Nebraska Statewide Groundwater-Level Monitoring Report

2013

Aaron R. Young
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Conservation and Survey Division
School of Natural Resources

Nebraska Water Survey Paper Number 81

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The Conservation and Survey Division of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln is the agency designated by statute to investigate and interpret the geologically related natural resources of the State, to make available to the public the results of these investigations, and to assist in the development and conservation of these resources. It consists of program areas in geology, water, soils, and remote sensing-geographic information systems.

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FORWARD

Nebraska's proud tradition of natural-resources stewardship is particularly apparent in the case of groundwater. Groundwater is inextricably linked to the State's rich heritage; it also maintains our agricultural economy and provides steady flows to some of the Nation's most admired natural streams. The groundwater resources that lie beneath Nebraska are indeed vast, but they are also vulnerable: even small changes in groundwater levels can have profound impacts.

We are proud to present this report, which is a continuation of the series of water resources reports and maps published by the Conservation and Survey Division (CSD) of the School of Natural Resources. The information provided herein can be used to inform, educate, and guide the citizens of Nebraska as we enter new and challenging times regarding water resources.

INTRODUCTION

Groundwater-level information is valuable to citizens and stakeholders for understanding water resource availability and making informed management decisions.

This report is a statewide synthesis of groundwater-level monitoring programs in Nebraska. It is a continuation of the series of annual reports and maps produced by the CSD of the University of Nebraska in cooperation with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) since the 1950's. Groundwater-level monitoring began in Nebraska in 1930 in an effort to survey the State's groundwater resources and observe changes in its availability on a continuing basis. The CSD and USGS cooperatively developed, maintained, and operated an observation well network throughout the State. These two agencies were responsible for collecting, storing, and making this information available to the citizens.

Although CSD and USGS still occupy a central role in the statewide groundwater-level monitoring program, other agencies have assumed the responsibilities of building and maintaining observation networks and measuring water levels. The CSD and USGS continue to operate some of the original observation wells, but today the majority of measurements are made by agencies such as the Natural Resources Districts (NRD) as shown in Figure 1, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Public Power and Irrigation Districts. Because these agencies are located throughout the State, they are able to implement groundwater-level monitoring programs using local field staff, landowner contacts, taxing and regulatory authority, and first-hand knowledge of local conditions. Collectively, these agencies have developed an extensive network of observation wells throughout the State.

The CSD plays a vital role in providing technical expertise to these agencies as they develop and implement groundwater-level monitoring plans. The CSD evaluates the adequacy and accuracy of the water-level data and provides the statewide assessment of groundwater-level changes across many of the State's aquifers (Figs. 2-3).

The CSD has long provided technical services to stakeholders by integrating groundwater-level change data

1) Determine the amount of groundwater in storage and its availability for use.
2) Assess the water-supply outlook by determining changes in the volume of groundwater in storage.
3) Identify areas in which changes in groundwater levels may have an economic impact.
4) Assist state and local agencies in the formulation and administration of resource-management programs.
5) Determine or estimate the rate and direction of groundwater movement, specific yield of aquifers, base flow of streams, sources and amounts of groundwater recharge, and locations and amounts of groundwater discharge.
6) Assess the validity of hydrogeologic interpretations and the assumptions used in developing models of groundwater systems.

The need for this information has increased tremendously over the past few years, yet the resources available for fulfilling this need have decreased. The CSD strives to meet this challenge by focusing on fundamental data, building collaborative relationships with the agencies that depend on the information, and providing scientifically accurate information in a timely manner.

Figure 1. Nebraska Natural Resources Districts

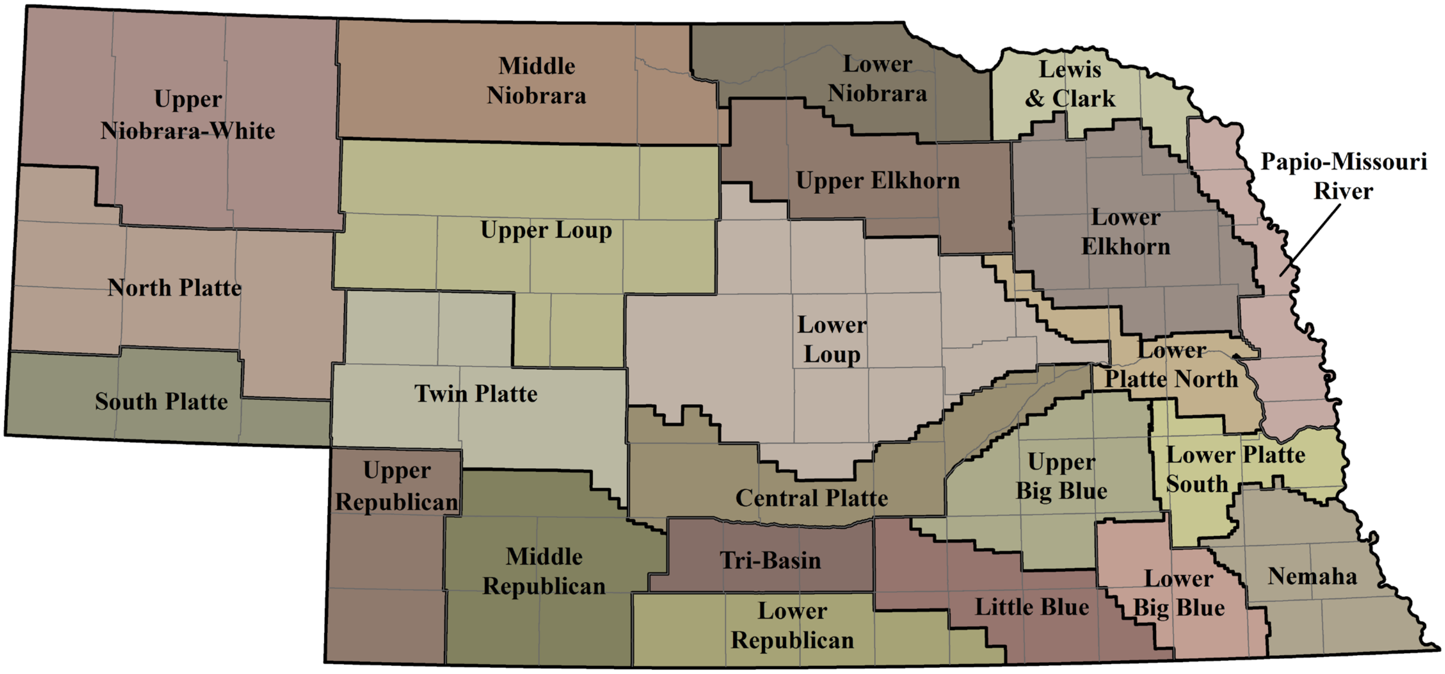
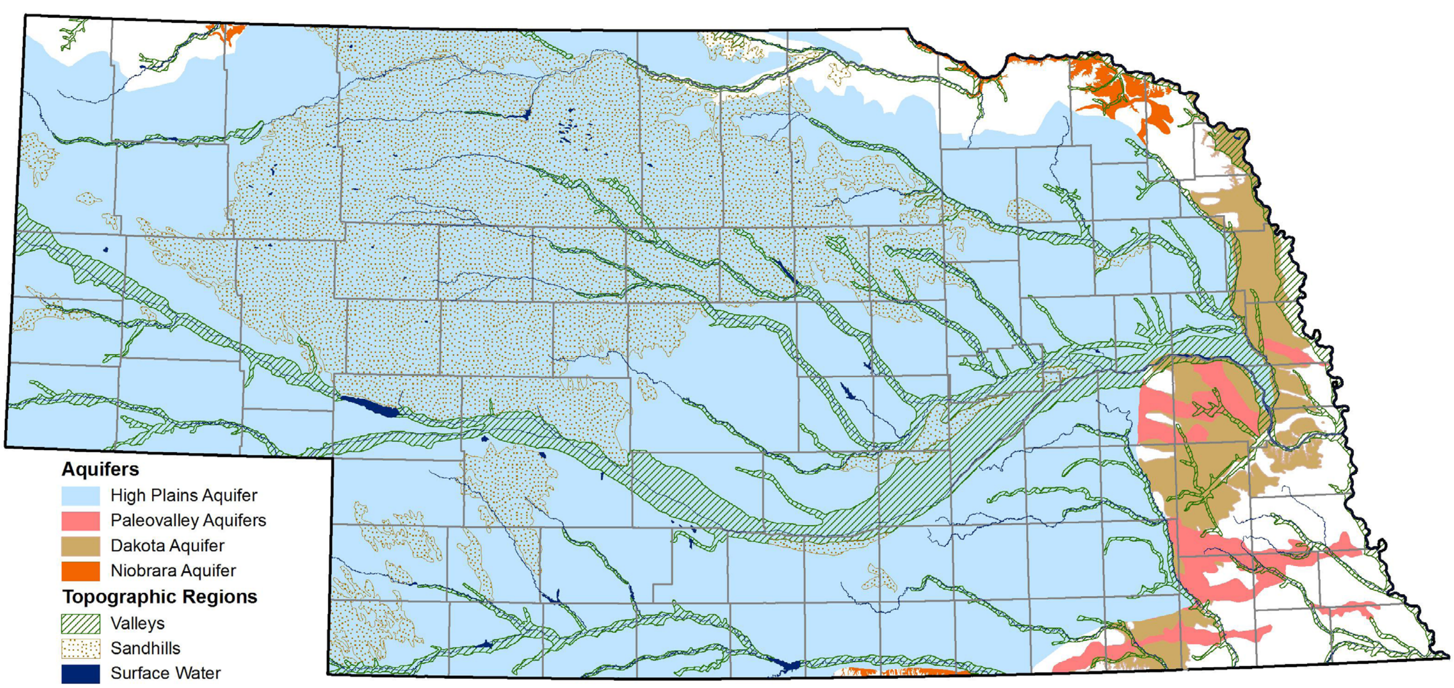


Figure 2. Important Aquifers and Topographic Regions of Nebraska



Note: In some areas, the aquifer units shown here may contain little or no saturated thickness.

