

MINUTES

LOWER LOUP NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

November 16, 2023

Ord, Nebraska

The January meeting of the Board of Directors of the Lower Loup Natural Resources District was held at the Headquarters Office, 2620 Airport Drive, Ord, Nebraska, on November 16, 2023. Vice Chairman Thoene called the meeting to order at 4:00 p.m.

CALL TO ORDER

Directors in attendance:

Rollie D. Amsberry, Treasurer
John R. Coffey, Secretary
Gary A. Kruse
Todd Nitsch
Chad J. Podolak
Henry J. Thoene, Vice Chairman
Rick Vlach

Darwin B. Anderson
N. Richard Hadenfeldt
Larry Mohrman
Alan Petersen
Gerald Smith
Alexander L. Vlach

Directors absent:

James C. Adams
Robert L. Bauer
Randy Kauk
Matt Lukasiewicz

Timothy E. Bartak
James Eschliman, Chairman
Thomas L. Knutson

Staff in attendance:

Russell G. Callan, General Manager
Irene F. Kreifels, Administrative Assistant
Brant Bechtold, I&E Specialist
Dell Harris, Water Resources Specialist
Brian Kolar, Projects Technician
Cacey Wilken, Water Modeling Coordinator

Tylr Naprstek, Asst. General Manager
Kim A. Lyons, Financial Secretary
V. Anne Freeman, Water Programs Secy.
Kevin Gustafson, District Engineer
Jason Moudry, Water Programs Specialist

Guests in attendance:

Bryce Bauer, NRCS, Ord

Justin King, Columbus

VERIFICATION OF MEETING NOTICE AND ADOPTION OF AGENDA

Vice Chairman Thoene asked for verification of the meeting notice. General Manager Russell Callan stated that the agenda was current, and that the meeting notices were properly published in all newspapers, posted at the NRD Headquarters office in Ord, on the NRD website, and in the eight field office locations.

EXCUSED ABSENCES

Thoene stated that Directors Adams, Bartak, Bauer, Eschliman, Kauk, Knutson, and Lukasiewicz had asked to be excused. He also announced the Director Podolak would be late.

Nitsch motioned, seconded by Anderson, to excuse absent Directors Adams, Bartak, Bauer, Eschliman, Kauk, Knutson, and Lukasiewicz. Motion carried by electronic vote. Directors voting yes: Amsberry, Anderson, Coffey, Hadenfeldt, Kruse, Mohrman, Nitsch, Petersen, Smith, Thoene, A. Vlach, R. Vlach. Director not present for vote: Podolak.

MINUTES

Thoene asked for corrections and/or additions to the October 26, 2023, Board meeting minutes. None were heard.

R. Vlach motioned, seconded by Kruse, to approve the October 26, 2023, Board meeting minutes as presented. Motion carried by electronic vote. Directors voting yes: Amsberry, Anderson, Coffey, Hadenfeldt, Kruse, Mohrman, Nitsch, Petersen, Smith, Thoene, A. Vlach, R. Vlach. Director not present for vote: Podolak.

TREASURER'S REPORT

Russell Callan, General Manager, highlighted expenditures of \$50,370.00 to Ranchland Ford for a pickup for the new agronomist; and \$3,330.60 to Ward Labs for vadose zone soil sampling. Callan explained that he is looking into a pickup mount Giddings probe rig instead of the current tractor mount for ease of transportation and use.

Podolak arrived at 4:05 p.m.

Callan also noted additional expenditures of \$2,699.00 to Dobbins Service Center Inc. for a new office refrigerator; \$6,000.00 to UNL for the weather monitoring sites, mentioning that he and staff will be working with UNL to find out where all the original sites are located; and \$10,764.75 to LRE for water modeling.

Kruse motioned, seconded by Coffey, to approve the November 16, 2023, Treasurer's Report. Motion carried by electronic vote, all present voting yes.

The Treasurer's Report Approval Policy states that the approved expenditures are to be published and each director who has per diem and/or reimbursement of expenses included in such financial reports, abstains from voting for the approval of his or her own per diem and/or expense reimbursement.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Kruse announced that Justin King, from Columbus, was present and that he is interested in the open Board of Directors seat.

King introduced himself and stated that he grew up on a farm in Newman Grove and attended Midland College and obtained a UNL degree in wildlife ecology. He stated that he also worked in Grand Island for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife and has now been employed at NPPD for 30 years in the environmental department, stating that Joe Citta was his previous manager.

FORESTER'S REPORT

Aron Lewis, Conservation Forester, was not present for the meeting. Callan stated there was an update provided in the agenda.

NRCS REPORT

Bryce Bauer, DC, NRCS, stated that they have been getting calls on the promotional letter mailed out on their programs and that staff has been working on new program applications; however, they are waiting for the 2024 rules to be released. He added that they don't have a cost docket or updates on rankings or priorities yet.

Coffey asked when they would know. Bauer stated that it may not be until January. In the meantime, though, they are prepping so they will be ready when the information becomes available.

