Water Issues Conference  I recently attended a water conference in Ogallala, “Exploring Nebraska’s Water Future – A Water Resources Seminar.” The event kicked off on March 29th at Lake McConaughy. I spent a little time beforehand driving around the lake and was astonished how much it has shrunk. The beaches are now really big beaches and the surrounding wetlands, inlets, and coves are also beaches. Even without its normal volume, it is still a very big body of water. On the first night of the conference we heard from the USGS on symmetry and topography of the lake. They have very sophisticated tools to study including 3-D software to do a virtual flyover into the lake basin. We also heard from NDEQ on developing Total Daily Maximum Loads (TMDL’s) for Lake Ogallala- or the maximum amount of contaminants/pollutants that can enter the lake without degrading the water quality. The second day focused on recent drought issues and competition for water in Nebraska. Congressman Osborne opened the 2nd day and discussed a myriad of water-related problems for agriculture particularly in western Nebraska. Jim Goeke with UNL Conservation & Survey Division give an interesting presentation on geology of western Nebraska and how it relates to groundwater quality and quantity. We then heard from Jim Cook with the NDNR on LB 962 and implementing integrated management plans in Nebraska as a result of LB 962. This bill will study all of our river basins to see if they are "over- appropriated," "fully- appropriated," or still have water available for development. The western and southwestern part of the state has already undergone this evaluation primarily due to priority status and several multi-state water compacts. The Lower Platte River Basin will be on the table in 2006 for evaluation. There is always the possibility that our basin could be deemed "fully- appropriated" particularly in light of the fact that some large-scale water projects will be coming on line in the near future. Planned use will be calculated into the equation to determine if a basin is fully or over appropriated. Following this presentation, there was a panel discussion on implementing integrated management plans. The panel was primarily made up of NRD managers in the areas working on such issues. We had a great luncheon speaker – Ernie Niemi with Econorthwest – who spoke on changing paradigms and how we can survive in Nebraska even if irrigated agriculture is reduced. To do this, we must look outside the box and adapt to the limitations and possibilities we have. He used Oregon as an example and how the reduction in logging due to T&E species changed the economy from logging to natural resources and recreation. Our next speaker was ill so we moved up a presentation by the Bureau of Reclamation on conservation case studies in Nebraska and Kansas. The final element of the conference was a panel discussion on future activities and what is ahead for Nebraska. Most people understand that we are in changing times and we cannot continue as is. It took a drought crisis to get us to address the idea of water conservation. The drought cycle may end, but we cannot loosen our grip on conservation practices for water because drought is cyclical and will return.

Cumulative Impact Study (CIS)  We are still plugging away and trying to finish the Scope of Work (SOW) for Phase II. We been working to pin down cost estimates and elements of the scope. We should be ready for data gathering by the summer or fall of this year.

River Obstruction Project  We have determined a cost estimate for the Hwy 50 pilot project and will be approaching the NRDs to help fund this portion for FY06. Once funding is secured, we can proceed with removal of the very dangerous obstructions at Hwy 50.

Environmental Carrying Capacity Project  Just had a meeting with HDR to get the acquisition kicked off. The LPRCA has assembled a lot of the materials needed for the study including comprehensive land use plans and zoning regulations.
One panelist said that many water resources managers lack the big picture mindset, hate uncertainty, and don't formally address risk. We finished the conference with two editors from the "High Country News" newspaper, which addresses a variety of environmental issues and particularly water management in the west. Throughout the conference the media had been taking jobs, so the newspaper folks wasted no time in taking their turn. They mentioned that media is often criticized for not understanding the issue, painting a one-sided story, and not having people with science backgrounds on their staffs. The scientific community also needs to be able to convey their message better, more concisely, and in a manner that both media and the general public can understand. I enjoyed the conference and would recommend it anyone with an interest in Nebraska's water.

D.C. Trip On March 9 & 10, the Lower Platte River (LPR) NRD's and I traveled to D.C. to make our presence known and push for funding of the LPR Feasibility Projects - Sand Creek, W. Sarpy, and Antelope Valley – and to work for inclusion of LPR environmental restoration funding authorization in the next WRDA bill. It was a quick, yet necessary and effective trip. We have received tremendous assistance from our Congressional officials (Sen. Nelson, Rep. Terry, Rep. Osborne, Sen. Hagel, and Rep. Fortenberry) and they know the right people to work with and contact to get the funding sent our way. I have to give kudos to our legal representative in D.C., Bob Weaver, who has been instrumental in the process and finding us the funds in a tough budget time.

LB 546 The I-80 Innovation Zone Commission legislation looks to be headed for the law books and has been placed on select file and advanced for engrossment with several amendments. The LPSNRD and PMRNRD have seats reserved on the commission, which consists of a 19-member board that will help identify economic development opportunities for the area on I-80 between Omaha and Lincoln. It is an advisory committee only but will work with zoning jurisdictions and recommend consistent zoning rules and regulations.