Purpose and Methods

This report summarizes changes in Nebraska's groundwater levels over periods of 1, 5, and 10 years prior to 2013, as well as from 1981 to 2013, predevelopment to 1981 and predevelopment to 2013. 1981 was selected as a fixed year, as groundwater level declines in many parts of the state reached a maximum in 1981. These changes are depicted in maps that delineate regional trends on a statewide basis. Although localized conditions may vary considerably, the maps presented in this report provide an overview of the general locations, magnitudes, and extents of rises and declines. The reader should use figures 1 – 4 to locate NRDs, rivers, aquifers, and counties mentioned in the text.

The 1-, 5-, and 10- year changes are presented in the spring 2012 to spring 2013, spring 2008 to spring 2013, and spring 2003 to spring 2013 maps, respectively. Groundwater levels measured from thousands of wells throughout the State in spring 2013 (Fig. 5) were compared to levels measured in the same wells in the spring of the earlier year. For the 1-, 5-, and 10-year change maps, contours were generated using computer interpolation. These contours were incorporated into the final maps in areas where the principal aquifer is continuous, is in relatively good hydraulic connection over large areas, and where data density is relatively high. In areas not meeting the above conditions, the computer-generated contours were manually edited on maps at a scale of 1:500,000 in order to conform to hydrogeologic boundaries that prevent the flow of groundwater. Such boundaries include 1) areas where relatively impermeable bedrock units outcrop or exist in the shallow subsurface, such as southeastern Nebraska and in areas of Scotts Bluff County, 2) valley boundaries in eastern Nebraska where alluvial aquifers are a major source of groundwater but upland areas between them lack a primary aquifer, and 3) areas where the High Plains Aquifer is separated by deeply entrenched parts of the Niobrara, Republican, and Platte River valleys. For the spring 1981 to spring 2013 map, computer interpolation was impractical because data was sparse in many areas. Contours were therefore drawn manually with knowledge of the major hydrogeologic boundaries listed above.

For the predevelopment to spring 2013 and predevelopment to spring 1981 maps, water levels from wells measured in 2013 and 1981 were compared to estimated predevelopment water levels in the same wells. An estimated predevelopment water level is the approximate average water level at a well site prior to any development that significantly affects water levels. Predevelopment water levels for most of the State are the estimated water levels that generally occurred before the 1930s, 1940s, or early to mid-1950s. These dates, which vary throughout Nebraska, generally depend on the beginning dates of intensive use of groundwater for irrigation. Typically all available water-level data collected prior to or during the early stages of groundwater development are used to estimate predevelopment water levels. Contours were drawn manually with the aid of previously existing maps for similar time periods and with knowledge of major hydrogeologic boundaries.

Areas of sparse data are shown with a hatched pattern on all maps. A computer point density interpolation was used to determine the number of observation points within a 6 mile (10 kilometer) search radius. Areas of sparse data were defined as areas with zero observation points within the search radius.

Precipitation maps were prepared by comparing total precipitation over the time period of interest to the 30-year normal provided by the National Climate Data Center. The 30-year normal currently in use is based on average annual precipitation from 1981 to 2010. Computer interpolation was used to generate contours for these maps.

The average daily streamflows were computed by taking the average of all daily mean values for the water year, which was from October 1, 2011 to September 30, 2012. The long-term average is calculated from all available annual data from the 30 year period previous to the current water year. The 2012 stream flows were compared to the average annual flows from 1982 to 2012. For a few sites, less than 30 years of data is available for computing the long term average.

Factors Causing Groundwater-Level Changes

Long-term groundwater-level changes are a reflection of the changing balance between recharge to, discharge from, and storage in an aquifer. If recharge and discharge are in balance, such as they were before widespread irrigation development, groundwater levels are generally steady because the amount of water stored in the aquifer does not change. Minor changes in groundwater levels may occur due to natural variations in precipitation and streamflow, but generally the system is in equilibrium. If, however, the rate of recharge exceeds the rate of discharge over a long period, the amount of water stored in the aquifer increases and groundwater levels rise. Conversely, if the rate of discharge exceeds the rate of recharge for a long period, the amount of water in storage is depleted and groundwater levels decline. The magnitudes, locations, and rates of groundwater-level changes are controlled by many factors, including: the aquifer’s storage properties, permeability, and saturated thickness; the locations, rates, and pumping schedules of wells; the locations and rates of artificial recharge areas; and

Figure 3. Generalized Geologic and Hydrostratigraphic Framework of Nebraska

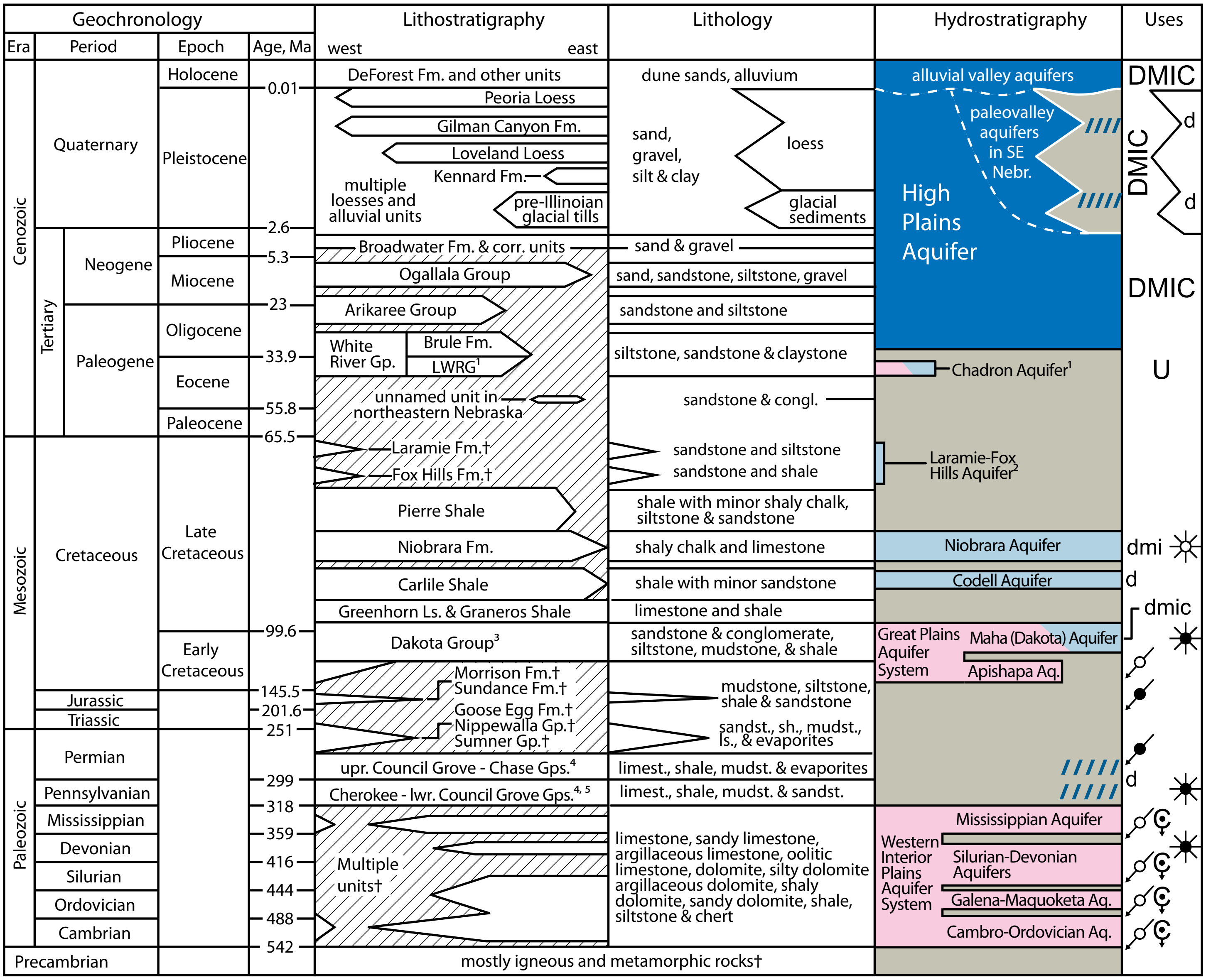


Diagram is not to scale relative to geologic time and stratigraphic thicknesses.

