

Water and Land, a Decade of Events in the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District  
By Jim Thompson, Chairman, PMRNRD Board

In the last decade the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District experienced two significant flood events. One of the "Great Floods" occurred in 2011 with the Missouri River exceeding her flood stage for many, many months. For the most part the levees held, water receded and we moved on. In 2019 another "Great Flood" pummeled the District. Along with frozen rivers, rain, and melting snow, nature took the upper hand, scouring too many levees and river banks. BAM! We are still suffering as we enter 2020 and the dollar damages have yet to be totaled. A tough lesson for all involved and one that we cannot forget.

The percentage probability of future flood events at these historic levels is low. We continue to design and build dams and improve levees based on terms such as "100 year" or "500 year". As we all have witnessed these events are not calendar related but statistically evaluated. We have had two "500 year" events taking place in the last 10 years. Fortunately for Nebraska we have a multitude of professional engineers, hydrologists, and others who are the silent heroes in doing what it takes, within limited financial resources of course, to shape the land and water to the benefit of all. For Nebraska, we are even more fortunate to have the mechanisms of Natural Resources Districts to facilitate this process.

The Papio-Missouri River NRD covers six counties on the eastern edge of the state. Although the flood events made headlines, the addition of six more flood and water quality structures within the District was a significant accomplishment and played a critical role in helping to keep the Greater Omaha Metro Area safe. This success was facilitated by the relatively new tool provided by the State in the form of our ability to issue government general obligation bonds. This was done without raising your property tax levy. The next decade will see six more structures under design and, within financial resources, be built to further assist the District in flood mitigation. Beyond that, an evolving master plan for the entire District will continue to dictate future actions in the decades to come. The shrinking of the flood plain and subsequent lowering the need for flood insurance will result from these efforts. Again, a benefit for all.

Our mission covers more than flood control. In the past decade we worked to add about 30 more miles of recreational trails in the District. Direct spending along with different partnerships within the communities made this possible. The next decade will see more growth of our valuable trail system.

Erosion control along our many banks and streams was balanced well in the last decade. This effort, due to cost of rock and proper techniques, will likely be harder to implement. This infrastructure portion of our district is reaching its age. Millions of dollars will be needed to continue this program, even though the results are sometimes invisible to the passer-by. A related effort that is quite visible is the working relationships we have with farmers to build terraces on their land. Thousands of acres of farmland were appropriately addressed for this soil and water conservation program in the past decade. Our role in the next decade will continue to be significant to work towards this mutual goal.

Trees help provide shelter, habitat, wind breaks, shade and beauty to our landscape. In the past decade we have worked to plant hundreds of thousands of trees. As a significant natural resource, a benefit to all, we will continue this Arbor State initiative. The invasion of the emerald ash borer beetle will make this challenging but we are committed to this effort.

Another success story in the past decade was the recycling effort for used tires, e-waste, and pesticide containers. In the last decade we recycled approximately 4,500 tons of tires in the rural settings of the District. This endeavor will continue to be budgeted for in this next decade.

Recreational sites under our jurisdiction were built and enhanced in the last 10 years. Canoe launching sites along the Elkhorn and Platte, campgrounds, other outdoor areas received a fair share of our effort. Add to that the continuing wildlife and habitat needs for birds and critters saw additional investment in this resource. The development plan for Glacier Creek at the Allwine Prairie Reserve is a great example of putting our resources where they count. In the mounting expansion through urban sprawl, we will continue to keep these wetlands and prairies prominently in our mission.

Education has been an ongoing effort with the classroom and outdoor education programs we provide. We have connected with 200,000 kids in the last ten years to stress important environmental considerations. The expanding use of social media has helped to facilitate this education to all levels and professional staff members continue to refine our message to gain the outreach needed.

The current state of the NRD is positive, in spite of what Mother Nature has thrown at us this past decade. Of course we cannot predict the future of her actions, but with the professional staff we have garnered over the years, confidence in doing the best we can has never been higher.