

Groundwater Regulators Join Forces For Water Plan

BY GRANT SCHULTE
Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — Some of Nebraska's groundwater regulators are joining forces to ensure that their districts' long-term water supply remains sustainable in dry years.

The Middle Niobrara Natural Resources District board said last week that it has partnered with four neighboring districts within the Niobrara River basin. The river is a popular spot for tourists in an area covering a large portion of northern Nebraska.

Nebraska has seen a wetter than average year, with record rainfall in parts of the state. The precipitation has eased fears about the kind of drought that swept the state in 2013, but district managers say a basin plan could help them save more of the water that flows through Nebraska in rainier years.

"It's one more proactive step we can take to look at what we have for water resources," said Mike Murphy, general director of the Valentine-based district. "This is an opportunity for us to come together as a basin."

The districts also hope to qualify for state funding under a law approved by Nebraska lawmakers last year. Districts can only qualify for the "water sustainability" money if they work together to create a basin-wide water management plan, instead of focusing on their specific area.

Nebraska's groundwater is regulated by 23 regional natural resources districts, known as NRDs, throughout the state. The state Department of Natural

Resources oversees surface water such as rivers or ponds, but can also intervene when parts of the state overuse the water supply. Regions that draw too much water face restrictions that force them to scale back their use.

The state DNR declared the Niobrara River basin "fully appropriated" in 2008, meaning its water usage roughly equaled the amount of water that flowed into the region. The designation prevented residents in the district from moving forward with major projects that would consume additional water, such as using more land for irrigated crops.

Four districts challenged the ruling, and the Nebraska Supreme Court overturned the department's decision in 2011.

When a department decision is overturned in court, state law requires the department to review the basin's water usage again and make a new finding four years later. The department is expected to release a new decision before the year's end, prompting the districts to seek ways to balance out their supply in advance.

The districts are certifying the total number of irrigated cropland within their boundaries and requesting water usage data from their cities, Murphy said. Many districts have also started to use soil moisture probes, which measure the water content of soil.

The new water sustainability law allowed districts to start creating their own basin management plans without prompting, said Anna Baum, general manager of the Upper Loup NRD in

Thedford. Previously, the state had to declare basins "fully appropriated" and then required districts to come up with a plan.

"With all of the NRDs together, we're able to collect and share our data to see the current water uses, current demand and what we have available," Baum said.

The plan could help spur economic development by making more water available for industrial uses, businesses, farms and cities, said Dennis Schueth, general manager of the Upper Elkhorn NRD in O'Neill.

Many districts already have water conservation plans within their own boundaries, but a basin-wide blueprint helps ensure that one district isn't depriving another of water, said Patrick O'Brien, general manager of the Upper Niobrara White NRD in Chadron.

"If your individual plan impacts an upstream or downstream district, it's not really a great plan for the basin," O'Brien said. "We're trying to take a step back, develop a basin plan, and then go in and work on our district plans."

The districts don't yet have specific projects in mind but could develop some once they have a better sense of their exact water usage, said Terry Julesgard, general manager of the Lower Niobrara NRD in Butte.

"We're not really looking at a whole bunch of new acres to be irrigated," Julesgard said. "Our goal is to make sure we maintain the basin so we can keep everybody profitable."

Widower Of Slain Officer Faces Loss

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The widower of an Omaha police officer killed in the line of duty is trying to provide for his family, but one challenge he faces is a long road to U.S. citizenship.

In an interview with the *Omaha World-Herald*, Hector Orozco broke down and wept as he spoke about 29-year-old Kerrie Orozco, who was fatally shot May 20 while attempting to arrest a fugitive on a felony warrant.

In the wake of his loss, the 33-year-old Hector is trying to provide for his family as a single father while navigating a long path to citizenship. Hector Orozco crossed the U.S.-Mexico border in 1999, at age 17. Leaving was not easy, he said, but it was something he felt was necessary to succeed.

"Not only for me, but for anyone, it's something big," he said. "Just being a citizen of the United States, because you work for years and years just to have something."

U.S. Rep. Brad Ashford said he will push for a law that would expedite the citizenship process for spouses of first responders who are killed on the job. Ashford said his proposal will be called the Kerrie Orozco Act.

"We want, I think, as a nation, people like Hector Orozco to have a little bit of a nudge, a little bit of help to get them on the track, so that they can find a permanent job, take care of the baby, provide for day care," Ashford said. "I think we want to lift that family up."