Hydrostratigraphic characteristics and water quality

- primary aquifers with good quality water
- secondary aquifers with good quality water
- secondary aquifers with generally poor quality water
- aquitards with local low-yield aquifers
- aquitards

[1] lower White River Group - includes Chamberlain Pass and Chadron Formations according to some authors; "Chadron Aquifer" historically refers to aquifer in lower White River Group

[2] important aquifer in Colorado, but present in Nebraska only in extreme southwestern Panhandle

[3] Dakota Formation in adjacent states

[4] includes correlative units with different names in northwest Nebraska

[5] Cherokee, Marmaton & Pleasanton Groups are not exposed in Nebraska

†present only in subsurface

Groundwater uses and related aspects

D major domestic use
d minor domestic use

I major irrigation use
i minor irrigation use

M major municipal use
m minor municipal use

C major commercial/industrial use
c minor commercial/industrial use

- units used for wastewater injection
- units with potential use for wastewater injection
- U unit mined for uranium by in-situ leaching (Dawes Co.)
- unit with potential use for carbon sequestration
- unit producing petroleum or natural gas
- unit with natural gas potential

From Korus and Joeckel, 2011

the degree of hydraulic connection between the aquifer and surface water bodies.

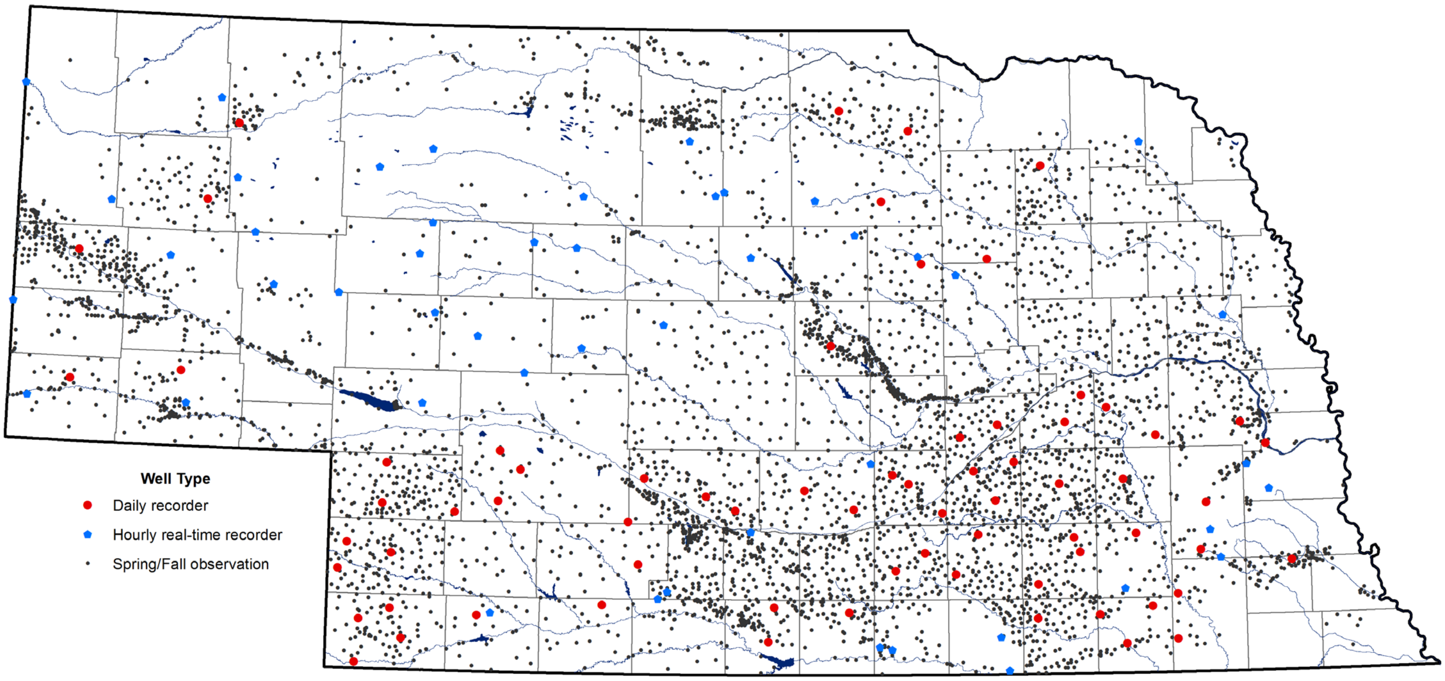
It is a common misconception that the rate of recharge from precipitation can be used as a "safe yield" or "sustainable limit" on the rate of groundwater extraction from an aquifer (Bredehoeft, 1997). This idea is too simplistic. The aquifer properties and all sources of recharge and discharge must be taken into consideration. Recharge is provided primarily by precipitation, but also by irrigation return flow and seepage from canals, reservoirs, and streams. Discharge occurs as baseflow to streams and lakes, evapotranspiration, and groundwater pumping. Groundwater levels, therefore, respond to a variety of natural and anthropogenic factors affecting recharge and discharge and are controlled largely by the physical properties of the aquifer. Limiting groundwater extraction to a rate equal to or less than the rate of recharge from precipitation will not prevent depletion of the aquifer. In fact, groundwater "mining" is prone to occur to one degree or another in any heavily pumped aquifer. A holistic, adaptive approach to groundwater management based on hydrologic mass balance is more appropriate. These strategies are discussed by several authors (e.g. Sophocleous, 1997, 2000; Alley and Leake, 2004; Maimone, 2004; Korus and Burbach, 2009a).

Groundwater-level changes can be observed at many different temporal scales (Fig. 6). Changes may occur over several minutes or hours in response to pumping, floods, or earthquakes. Long-term changes may occur due to the cumulative effects of pumping over many irrigation seasons, prolonged droughts or periods of high rainfall, or seepage from man-made water bodies. Similarly, groundwater levels can be observed at multiple spatial scales. For example, groundwater levels decline around the immediate vicinity of an individual well during pumping, but also from the cumulative effects of many irrigation wells pumped over many irrigation seasons at the scale of an entire regional aquifer. Groundwater levels rise along the banks of a stream during a flood, but may also rise significantly over an entire drainage basin during a prolonged wet period. The temporal and spatial scales of observation must be taken into account when using the maps presented in this report.

The maps presented in this report were generally created at a scale of 1:500,000. They are intended to identify regional trends at medium and long-term time scales throughout the entire state of Nebraska. As such, these changes chiefly reflect the interplay between precipitation, groundwater pumping, and artificial recharge from reservoirs and canals.

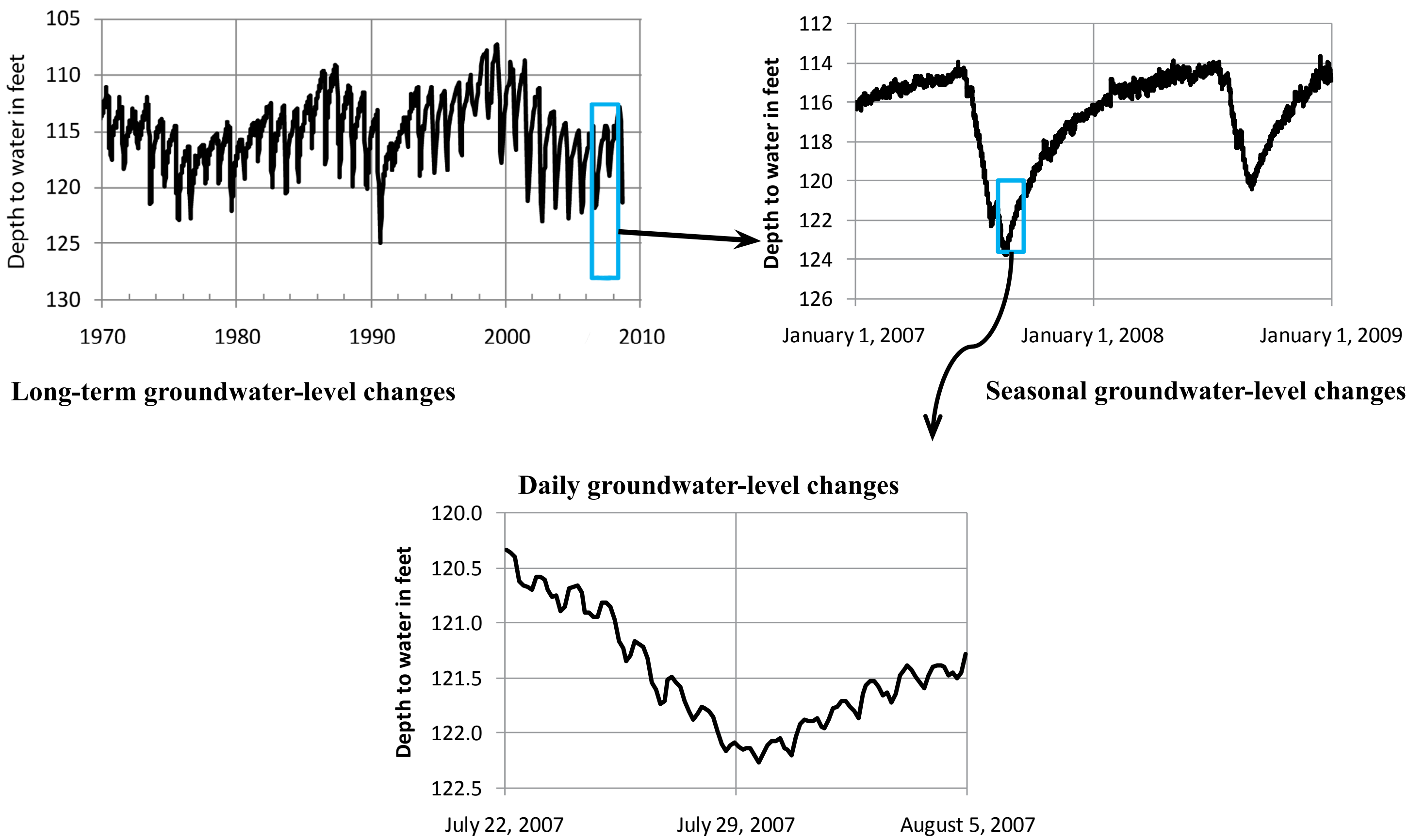
Figure 4. Counties, Major Cities, and Streams of Nebraska

Figure 5. Location of Observation Wells by Type



Sources: U.S. Geological Survey, Nebraska Water Science Center; U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Kansas-Nebraska Area Office; Nebraska Natural Resources Districts; Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District; Conservation and Survey Division, School of Natural Resources, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Figure 6. Example of Groundwater-Level Changes at Different Temporal Scales



Based on data from Plymouth Recorder well, Jefferson County

2012 DROUGHT IN NEBRASKA

2012 was the hottest and driest year on record for Nebraska, both hotter and drier than the worst years of the 1930s Dust Bowl.