Mohrman asked if things will change much. Bauer replied that the local allocation won't change much and that they are pretty well set up for EQIP. But he doesn't have anything on the rules for the Inflation Reduction Act money. He added that they have been told those funds have to be spent before they can start using their local allocation.

Callan stated that he, Bauer, Bartels, and Bechtold had worked up a promotional flyer that was sent out and that they are planning on doing more advertising of the NRCS programs.

INFORMATION & EDUCATION REPORT

Newsletters

Brant Bechtold, I&E Specialist, reported that the *In the Loup* publication would be sent out this week. He stated that he and Bartels had been working on writing articles for *Water Matters* and that it will mail in the next 1-2 weeks.

NARD Legislative Conference

Bechtold stated that the NARD Legislative Conference will be held January 23-24 in Lincoln and that Bartels would be contacting everyone for attendance information.

ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER'S REPORT

Nitrate Vulnerability Model – Landowner Meetings

Tylr Naprstek, Assistant General Manager, reported that there was a meeting held on November 13th and that another was scheduled for November 17th to discuss the nitrate vulnerability model on fields that were considered “high” per the model. He said that nutrient management plans for each field have not been written yet, but that the meetings have been positive. Producers were encouraged to go to their NRCS offices to put in applications to possibly get help in paying for soil moisture sensors, cover crops, etc. Naprstek added that there haven't been many questions on the data that has been showcased. He stated that the next big thing will be a letter going out the end of the month to anyone in the “medium-high” category with a list of different items that they could implement in their fields. He said a map will be included that will show and state that some of their fields are on the edge of the “high” category but haven't triggered yet.

Callan added that they talked about where the nitrogen application recommendations have come from for the producers, as well as how it is being applied, so that everyone has the same understanding of what is going on. He said there has been good back-and-forth conversations.

Kruse asked how many letters would be sent out for the “medium-high” category. Naprstek stated that there are 32 fields, mainly in Area 28, with a few in Areas 29 and 30. However, not all are owned by separate producers. Callan added that there won't be separate meetings set up for these fields.

Fall Field Work

Naprstek stated that fall static water level readings were completed last week and that drought impacts are still showing on many of the same sites.

Naprstek showed the 2023 static water level wells map marked that had the deepest static water level readings that have ever been read. He stated that the readings follow the drought map. He stated that the Fall reports were sent to producers after samples were taken, along with the Spring reading information.

Kruse asked if the Fall, 2023, readings were compared to the Fall readings of 2022. Naprstek replied that they have not been compared yet, but will be done.

Naprstek stated that flow meter readings on 1,100 sites have been completed and that the average is 11 acre-inches across the entire District. He stated that the eastern side, because of the

ongoing drought, had higher pumping totals than in the west or north. He said that a crop analysis comparison has been done and that the 9 fields of potatoes showed the highest pumping. He showed the comparison of the three water quality management areas showing total number of meters and the total amount of pumping. The plan is to develop a letter that will be mailed to all producers showing the overall average and what their pump did in 2023, along with a reminder about maintaining their meters.

Podolak asked if there was a high amount of pumping in the last 3 years. Naprstek replied that there was a lot of pumping both this year and last year.

Drought Monitoring and Impact Meetings

Naprstek showed the local groundwater status and the new November, 2023, drought map. He stated that Area 3, for the first time in 2 years, had modifications in Wheeler and Boone Counties, as well as Areas 15 and 17. He said they went back to “monitor” status from a “watch” status. He added that Area 18 went from “severe” to “abnormally dry” as opposed to “moderate drought” status. Naprstek stated there are a lot of problems in Area 18 and presented the difference in the long-term readings which showed persisting drought across the eastern part of the state.

Naprstek stated that the surface water areas are peculiar and that most of the North Loup River was down with not a lot of flow, even though there have been rains. He said that it is possible that infiltration has not gotten into the basin to be released but added that there is a gauge in Taylor that shows levels are down.

Naprstek also showed the local precipitation status and the transition throughout the year, stating there has been improvement from December, 2022 to now.

Podolak asked what would happen if static water levels are still low in the Spring. Naprstek stated there would need to be further discussion.

Drought Impact Meetings

Naprstek reported that meetings were held November 14th in Monroe and November 15th in Pleasanton.

Kruse stated that they were good meetings but there was some anxiety regarding flow meter requirements and that some producers wanted the NRD to wait and do another Spring water level reading before putting in the requirement.

Mohrman stated there were some people upset that the NRD wasn't offering more money toward cost-share on the flow meters.

Thoene asked if there was much feedback on the flow meter requirement. Mohrman stated they were not too pleased, but it was better that the NRD was offering 50% cost-share than nothing. Kruse said it took the edge off.

Coffey said there were some people upset and some people that left were still upset, but he thought, overall, it was a good meeting.

Mohrman stated that he thinks the NRD needs to look into cost-share for converting gravity to pivot irrigation and offer cost-share on used equipment instead of just brand new, like EQIP does.