Hector Orozco's attorney, Kristin Fearnow, agreed that speeding up Hector's citizenship would help give the family security.

"It's very easy to take for granted, when you are a citizen of the United States, the inability to plan your life when you're living in a legal limbo and you don't have certainty about what's going to happen," Fearnow said. "I think the stress of that cannot be underestimated."

Man Drowns While Swimming In NE Lake

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A Crete man has drowned while swimming with his family at Branched Oak Lake in eastern Nebraska.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission says 67-year-old Guerrero Perales had been swimming at the beach in Lancaster County on Saturday when a family member realized he had not returned. Authorities say Perales walked or swam toward a buoy line that separates the swimming area from the lake.

Perales' family called 911 around 8:30 p.m. Dive teams first searched for Perales, but were unsuccessful. Two teams of emergency responders recovered his body at approximately 12:30 a.m. Sunday.

Company Awarded \$30M In Lawsuit

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A jury has awarded \$30 million to an Omaha company that accused wireless provider Sprint PCS of violating its patents on security technology.

The Lincoln Journal Star reports that the technology helps smartphones, tablets and broadband mobile cards access the Internet. The verdict came at the end of a trial in U.S. District Court in Omaha two weeks ago.

Prism Technologies sued Sprint Spectrum LP, which does business as Sprint PCS, and other companies, for using systems that Prism "pioneered and patented," even though Sprint had no legal right to do so.

Attorneys for Prism say the company's predecessor, Prism Resources Inc., began work on the project that led to the patents by early 1996 and sought a patent in 1997.

Sprint can still appeal.

Producers Should Watch Out For Pinkeye

BROOKINGS (AP) — The South Dakota State University Extension is recommending cattle producers to watch out for pinkeye, one of the most common and economically damaging cattle diseases.

Pinkeye is the common name for infectious bovine keratoconjunctivitis. It is a contagious disease causing inflammation of the cornea and conjunctiva.

The SDSU Extension says cattle producers every year lose an estimated \$150 million due to reductions in weight gain, decreases in milk production, treatment costs and potential price discounts for affected animals.

Janna Kincheloe is an SDSU Extension research associate. She says the climate this growing season, including moist conditions and lush forage, is optimal for pinkeye.

Kincheloe adds that wet weather typically increases the incidence of face flies that irritate eyes and help spread the disease.

Man Injured After Falling In Badlands

RAPID CITY (AP) — Law enforcement authorities in western South Dakota say an Illinois man was seriously injured after falling 150 feet near Sheep Mountain Table at the Badlands National Park.

The Pennington County sheriff's office says the 26-year-old man was transported from the park to a Rapid City hospital Saturday afternoon in a helicopter from the South Dakota National Guard.

Authorities say the incident happened around 2 p.m. Saturday. The sheriff's office did not immediately identify the man. His condition is unknown.

The Pennington County sheriff's office responded to the scene after receiving a request for assistance from Oglala Sioux tribal law enforcement officers.

Several other agencies assisted in the man's rescue including Pennington County Search and Rescue, Badlands National Park Rangers and Rapid Valley Volunteer Fire Department.

Stage Magic: Black Hills Playhouse Celebrating 70th Anniversary

BY MAX B. O'CONNELL
Rapid City Journal

RAPID CITY (AP) — It's been through fires, a threatened closure and some much-needed repairs, but the Black Hills Playhouse keeps on going.

The venerable theater will celebrate its 70th anniversary Friday through Sunday with a reunion for Playhouse alumni both old and young. Up to 200 people are expected to attend.

"The alums are coming from all over the country, some of whom are in their 90s and were with the Playhouse in its earliest days," said Linda Anderson, Playhouse executive director.

Anderson has been executive director of the theater for five years, but has 40 years' worth of memories of attending shows there.

When she first came on board, "we needed \$500,000 worth of upgrades to keep things going," Anderson said.

Anderson is referring to the trouble the Playhouse ran into in 2010, when it was closed and then-Governor Mike Rounds threatened to revoke the theater's lease in Custer State Park.

"But we made it, and we've done \$1 million in

improvements since," Anderson said.

This year's project is fundraising to replace all of the Playhouse's electrical systems, including its lighting and sound system.

One person who will be in attendance at the reunion has been there from the start: Byron Lee, son of BHP founder Warren M. "Doc" Lee.

"I was 18 months old when it started," Lee said. "I acted in shows like 'The Legend of Devil's Gulch,' which my father wrote, and 'On Borrowed Time' in a part that Billy Crystal would go on to play.