During 2012, much of the central United States experienced significant drought. According to the National Climatic Data Center, precipitation values for the lower 48 states were 2.57 inches below the 20th century average, the 15th driest on record. The average temperature was 3.2ºF above average, a full 1.0ºF warmer that the warmest year on record between 1895 and 2012. All of Nebraska was severely affected by drought in 2012. Precipitation values for Nebraska ranged from 12-16 inches below normal for the year, and average temperatures were the highest ever recorded in the state (High Plains Regional Climate Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln). Drought severity is ranked by the US Drought Monitor using a drought severity index, ranging from abnormally dry (D0) to Exceptional Drought (D4). Explanations of categories are explained in Figure 7. Figure 8 represents the percent area of Nebraska included in drought categories by area during 2012. For the majority of Nebraska, precipitation values for the first half of 2012 were normal to slightly dryer than normal, however starting in mid-June, precipitation rates throughout the state began to slow dramatically, and the portion of the state included in the worst categories of drought (D3 and D4) began to rapidly increase. The percentage of the state included in the worst two categories of drought peaked in October of 2012 at 98%. Figure 9 shows drought conditions in Nebraska at the worst of the 2012 drought. The drought had severe physical and economic impacts on the state, ranging from wild fires, crop failures, and drinking water shortages and restrictions.

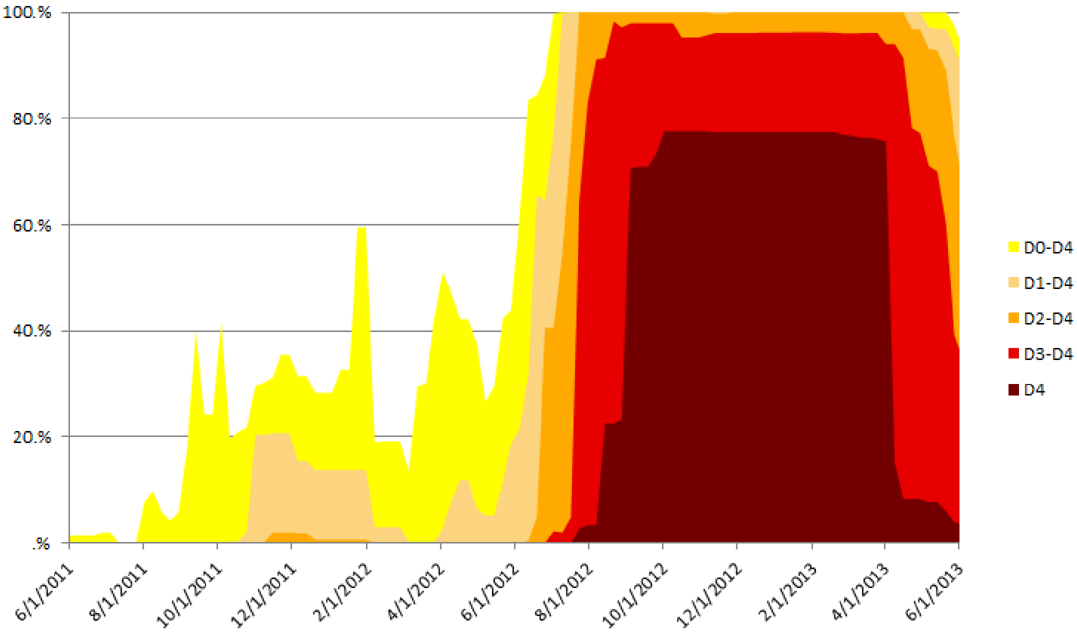
Drought has both a direct and indirect impact on groundwater levels. In Nebraska, some observation wells are screened in portions of aquifers that are not affected by human use such as irrigation pumping or other high capacity wells. Therefore, water level changes in these wells are the result of reduced recharge, largely resulting from reduced precipitation. These wells generally declined in 2012 from 2-4 feet. Parts of the Sand Hills saw rises in similar wells through 2012 and most of 2013. However, this is the result of a lag period between short term changes in climate, and changes in groundwater levels, we will eventually see a decline from the 2012 drought in the Nebraska Sand Hills. The major impact that drought has on groundwater levels comes in the form of increased demand for irrigation water due to a drastic decrease in precipitation. From the spring of 2012 to the spring of 2013 most wells in Nebraska experienced declines of one to more than 20 feet. Although reduced recharge to aquifers from reduced precipitation contributed to these declines, in most cases the contribution was minor. With precipitation deficits of 12-16 inches in Nebraska, the demand for irrigation water was significantly higher than typical years. Higher temperatures and more cloud free days greatly increased evapotranspiration rates, thus reducing the efficiency of irrigation systems, and further increasing the demand for irrigation water. The increased demand for irrigation water combined with slower rates of recharge resulted in some of the greatest recorded one-year water-level declines in Nebraska.

Figure 7. Descriptions of Drought Categories

Category	Description	Possible Impacts
D0	Abnormally Dry	Going into drought: short-term dryness slowing planting, growth of crops or pastures. Coming out of drought: some lingering water deficits; pastures or crops not fully recovered
D1	Moderate Drought	Some damage to crops, pastures; streams, reservoirs, or wells low, some water shortages developing or imminent; voluntary water-use restrictions requested
D2	Severe Drought	Crop or pasture losses likely; water shortages common; water restrictions imposed
D3	Extreme Drought	Major crop/pasture losses; widespread water shortages or restrictions
D4	Exceptional Drought	Exceptional and widespread crop/pasture losses; shortages of water in reservoirs, streams, and wells creating water emergencies

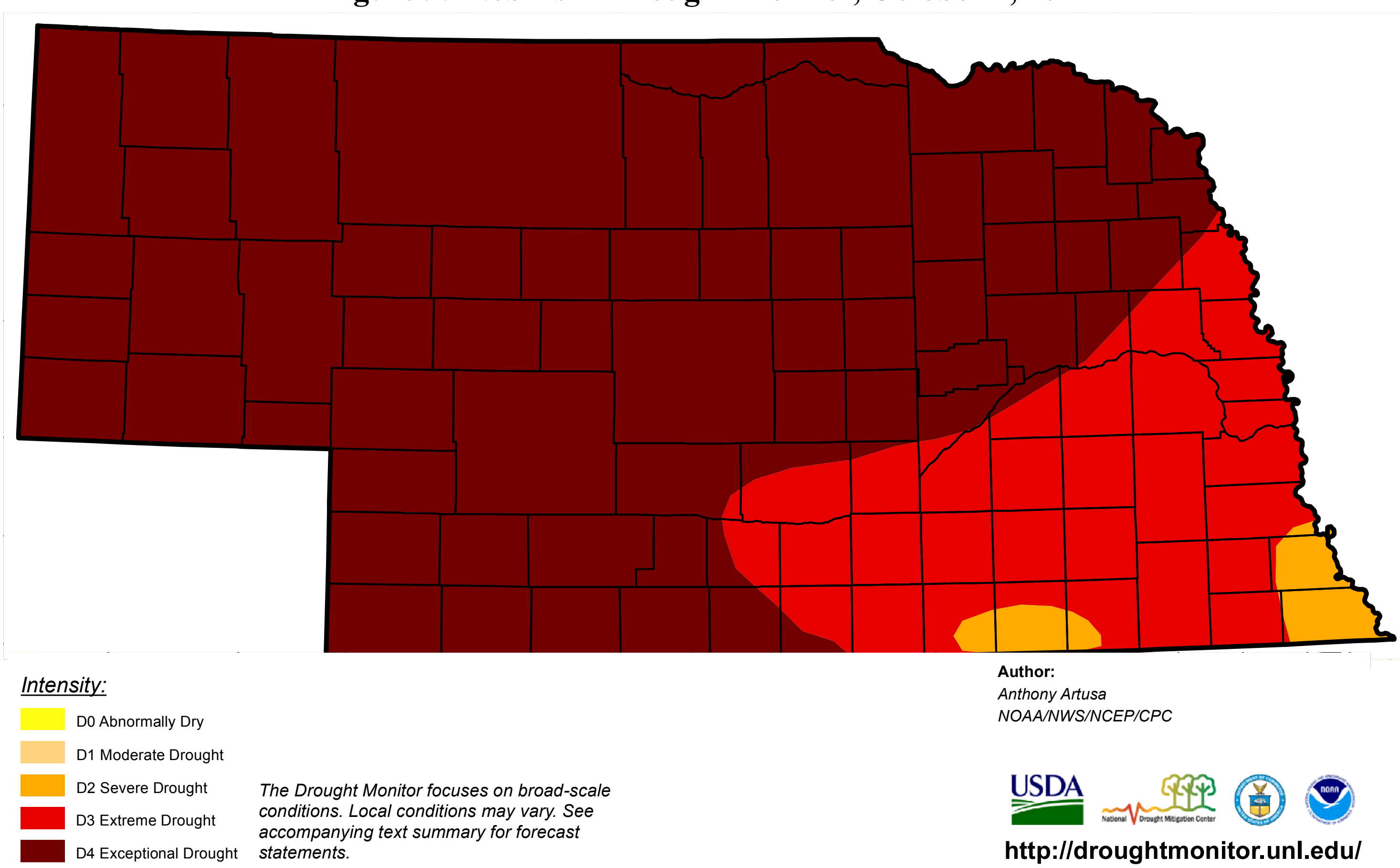
The U.S. Drought Monitor is jointly produced by the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the United States Department of Agriculture, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Map courtesy of NDMC-UNL.

