

## The Coordinator's Corner

Quarterly Report from the Lower Platte River Corridor Alliance \* Rodney L. Verhoeff, Coordinator

*\*For the period of April through July 2007\**

### **Coordinator Celebrates 4 years with LPRCA in April**

*A few words from the Coordinator:* April 14<sup>th</sup> was my 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary since I started in this position with the LPRCA and it has been both rewarding and challenging. I feel the LPRCA has made tremendous strides in providing information and facilitating cooperative ventures between stakeholders. A few highlights of the past four years include: development of the River Obstruction Removal Program (12 projects); delivery of the Water Wellness Awareness Program; continuation of our Airboat Tour and Water Quality Open Golf Tourney; and successfully holding the first ever LPRCA River Summit - - just to name a few. I want to thank all of you who have helped the LPRCA to achieve so many milestones. It truly takes cooperation to manage and protect a large and diverse area such as the Lower Platte River Corridor.

**NE Land Trust (NLT).** The NLT held a board meeting on June 1 and a strategic planning effort on June 2. As a board member for the past two years, I've seen this organization continue to gain tremendous ground in the land protection arena. There is a lot of landowner interest in protecting land either for conservation reasons or to maintain the rural/agricultural characteristics. As this interest has grown, so has the need for more capacity in terms of funding and staff. The NLT now operates with just one staff member and several volunteers. This summer, Dave Sands, the Executive Director of the NLT, has hired on a student intern to help develop a landowner database. The LPRCA is also assisting in this effort so we can share the database information. At the strategic planning effort, several issues came to light: we need to find long term funding; there is a need to consider not just donated easements, but also purchased easements; the NLT needs to consider more paid staff; there is a need to have formal policies regarding the "conservation fee" required for donated easements; and there may need to be a priority system to help qualify the best easement options. Board members present at the planning session developed a vision statement. It reads as follows - *The Nebraska Land Trust will be the premier organization for the protection of private land and special sites in Nebraska, by partnering with landowners and others, providing education, and achieving long-term sustainability, while maintaining an impeccable reputation through transparency, accessibility, and execution of our fiduciary duty.* Additionally, the group decided to create a Stewardship Committee to accomplish the following: (1) Assess each individual easement prospect and then decide how much will be needed for a Stewardship Fee, to bring a measure of flexibility to this important requirement that takes into account the various factors and merits of each prospect; (2) Allocate Stewardship Fees when they get them, between the annual budget to cover expenses associated with the easement, permanent funds for monitoring and defense, and possibly an Operating Reserve; and (3) Make recommendations to the Board on whether or not to pursue various projects. The planning session was a great effort but will require more time. Please visit the NLT's website for more info at: [www.nelandtrust.org](http://www.nelandtrust.org).

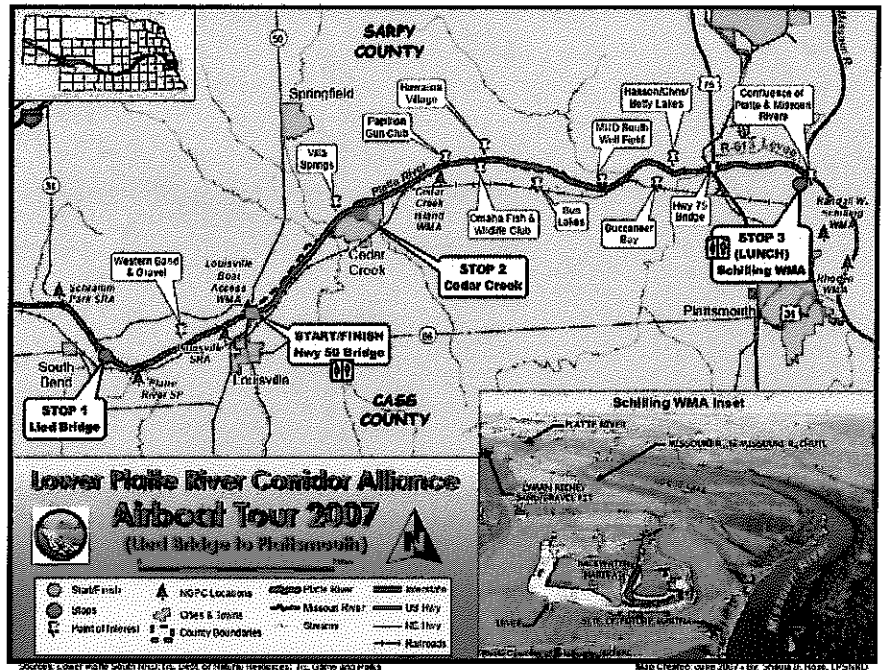
**Water Quality Monitoring Network.** Hard rains earlier this year delayed the start of monitoring and sampling for this program, but sondes (monitoring probes) were installed on the Hwy 50 Bridge on the Platte River and at the Elkhorn River Bridge near Waterloo. Dry weather and shifting flows have now resulted in damaged sampling probes. We plan to move one sonde to Salt Creek leaving just one at Hwy 50. Monitoring and sampling will continue through the fall.

