APPENDIX 3: Detailed media analysis and drought narrative

Analysis of news stories collected in the Drought Impact Reporter and related policy documents revealed several distinct instances from 2009 through mid-2015 of people encountering limits of water supplies in different parts of the Platte River system, including the Loup and Elkhorn basins, during drought. Some of those instances prompted new regulatory action or reexamination of existing regulatory mechanisms. Among those triggering reevaluation of governance mechanisms were conflict between upstream and downstream irrigators on the North Platte River, low flows that threatened the City of Lincoln’s water supply, and water supplies for smaller rural water systems in the eastern part of the state. Other encounters with limits were presented in context of extreme measures to cope with extreme drought.

The water flowing from the North Platte River into the state’s iconic Lake McConaughy was reduced after varying degrees of drought in the basin from 2000-2009 and years of increasing groundwater irrigation upstream, creating a shortfall for customers of the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District, which operates the dam and lake system and is the state’s largest irrigation district. Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District filed suit against the North Platte Natural Resources District in 2009, arguing that the district should further reduce the water allotment of irrigators in the Pumpkin Creek watershed. The lawsuit heightened the rhetoric about the importance of Lake McConaughy to the state. “Nebraska is on the edge of a historic natural resources disaster: Lake McConaughy drying up,” was the description in the Omaha World-Herald when the suit was first filed (Hendee, Jan. 4, 2009). Later the paper observed that the lake contributes to recreation, wildlife habitat and power generation, and is “part of a system that is a source of water for four of Nebraska’s five largest cities: Omaha, Lincoln, Grand Island and Kearney” (OWH, Sept. 6, 2009). An editorial questioned whether resolving water conflicts should be left to courts, and asked “how should the state’s water laws be modified to ensure that the NRDs fulfill their duties not only to their irrigators but also to downstream water users and all state residents?” (OWH Sept. 20, 2009) The Nebraska Supreme Court ended up dismissing the case on the grounds that CNPPID did not have standing to appeal the NRD’s decision, because CNPPID holds its water rights for the benefit of others (Kelly, 16; Nebraska Supreme Court, 2010). The Court also noted that it found CNPPID’s rhetoric about Lake McConaughy to be “apocalyptic” beyond what the facts substantiated. In 2012, CNPPID officials said that inflows to Lake McConaughy had been falling for years, and that low inflows might be the new normal, due to increased irrigation development upstream (OWH, May 8, 2012). As drought developed during summer of 2012, the Grand Island Independent quoted a CNPPID official as saying the lake level was declining due to demands from downstream irrigators (July 5, 2012).

Nearly the entire state experienced intense drought in 2012. High corn and soybean prices led farmers with access to groundwater to drill more wells in 2012. The Department of Natural Resources said 1,105 new wells in 2012 were the most registered in a single year since 2005 (Hovey, Feb. 22, 2013). The drought triggered coping mechanisms, such as widespread curtailment of surface water irrigation during 2012, including about 200 irrigators in the Platte
system shut off to preserve instream flow rights held by the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission (Lincoln Journal-Star, July 13, 2012), and 45-minute blackouts in north-central Nebraska to accommodate the demand for power for irrigation systems (OWH July 25, 2012). A retired farmer recalled that even during the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, the creek on his family farm never dried up, but it did in 2012 (Grand Island Independent, Sept. 23, 2012). The Dust Bowl was a historic drought on the Great Plains, exacerbated by overly aggressive plowing, that drove many farmers off their land and led to the formation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Water levels fell below pumps in domestic wells and wells serving small communities throughout eastern Nebraska in 2012, and groundwater continued to show effects of drought in 2013, prompting NRDs to impose new limits in 2013 and 2014. Eighty-one municipal water systems had problems due to drought (Laukaitis, Nov. 30, 2012). The Lower Elkhorn NRD became the first in eastern Nebraska to impose allocations (limits) on irrigators after more than 100 domestic wells went dry (Hovey, Jan. 25, 2013); the Lower Platte North NRD created a special district with new rules limiting irrigation in areas where aquifers had large drops in pressure; and the Lower Platte South NRD created a special management area in 2014 that prohibited new irrigated acres and imposed a three-year allocation (Nebraska Association of Natural Resources Districts, 2014). Irrigators expressed objections at a public meeting, although local water suppliers expressed support and pointed to drought as a common enemy: “Greg Bouc, the water plant operator for Valparaiso, applauded the NRD for trying to make the changes, saying that in the past 30 years he has never seen the water table drop at the rate it has in the past year. ‘The biggest enemy in this room is not the irrigators or municipalities, it's the drought,’ Bouc said” (Laukaitis, Jan. 9, 2014).