Figure 8. Drought Severity Index by Percent Area in Nebraska



Source: Modified from U.S. Drought Monitor

Figure 9. Nebraska Drought Monitor, October 2, 2012



Source: U.S. Drought Monitor

CHANGES IN GROUNDWATER LEVELS, SPRING 2012 TO SPRING 2013

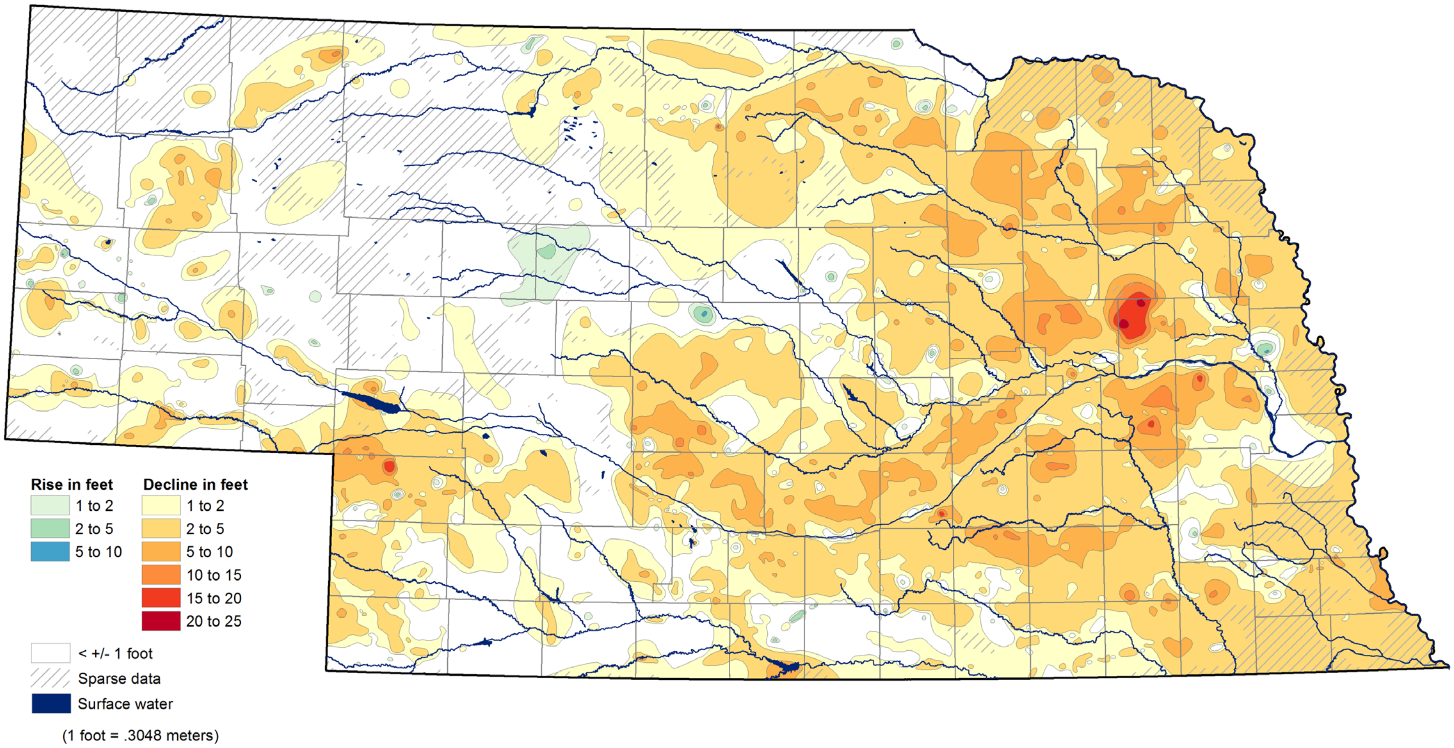
Significant groundwater level declines up to 20 feet were recorded throughout Nebraska in the spring of 2013.

In the spring of 2013, a total of 4,885 monitoring wells were measured throughout the state of Nebraska (Fig. 5). Of those wells, 91% recorded groundwater-level declines compared to the spring of 2012, with 73% experiencing a decline of greater than one foot. Groundwater-level rises were recorded in 8% of wells measured, with only 2% of wells recording a rise of greater than one foot. Approximately 1% of wells had neither rises nor declines from the spring of 2012 to the spring of 2013. All reporting weather stations in Nebraska reported precipitation values less than the 30-year average (Fig 11). Portions of Keith and Lincoln Counties, and parts of the Nebraska Panhandle received only 30-40% of the 30-year averaged precipitation.

Generally, observation wells which recorded groundwater-level rises were individual wells scattered throughout the state. Many of the wells that experienced rises were likely recorded in irrigation wells which were not pumped during the 2012 growing season due to crop rotations, conversion to pasture, etc. The largest continuous area of groundwater-level rise occurred in the Nebraska Sand Hills. During 2010 and 2011, the Sand Hills region experienced two extremely wet years, with precipitation amounts as much as 180% of the 30-year average. Many observation wells in the Sand Hills are continuing to rise from these two wet years as water moves through the aquifer. These observation wells will likely show the effects of the 2012 drought in coming years. A number of wells in southwest Lancaster County screened in paleo-valley aquifers recorded rises of approximately five feet from 2012-2013, and are likely experiencing a delayed rise similar to the Sand Hills resulting from extremely wet years in 2010 and 2011.

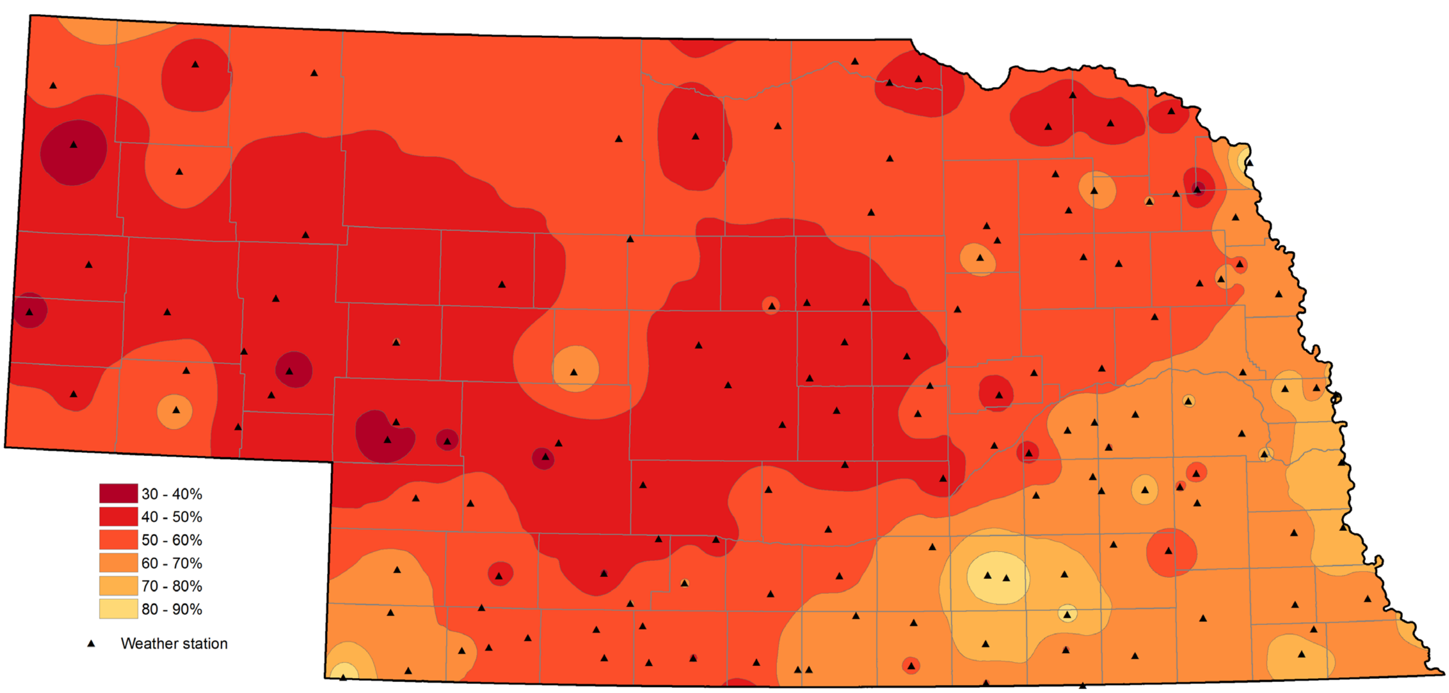
From spring 2012 to spring 2013 groundwater-level declines of greater than 1 foot were recorded in every county in Nebraska with the exception of Grant, Hooker, and Thomas Counties. The areas of greatest decline, with one-year declines in excess of 20 feet were recorded in northern Colfax County. Groundwater in this area is obtained from an isolated aquifer in glacial sediments that is dependent on surface water for recharge. In 2012, there was little surface water to recharge the aquifer, resulting in extreme groundwater-level declines. Almost the entire eastern 1/3rd of the state recorded declines of greater than two feet. Significant declines of 2-10 feet were also recorded in wells located between the Platte River and the Loup/South Loup Rivers. In western Nebraska, counties which have experienced significant historic groundwater-level declines, including Perkins, Chase, Dundy, and Box Butte counties recorded declines ranging from 1-15 feet from the spring of 2012 to the spring of 2013.