Coffey stated that EQIP needs to decide their rules before February because of supply chain issues. Kruse asked if EQIP could currently be used to convert to pivots. Coffey stated NRCS told him on one system it would be ranked next spring. Mohrman stated that you can't get EQIP until the plan is engineered.

Bryce Bauer added that the contracts aren't actually in place until April or May, so the project is planned to be about 18 months out from the time it is started.

Podolak asked what the incentive is. Bryce Bauer stated it was 50% and then went to 30% but he has been told the new amount should be 50% again.

Mohrman stated that with the price of new equipment these days, used pivots are a good option. Smith agreed that there are a lot of good older pivots that could be used.

Hadenfeldt asked who decided that used pivots couldn't be used. Bryce Bauer stated that EQIP rules stated that cost-share monies could only be used on new pivot systems.

Mohrman and Hadenfeldt mentioned that the NRD could look into cost-share for used pivots. Coffey stated that the NRD budget would skyrocket if Lower Loup NRD offered cost-share for pivots.

Bryce Bauer added that EQIP pays to re-nozzle pivots, underground piping, and flow meters, but not the wire. Mohrman asked why there isn't cost share on the wire because it is essential. Bauer responded that he didn't know.

Podolak asked why some of the Board members thought the NRD should cost-share on pivots. Mohrman responded that to switch from gravity irrigation to pivots would cut back on water use. Kruse stated that, from a water quantity standpoint, it needs to be done. Coffey stated we could work with producers so they can add acres because of pasture crossover due to pivot installation.

Podolak asked what percentage of the irrigated acres in the District is gravity vs. pivot. Napstek stated staff could do a visual inspection of the mapping, but it would take time to put numbers together.

ENGINEER'S REPORT

Columbus Recharge Erosion

Kevin Gustafson, District Engineer, reported that erosion repairs had been completed on the Columbus Recharge Project. He showed a sample of the erosion mat that was put down to help control the erosion near the outlet. Photos were shown of the repair process as well as the finished result.

Mud Creek WFPO/Mira Creek WFPO

Gustafson reported that Mud Creek WFPO is being reviewed by NRCS headquarters and that Mira Creek WFPO is being reviewed by the National Water Management Center.

Streambank Requests

Gustafson reported that he has had three streambank requests – one for Loup City Airport, one north of Ord, and another by Dannebrog.

Mohrman asked if the NRD had already done something with the airport. Gustafson stated that it has not been done but there has been previous discussions with them. He said they are just getting the permitting with the Corps to do the work.

Callan reported that the process on the flood plan and WFPO work is frustrating, and it would be beneficial for the NRD to hire a lobbyist in DC to help work with and for us to help with the process and keep discussions going. He said that there are four other NRDs who are working with one. He didn't have any price information yet but would give an update later.

MANAGER'S REPORT

Litigation Update

Callan stated there was nothing new concerning litigation.

Callan said he attended the Farm Bureau policy meeting held earlier in the day. There was discussion about potentially switching the NRDs to being state funded. He said a resolution was passed to support NRDs remaining under local control.

Kruse asked if the resolution goes anywhere. Callan replied that Farm Bureau uses it to lobby for or against legislation. Thoene stated that Dell Harris, Water Resources Specialist, has answered a lot of questions regarding the proposed changes. Harris stated that the local Farm Bureau is really supporting the NRDs in the matter. Podolak asked what the change of control would entail. Callan stated that the NRD would no longer have taxing authority and that the state would take that over, then the NRD would have to get their money from the state.

New Hires

Callan reported that the secretary position in Spalding would be advertised soon and that Derek Vogt, District Agronomist, started yesterday.

Non-action Reports

None.

NARD REPORT

Amsberry reported that there was discussion about increasing employer and employee contributions to the retirement fund. He stated that there hasn't been an increase since 2006. Currently it is at 6% NRD contribution and 5.5% staff contribution. He added that for it to increase, all 23 NRDs must agree.

Callan added that the recommendation was to ask Board and staff if they were interested in a 1% increase. He stated that for our NRD, that would be roughly a \$20,000 increase in salaries for our portion of the match and staff's contribution would increase as well.

Podolak asked what the benchmark contribution was. Callan stated that between 14-15% is comparable. Kruse asked if there is a summary page of the information. Callan stated more information would come.

Kruse asked what happened with the health insurance. Callan stated that a new company, Omnify, would be handling FSA dollars, and that NARD is going to rebid their insurance administration.

NRC REPORT

No update.

ANNOUNCEMENTS / FUTURE MEETING TOPICS

Callan announced that the awards banquet would be December 21st, following the Board of Directors meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

With no further business before the Board, Vice Chairman Thoene declared the meeting adjourned at 5:05 p.m.

Roster for attendance of this meeting and tally of votes cast on motions at this meeting are being filed with the official minutes of this meeting at the Lower Loup Natural Resources District's Headquarters Office, 2620 Airport Drive, Ord, Nebraska. Publication notification of this meeting was made via a newspaper in each county within the district. The next Board of Directors meeting will be held December 21, 2023, at 4:00 p.m., at the Headquarters Office in Ord, Nebraska.

John R. Coffey
Secretary