"I wish my family had the technology to film his version so I could have seen it and stolen everything he did."

In its original form, the Playhouse summer theater would tour. But that eventually became "an impossibility," according to Lee, and a tent theater was started, followed by the conversion of Custer State Park's dining hall into a theater in 1951.

Two weeks after the dining hall was converted into a theater, it burned down. But with the help of the Custer residents, "Doc" Lee kept the show going and eventually

designed and built its current theater in 1955.

Byron Lee, who lives in Texas, says he tries to come back and see the Playhouse's shows every summer, and that now that he's retired, he plans on seeing every show this year.

"My father loved everything about theater," Lee said. "He produced shows in high school with his own theater company, got a Ph.D. in theater at the University of Iowa, wrote and published plays, and started this because he believed it was important. This theater means family to me."

It also means family to Dan Workman, artistic director since 2011 (and from 2007 to 2008). Workman has been with the theater on and off since 1990, when he acted in the show "The Boys Next Door."

"In my first summer, I knew it was the place for me," Workman said. "It was such a nurturing environment with a real sense of community, and I met my wife here in my third summer."

Workman recently played Atticus Finch in "To Kill a Mockingbird," appearing alongside his sons Satchel (Jem) and Preston (Dill). His oldest son, Dylan, has also been in shows in the past,

including "The Music Man" and "The King and I."

"There's constant challenges at a nonprofit, where you're running short on money and then something breaks and needs to be replaced," Workman said. "But we always find a way to get it done, and the supporters keep coming."

Each Playhouse alumna and worker has a favorite show, with Anderson citing her love of the 1990s production of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" and Workman the farce "Move Over, Mrs. Markham."

"For me, it's still 'Devil's Gulch,'" Lee said. "It's near to me because my father wrote it, and because everybody in the camp had something to do with it. People would come back and lines became inside jokes between us."

The Playhouse alumni are a big family that spans over several generations, and this weekend that family will reunite to celebrate the theater that means so much to them.

"It's a place where theater professionals can be trained and employed and where people can see great quality theater," Anderson said. "And all as a part of a family. That kind of experience is precious and rare."

Neb School Districts Face Teacher Shortage

BY RALPH CHAPOCO
The North Platte Telegraph

NORTH PLATTE, Neb. (AP) — Many school districts, including North Platte Public Schools, faced a shortage of qualified substitute teachers to fill vacancies during the academic year.

Regulations require each classroom be staffed by an adult to supervise children during the school day and that can lead to tenuous moments when administrators are left without a replacement for an absent teacher. *The North Platte Telegraph* reported.

"We had a tough year when it came to substitute teachers," said Tami Eshleman, associate superintendent for the North Platte school district. "It is a statewide issue, so we are not the only one, but we had a difficult time finding teachers for classes when people called in sick or a personal matter."

Eshleman said administrators did not have issues finding substitute teachers for planned absences, but finding replacements for people on short notice was difficult.

Part of the reason is logistics. Substitute teachers serve on an on-call and part-time basis and many simply can't accommodate a request with such a rapid lead time, especially when they may already have plans. Demographics also play a role.

"Substitutes have a choice among different options avail-

able," Eshleman said. "Some only want to teach at certain buildings and within certain grade levels. Others only want to teach certain subjects. Not to mention our unemployment rate is low so people don't have to apply."

She said the most difficult vacancies to fill were in elementary buildings. There are a number of teachers at the high school who can fill in, each with a planning period that administrators can take advantage of.

That is not the case within elementary buildings when teachers must manage a class for an entire day. To compensate, Eshleman said administrators and counselors may fill the void if a substitute cannot be located.

The long-term issue is what to do with the shortage of available substitutes since the causes are structural.

First, not everyone is qualified to be a substitute teacher. Nebraska Department of

Education requires substitutes to have 60 undergraduate credit hours, including one education and one human resources course, effectively reducing the pool of available candidates.

The second, and more difficult answer, is that many young professionals are forgoing education careers, creating a vacuum of potential substitute teachers.

"Many teachers have to substitute teach before they are assigned a classroom, but since there are few of them, many are recruited directly," Eshleman said. "We have turned some of our substitute teachers into full time staff."

Eshleman said there are numerous benefits to the job such as a flexible schedule and the option to decide where an individual is placed.

"I think the biggest benefit is the opportunity to work with children in an educational setting," Eshleman said.

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