Figure 10. Groundwater-Level Changes in Nebraska - Spring 2012 to Spring 2013



Sources: U.S. Geological Survey, Nebraska Water Science Center; U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Kansas-Nebraska Area Office; Nebraska Natural Resources Districts; Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District; Conservation and Survey Division, School of Natural Resources, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Figure 11. Percent of Normal Precipitation - January 2012 to January 2013



Sources: National Climate Data Center, Asheville, North Carolina; High Plains Regional Climate Center, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

CHANGES IN GROUNDWATER LEVELS, SPRING 2008 TO SPRING 2013

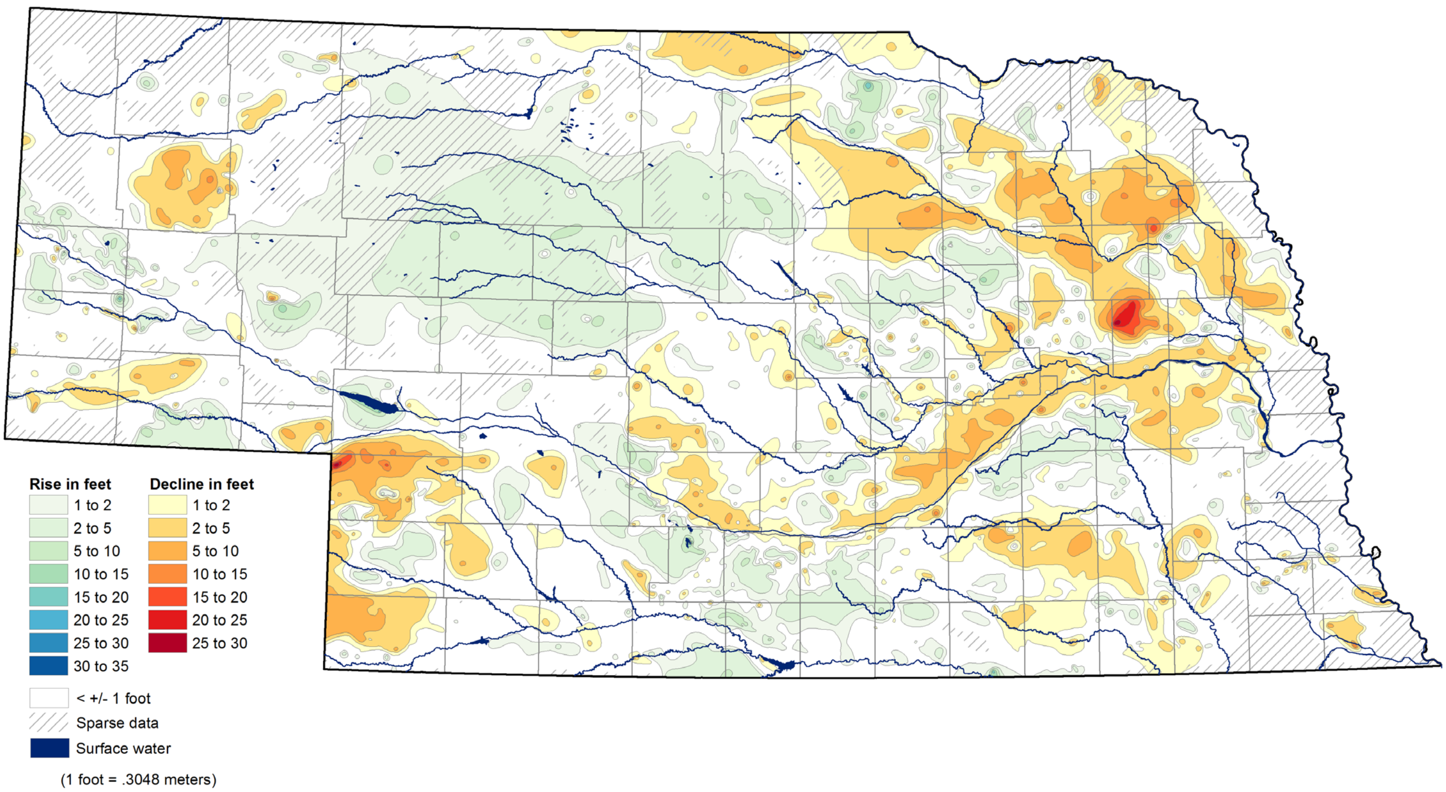
Following the extremely wet years from 2009-2011, 2012 was the driest year on record for the state of Nebraska.

The five-year period between spring 2008 and spring 2013 was dominated by extreme swings in precipitation. The period from 2009 to 2011 was characterized by above normal to much above normal precipitation. These wet years increased recharge to aquifers, and reduced demand for irrigation water causing rises in groundwater levels for many parts of the state (cf. Young et. al. 2012, pg. 10) following several dry years prior to 2006 (cf. Burbach, 2006). Following the extremely wet years from 2009-2011, 2012 was the driest year on record for the state of Nebraska. The reduced recharge to aquifers, combined with the much greater demand for irrigation water in 2012 buffered many of the groundwater-level rises recorded in recent years, resulting in significant net groundwater level declines particularly for parts of eastern Nebraska.

The five year groundwater level change map was developed based on 4,563 wells which were measured consecutively in 2008 and 2013. Of these wells, 54.5% recorded declines, 38% of all wells recorded declines of greater than one foot. One-half percent of wells recorded no change from spring 2008 to spring 2013. Vast areas of groundwater-level declines occurred over numerous parts of Nebraska. The greatest area of decline occurred in northern Colfax County, which recorded groundwater-level declines of 25-30 feet. Much of northeast Nebraska and the Elkhorn River basin recorded groundwater-level declines from 2-10 feet. The five-year average precipitation for these areas was generally less than the 30-year average. Observation wells between the Platte River and the South Loup/Loup Rivers also had significant declines of 2-10 feet, likely due to the extremely high density of irrigation wells in this region (Fig. 17). Parts of Saline, Fillmore and Clay Counties recorded similar declines of 2-10 feet likely due to average to below average precipitation and high densities of irrigation wells. Parts of western Nebraska with historically large groundwater-level declines in Box Butte, Chase, Perkins and Dundy Counties had declines ranging from 1-20 feet.

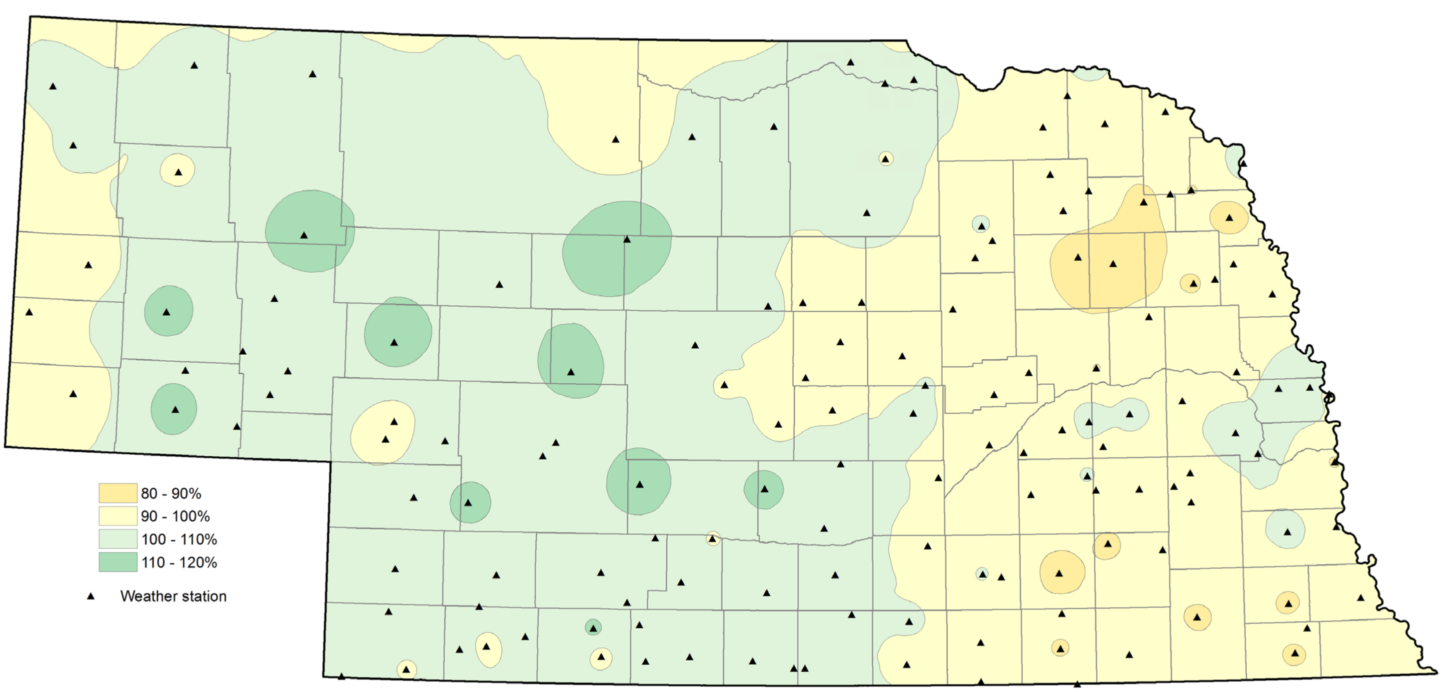
Other parts of Nebraska experienced average to above average precipitation when compared to the 30-year average. These areas generally corresponded to areas of groundwater-level rises. Of the 4,563 wells measured, 45% of wells recorded water level rises, while 28% of all wells recorded rises of greater than one foot from spring 2008 to spring 2013. Most of the Nebraska Sand Hills received slightly more than average precipitation, and recorded groundwater level rises from 1-10 feet. Similarly, parts of south central Nebraska received more than average precipitation, thus resulting in less demand for irrigation water, leading to groundwater level rises of 1-5 feet. Areas in central Nebraska to the south of the Platte River, along the North Platte River and surrounding large reservoirs statewide continue to see groundwater-level rises in the range of 1-15 feet due to seepage from unlined canals and reservoirs.

