue NRD, support for a major project for Nitrate and Uranium mitigation in the City of Hastings, and last year's addition of the Upper Big Blue NRD's project for the development of water use allocation software system. Our written report provides a table that summarizes the Water Sustainability Fund projects located within the Blue River Basins and dollars that have been awarded.

Table 1. Summary of Water Sustainability Fund projects in the Blue River Basin

Water Sustainability Fund Projects in the Little Blue and Big Blue River Basins					
<i>Year Funded</i>	<i>Project Score</i>	<i>Project Number</i>	<i>Applicant</i>	<i>Project Title</i>	<i>Funded Amount</i>
2015	47	4117	City of Hastings (Utilities)	Aquifer Storage and Restoration Nitrate and Uranium Control Project, Hastings, Nebraska	\$4,410,000
2016	42	4146	Little Blue NRD	Instream Weir Stabilization/Recharge Pilot Project	\$100,979
2016	42	4147	Little Blue NRD	Low-head Embankment Stabilization/Recharge Pilot Project	\$100,153
2017	44	5197	Little Blue NRD	LBNRD Oxbow Reconnections for Groundwater Recharge	\$389,820
2019	47	5241	Upper Big Blue NRD	UBBNRD Allocation Software	\$105,000

Current Opening for Director Position

With the retirement of Director Jeff Fassett from the Department on February 28, 2020 the agency is currently seeking to fill the director position. The search for a replacement is currently ongoing and a recruitment committee is assisting with identification of potential candidates.

Conclusion

I would once again like to thank Kansas for continuing the partnership to work together to proactively manage waters the Blue River Basins. I will now turn it over to Jeremy Gehle who will give a report on Nebraska water administration, which will be followed by the NRD reports.