The City of Lincoln considered exerting its right to water in August 2012, but decided instead to tighten its belt for the sake of upstream irrigators. In 2012, facing record low flows in the Platte River near its wellfield in Ashland, the City of Lincoln imposed mandatory watering restrictions but opted not to exert its right to water being used for irrigation upstream. The mayor was quoted as saying, “We realize that agriculture is the economic backbone of this city and region, and this is a critical time for our ag producers” (Hicks, Aug. 9, 2012).

Although the city imposed conservation requirements, it also encouraged people to water new street trees during drought in 2012 (OWH, Sept. 5, 2012). The City of Lincoln ended up fast-tracking construction of an additional well, which was completed in 2014 (Lincoln Journal-Star, Sept. 5, 2014). The city also developed a new system of “drought rates” to encourage conservation when voluntary or mandatory restrictions were in place (LJS, May 13, 2013), and allowing the city to issue civil penalties such as fines rather than misdemeanor citations for watering violations. Drought ended in 2013 as these measures were being approved, and they had not as of late 2015 been used because the area had remained drought-free. The Lincoln Water System Facilities Master Plan 2013 update (dated 2014) found that conditions similar to the very low flows that affected its well fields on the Platte in 2012 were likely to occur again before 2060, and that the city should begin taking steps in 2016 to find land for a well field along
the Missouri River, which would diversify its water supply and tap into a more drought-resistant river.

Drought in 2012 raised larger questions about balancing urban and agricultural water needs. As one newspaper article reported, “The daily drought drama will end at some point. But it’s also calling attention to an ongoing situation in which the growing populations of the state’s two largest cities are competing for a finite water supply with irrigators in the Loup and Elkhorn river basins. Especially this year, the heavy irrigation pumping that keeps crops watered in dry times is cutting into surface flows downstream and into the saturation in adjacent well fields used by both Lincoln and Omaha.” Observers speculated that in the future Lincoln might need to buy farmers’ irrigation rights (Hovey, Aug. 4, 2012). Information also circulated about the value of agriculture and irrigation to Nebraska’s economy. Drought in 2012 diminished the value of the state’s corn crop by $240 million, mainly affecting the 35 percent of the crop that is not irrigated, and one out of three jobs in the state depends on agriculture, according to a story that relied on the Nebraska Corn Board (Sholes, Dec. 5, 2012). The difference was based on a projected decline in production to 1.3 billion bushels, down from an average of 1.4 to 1.5 billion. The Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation commissioned a study that found that “the state’s ability to irrigate through drought in 2012 was worth $11 billion in agricultural output” (Hovey, July 24, 2013). Politicians also paid homage to the importance of agriculture in the state.

The Lower Platte South Natural Resources District completed a voluntary Integrated Management Plan in 2014, which is broader in scope than the mandated plans created by western NRDs. Among other things it identifies the needs to create an emergency drought plan, to consider urban growth and water needs, to explore options such as dry-year leasing that could prevent water administration (invoking rights to surface water), and to work with cities and others on water recycling and other new initiatives. (LPSNRD, 2014).

In 2015, the Lower Platte River Basin Coalition announced that seven NRDs and the state would create a plan to develop more of the “surplus” or “average excess supply” of water that flows from the Sandhills, which is also the margin that buffers the water supplies of Lincoln and Omaha during drought. The Sandhills, comprising much of north-central Nebraska, are remote, sparsely populated, and drain via the Loup Basin into the Platte River above the well fields that supply the City of Lincoln’s water system. “As the coalition works to better define this balance, they will look for ways to economically manage for conditions that exist the vast majority of the time, while subsequently ensuring plans are in place for the infrequent extreme drought periods when there’s a risk of Platte River supplies falling below demands,” according to a press release from the Nebraska Association of Natural Resource Districts (WOWT, July, 21, 2015).
Appendix 3 References


Nebraska Association of Resources Districts. 2014. 2014 NRD Water Management Activities Summary. Lincoln NE.