**Environmental Suitability Assessment (ESA) Project.** We have signed the Phase II task order with HDR to complete PHASE II of this project (formerly titled "Environmental Carrying Capacity") and are currently developing a questionnaire for local zoning jurisdictions and subsequent one-on-one meetings to assess their needs. We really want to have input from local jurisdictions and help them by developing resources for making land use decisions that include considerations giving to the natural environment.

## FEATURED PROJECT

### LPRCA Airboat Tour – July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007

We were booked to the brim for this year's airboat tour. Seems that each year, we have more people than we have seats. Keeping the attendance to a reasonable and controllable number means limiting the number of attendees to around 45, but that number usually crept closer to 60+ this year because of the interest. We certainly don't want to turn anyone away who would like to know more about the river. This year, we toured the section of the Platte River from Hwy 50 (near Louisville) up to the Lied Bridge (near South Bend) and then back downstream to Schilling WMA (near Plattsmouth) - - about 31 river miles (see graphic below). Each year, we rotate portions of the river that we tour. Even as much water as we had this spring, we are almost high and dry at the Hwy 50 launch point. As a result, some airboat operators had to find alternate locations to get their boats into the water. Our tour began at the Lied Bridge with a discussion on LPRCA activities and a presentation on airboating by two of our operators - Bob Wemmer and Stephen "Smitty" Smith. We then headed downstream to a sand bar near Cedar Creek for a great history lesson on the community by Chuck Paukert. We also heard updates on Cass County and Sarpy County water supply and wastewater studies and projects from Glenn Johnson and Marlin Petermann. We continued downstream to Schilling WMA near the confluence with the MO River and landed on a sand bar right off the location where the Platte flows into the MO River. After a great BBQ lunch, Frank Albrecht and Neal Van Winkle with NG&PC talked on the Schilling WMA and recent improvements including the new MO-MO chute and backwater habitat. We then heard from Russ Schultz, rep with the Lower Platte Weed Management (LPWMA) group on noxious weeds and invasive species in the LPR Corridor. Alvis Mar with the NPS spoke on the Lewis & Clark Expedition and the historical significance of the Platte-MO River confluence to this expedition. Following these great presentations, we all loaded up on trams and drove along the new chute to a location where NG&PC biologists were elctro-fishing to see what species were using the chute habitat. After loading up again, we headed over the backwater area (see map) for a briefing by Tim Riley with the Flatwater Group, the firm that designed the backwater area, on design considerations for the new backwater habitat and proposed expansion plans. Our next stop was near the proposed marina along the MO River and a presentation by Doug Dewey and Jeanene Wehrbein. This new marina will boast cabins, upscale housing, a floating restaurant, and a water taxi to Omaha. Our final stop of the tour was near a Lyman-Richey sand and gravel pit which is soon to be finishing up its mining activities after about 30 years of operation. Carl Roberts, now retired from Lyman-Richey and currently heading up the PACE group, gave a no hold barred assessment of the importance of sand and gravel mining in Nebraska. After all of those great presentation and stops, everyone loaded up for a nice half hour ride back on the airboats to Hwy 50. Once again, we had a great tour. Many thanks to the NG&PC for so much help in this effort - especially Neal Van Winkle and Frank Albrecht. Also, many thanks to the crew, airboat operators, and those who took the time to attend. See you next year!