Figure 12. Groundwater-Level Changes in Nebraska - Spring 2008 to Spring 2013



Sources: U.S. Geological Survey, Nebraska Water Science Center; U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Kansas-Nebraska Area Office; Nebraska Natural Resources Districts; Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District

Figure 13. Percent of Normal Precipitation - January 2008 to January 2013



Sources: National Climate Data Center, Asheville, North Carolina; High Plains Regional Climate Center, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

CHANGES IN GROUNDWATER LEVELS, SPRING 2003 TO SPRING 2013

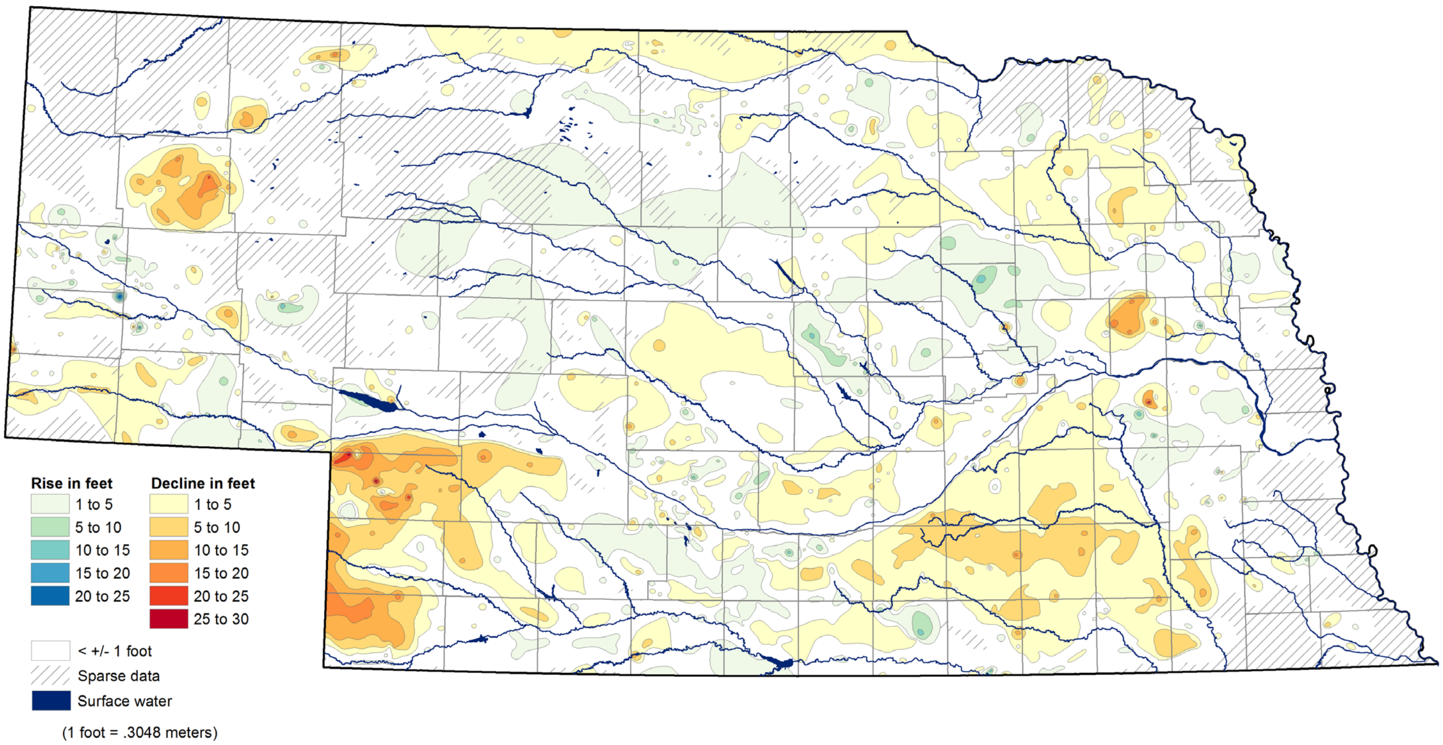
Contrasting patterns of groundwater-level changes over the past ten years reflect variations in the timing and locations of precipitation and irrigation withdrawals.

Groundwater-level changes from 2003 to 2013 were dominated by multiple contrasting periods of change. Much of the Midwest, and all of Nebraska were in a period of drought from 2000 to about 2007. During this time, groundwater-level declines were recorded throughout the state of Nebraska (Burbach, 2007). Precipitation returned to above-normal levels for the years between 2007 and early 2012, causing groundwater levels to return to pre-drought levels in much of eastern and central Nebraska. However, spring of 2012 through the spring of 2013 were the driest years on record for the state of Nebraska, resulting in groundwater-level declines which eliminated many of the groundwater-level rises associated with the wet years between 2007 and early 2012. Overall, compared against the 30-year average precipitation values, the average precipitation for the 10-year period from 2003 to 2013 was near normal for most of the state despite the drought of 2012.

The largest continuous areas of groundwater level rises were recorded across the central Sand Hills which saw rises in the range of 1-5 feet. Parts of Boone, Antelope, Madison, Wheeler and Platte counties also saw rises ranging from 1-10 feet. Many of these areas are slow to react to extreme events such as the drought of 2012, thus rises in these areas may still represent groundwater-level rises associated with the extremely wet years from 2009 to 2011. Many of these areas may continue to decline in coming years as a result. Water levels rose in many other localized areas of Nebraska due to a variety of factors. Increased flows in rivers, streams and canals for a number of consecutive years resulted in rising groundwater levels mainly along the Platte River and some of its minor tributaries. Higher water levels in numerous reservoirs in Nebraska resulted in water level rises of more than 10 feet in localized areas.