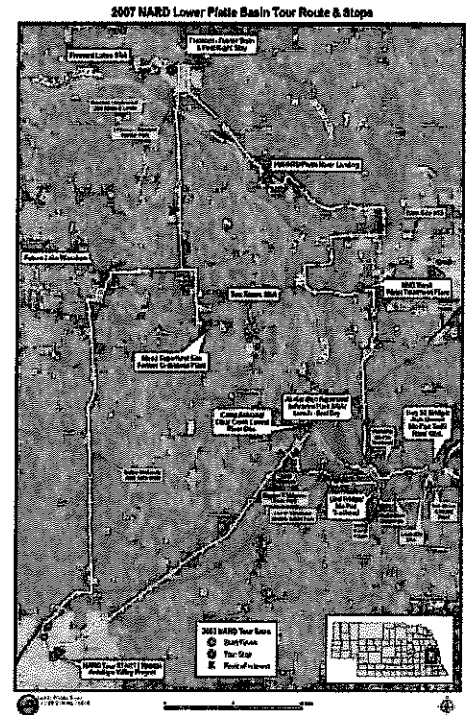
## Programs /Projects/Activities

**NARD Annual Basin Tour – Lower Platte River.** June 18 & 19 were the dates of the NARD Basin Tour. This year, the tour was held in the Lower Platte River Basin and the LPRCA and 3 area NRDs helped to plan and execute a great tour with a tremendous amount of work from NARD staff. Starting in Lincoln on the 18th with a tour of the Antelope Valley Project, the tour bus headed north on Hwy 77<sup>h</sup> towards the LPNNRD in Wahoo. Following a short break at the NRD, there were presentations on the Lake Wanhoo Project (a project that emerged out of the Lower Platte River and Tribes Feasibility Study several years back) and the Mead Superfund site including a tour of the water treatment plant. The tour then headed north to Fremont with a drive through the LPNNRD/City of Fremont Hormel Park and into the Fremont State Lakes area for a presentation on water quality issues related to toxic algae. That evening, tour attendees were treated to an evening on the Fremont Dinner Train and a role-playing game of mystery and intrigue with some pretty darn good acting by several NRD staff and directors.



Day 2 started off with a stop at the P-MRNRD Platte River Landing boat ramp, and a drive by Dam Site #13 - a public-private flood reduction and recreation partnership. The tour then

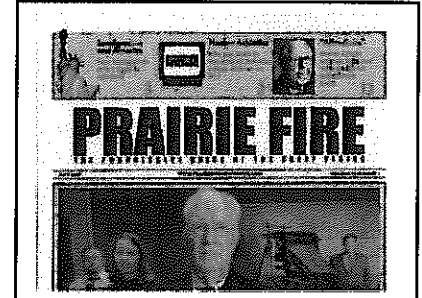
headed over to Two River SRA for a presentation by me on LPRCA projects. We then headed past the new MUD wellfield in Sarpy County to the MUD water treatment plant. This treatment plant is huge but will only take 11-12 people to operate when it goes online due to the high level of technology and automation. The next stop was at the Schramm SRA and Aksarben Aquarium south of Gretna. After a BBQ lunch cooked on site and a tour of the aquarium, the tour headed past the P-MRNRD Mo-Pac Trailhead near the Lied Bridge and onto Hwy 50, where I spoke about the Hwy 50 River Obstruction Removal Project and future improvements to the Hwy 50 Bridge to include a pedestrian lane. We then crossed the Platte River into the LPSNRD and over to the Lied Bridge, where participants walked out onto this unique hiking/biking bridge and heard about the trail networks in the P-MRNRD and LPSNRD. Other topics discussed along the way included regional water supply/wastewater projects/studies along with land use planning in the Bluffs area. The final stop of the tour was at Camp Ashland where Larry Vrtiska with the NE Military Department spoke on recent improvements to the camp such as a new parade ground, a new levee, and updates to Building 20 along the banks of the Platte River. We also got to tour an old boxing arena that is today used only as an inclement weather shelter and equipment storage area. The tour made a complete circle back to Lincoln around 4:00 p.m. on the 19<sup>th</sup>. This tour really showcased the diversity of issues in the Lower Platte River Basin including how much development is really taking place. However, it also illustrated how beautiful the area really is and the many projects the NRDS are undertaking to ensure sustainability of the resources. With over 60 attendees, several from western Nebraska, this tour was a great opportunity to let others know what we are up to in eastern Nebraska.



**Projects for UN-L Honors Water Class.** Two UNL students are working on a project to conduct a resources inventory for properties in the Schramm Bluffs area (near I-80 and Platte River). The students, Marco Floreani and Nicole Hosman, are also working with the Nebraska Land Trust on this project, which is funded by UNL through a new program called U-Care. This new program encourages students to get involved with solving an existing problem/issue in their field. Expectations are to wrap the project up by this fall (2007).

**UN-L School of Nat Res (SNR).** The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) has selected Dr. Don Wilhite as the new Director for the School of Natural Resources (SNR). Dr. Wilhite was formerly the Director of the National Drought Mitigation Center housed at UNL. I had the privilege of serving on an External Advisory Committee to search for the new director and can say that all of us who interviewed Dr. Wilhite are very pleased he was chosen. The recently-renovated Clifford Harding SNR Building on 33<sup>rd</sup> and Holdrege was completed last fall to house the SNR and now boasts offices, classrooms, labs, lecture halls, and an auditorium.

**W. Don Nelson Retires and then Doesn't (Again).** W. Don Nelson, who served as Senator Ben Nelson's State Director since the senator took office, retired earlier this year...and then came out of retirement (again) to start a new venture - - a newspaper called, *Prairie Fire*. The first edition came out just last week and the tag line is "the progressive voice of the Great Plains." The paper promises to be "neither reactionary nor radical, nor will it ascribe to a particular political philosophy or creed." In the inaugural edition, articles range from immigration to the arts to trails to a great article on Spring Creek Prairie and another on Ernie Niemi's report on natural resource amenities. Recall, Ernie Niemi was one of our featured speakers at the 2006 LPRCA River Summit. This monthly paper will be available at no cost at various outlets and can be ordered for home delivery. Look for my contribution in the August edition.



**FY08 Budget.** We just began a new fiscal year on July 1, 2007. The new LPRCA budget has been discussed and reworked several times to come up with the version we currently are working with. The total budget this year is \$507,325 compared to last year where the budget was \$869,325. This is due primarily to a lower cost for the Camp Ashland River Obstruction Removal Project compared to the Hwy 50 project the prior year. We continue to carry forward programs and projects we had in FY07 including the WQ Monitoring Network, the Cumulative Impact Study (CIS) - Phase II, the Env. Suitability Assessment (ESA) - Phase II, Camp Ashland River Obstruction Removal Project - Phase II, the annual Airboat Tour, and the WQ Open Golf Tourney. We plan to do a series of "coffee shop" meetings throughout the Corridor to get input from stakeholders on issues they feel we need to be addressing.

**River Summit.** Our river summit in 2006 was such a rousing success that we will be holding the next edition in the fall of 2008. I have begun planning the event with the National Park Service, the NRCS, and several other steering committee members. Although it seems to be more than a year off, the time will go fast and we are deciding on a theme and ideas for discussions. Land use and water resources seem to be the hottest topics at this time, so most likely, we will base the summit around those themes. We will also be expanding the steering committee to include local governments, developers, and members of the public in an effort to have a balanced event with a variety of perspectives.

**PCS Nitrogen Plant.** A collaborative group of resources managers and local jurisdictions are cooperating on clean-up of a former nitrogen plant located at the confluence of the MO and Platte Rivers in Sarpy County. There are some on-going negotiations with the owners to determine how the area might be cleaned up using Brownfields money (federal money to clean up contaminated sites that do not meet the level of "superfund" status). Hopes are to clean-up the area to allow for economic development in a portion of the site and manage the remainder for wildlife habitat and recreation. The owners are headquartered in Canada often making it difficult to communicate and continue the negotiations.

**Schilling WMA Tour.** On Friday, May 25<sup>th</sup>, I toured the Schilling WMA along with several NG&PC and COE representatives. A Missouri-to-Missouri River chute was constructed about a year and a half ago along with some backwater habitat. The changes at the WMA are quite remarkable and they have really improved fish and waterfowl habitat. Plans are still underway to do some additional backwater work and build a bridge over the new chute to reach Goose Lake.

**Pflug Road Panel Discussion.** On May 24<sup>th</sup>, the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities (JCI) held a panel discussion on the Pflug Road Interchange issue that has been getting a lot of press lately. This area is in the Schramm Bluffs area near I-80 and the Platte River. A new interchange is being proposed along with a lot of talk of new development. This area is one of the most visually appealing in the LPR Corridor and contains diverse and important habitat. I was asked to be a panelist along with the developer in the area - Ted Seldin, Marlin Petermann with the P-MRNRD, Toby Churchill with the Sarpy County Economic Development Association, Paul Mullen with MAPA, and Jerry Obrist with Lincoln Water System. All of these stakeholders have a vested interest in the area with ours, of course, being the natural environment. W. Don Nelson facilitated the discussion. Don was involved with helping Sarpy County get the funding to build the new Pflug Road Bridge. There was a great deal of talk of collaboration and building within the natural environment rather than making the environment fit the development. Often, the difficulty is translating these ideas into action and following through on stated intentions. Hopefully, this event made all stakeholders think about all aspects including the natural elements.

**WQ Open Golf Tourney. Wednesday, Sept 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007 \* Quarry Oaks Golf Course.** The event this year begins with a 10:00 am presentation by UNL Professor Roch Gaussoin on turfgrass, water conservation, and water quality issues related to golf courses and lawns \* 12:30 tee-off \* Cost will be \$65/person including all fees and a burger/brat buffet. This year, we will feature the "8 Reasons to Protect the Lower Platte River" by having one demo for each reason on various tees. Registration forms are available by contacting the LPSNRD office at (402) 476-2729 or by e-mailing me at [rverhoeff@lpsnrd.org](mailto:rverhoeff@lpsnrd.org). You can also download the forms at [www.lowerplatte.org](http://www.lowerplatte.org).



**Parting Shots**  
**LPRCA Airboat Tour – July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