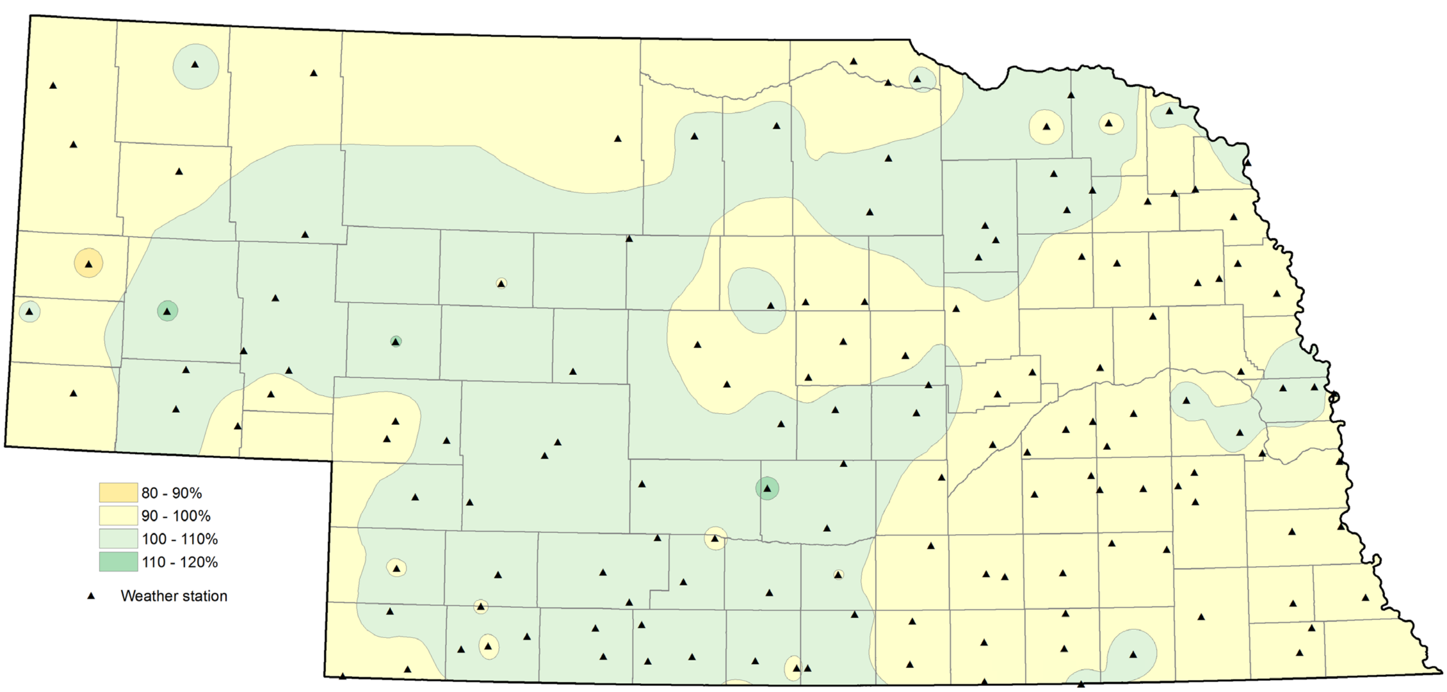
Many areas of the state recorded groundwater-level declines that were largely the result of the increased demand for irrigation water, and decreased recharge due to the drought of 2012. However, despite near average precipitation for the state between 2003 and 2013, groundwater levels in some parts of the state continue to decline. Major areas of groundwater-level decline include the south central/southeast region, Chase, Dundy and Perkins Counties as well as Box Butte, and Colfax Counties. Declines of more than 5 feet occurred over much of these regions, with declines of more than 25 feet occurring in parts of Box Butte, Perkins, Chase and Dundy Counties. Water level declines in these counties are largely the result of drawing large quantities of irrigation water from deep aquifers with little or no connection to surface water. Near-normal precipitation in south central/southeast Nebraska, combined with a high density of irrigation wells per section have resulted in declines of 1-20 feet for much of the region. Other localized areas of groundwater-level declines occurred throughout the state, which may result from a combination of factors including increased irrigation water withdrawals or reduced recharge from near normal to slightly below normal precipitation on a regional scale.

Figure 14. Groundwater-Level Changes in Nebraska - Spring 2003 to Spring 2013



Sources: U.S. Geological Survey, Nebraska Water Science Center; U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Kansas-Nebraska Area Office; Nebraska Natural Resources Districts; Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District

Figure 15. Percent of Normal Precipitation - January 2003 to January 2013



Sources: National Climate Data Center, Asheville, North Carolina; High Plains Regional Climate Center, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

CHANGES IN GROUNDWATER LEVELS, PREDEVELOPMENT TO SPRING 2013

Long-term groundwater-level changes in Nebraska primarily reflect aquifer depletion in areas of dense irrigation development and increases in storage due to seepage from canals and reservoirs.

Spring 2013 groundwater levels continue to indicate long-term declines and rises in certain areas of Nebraska (Fig. 16). With a few exceptions, areas of significant groundwater-level declines generally correspond to areas where irrigation well density is high and aquifers are deep and have little or no connection to surface water (Fig. 17). The largest groundwater-level declines from predevelopment to spring 2013 occurred in the southwestern part of the state near Chase, Perkins and Dundy Counties, and in the panhandle in Box Butte County. A large area of lesser declines occurred in the southeast corner of the High Plains aquifer in southeast to south-central Nebraska. The largest rises occurred in Gosper, Phelps, and Kearney Counties; areas where canals and surface irrigation systems exist.

The predevelopment groundwater levels used in Chase, Perkins and Dundy Counties are representative of the approximate average water levels prior to 1953. Available data indicate that, as a result of intensive use of groundwater for irrigation, a general trend of declining water levels began in about 1966. Predevelopment water levels used to develop the groundwater-level change map in Box Butte County are the approximate average water levels prior to 1946. Intensive groundwater development for irrigation since 1950 has caused water-levels to decline 5 to more than 90 feet from predevelopment levels (Fig. 16). Records from recorder wells in both areas indicate that rates of decline have been more or less steady despite changes in groundwater management practices, water use allocations, and fluctuations in the amount of annual precipitation (see Korus and Burbach, 2009b and forthcoming section).

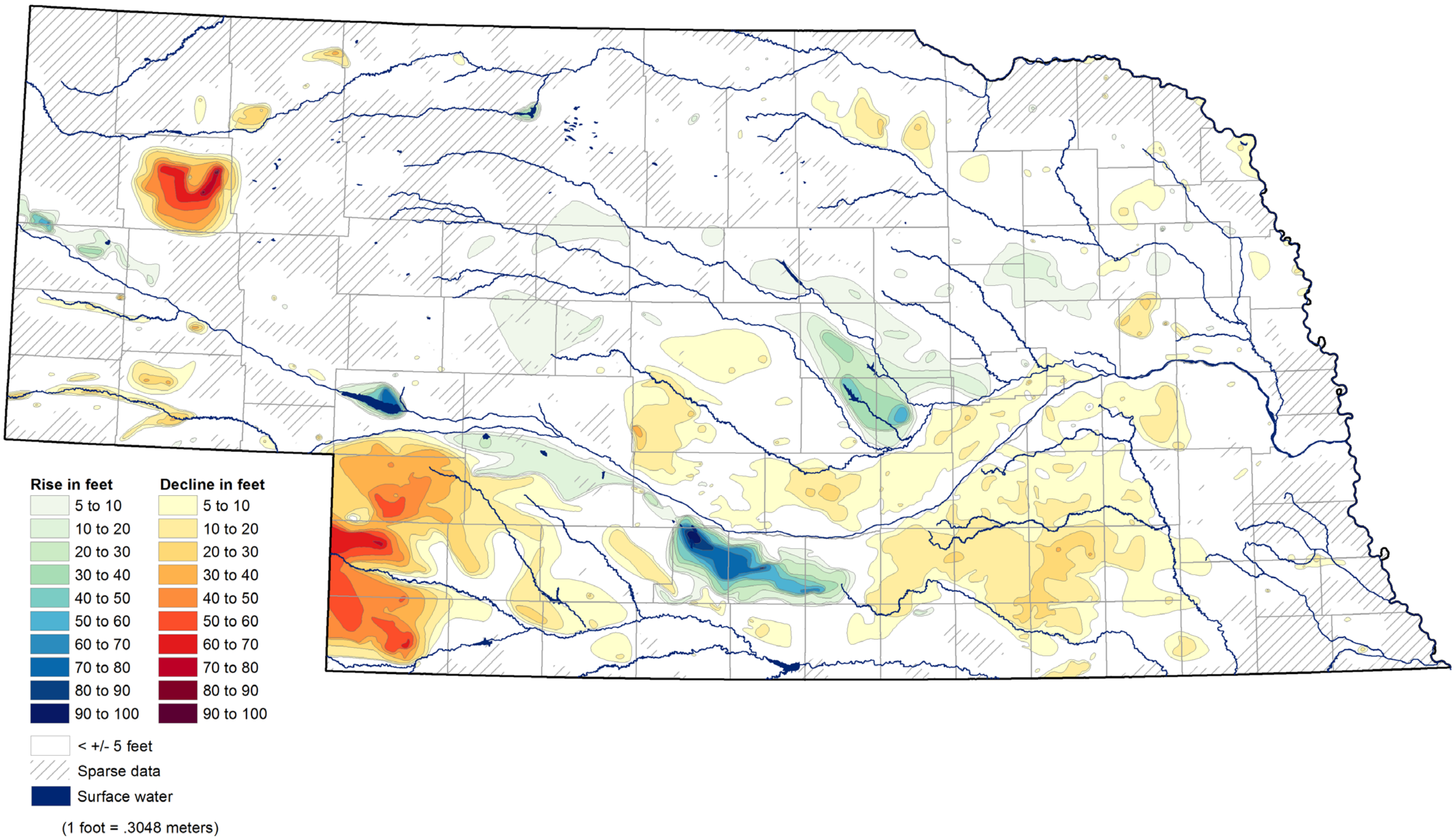
A large portion of southeast to south-central Nebraska has experienced long-term groundwater-level declines since predevelopment (Fig. 16). Predevelopment water levels in this area are generally representative of the approximate average water levels prior to 1950. Groundwater levels in large parts of this region have declined more than 10 feet, and in some areas more than 20 feet, from predevelopment.

Parts of other regions that experienced relatively large areas of decline include areas between the Platte and Loup/South Loup Rivers; Republican River Valley; localized areas throughout the Panhandle; and parts of Holt and Colfax Counties (Fig. 16). Irrigation well density is high in some, but not all, of these areas. Other factors such as aquifer characteristics, rates of recharge, and irrigation scheduling could be contributing to the declines.

Groundwater-level rises from predevelopment generally occurred in areas of surface irrigation systems. Storage of water in Lake McConaughy began in 1941, and seepage losses caused water-level rises of as much as 60 feet in nearby observation wells (Ellis and Dreeszen, 1987). Water levels generally stabilized by about 1950 and since then have fluctuated in response to changes in reservoir levels and precipitation (Johnson and Pederson, 1984). Water is released from storage in Lake McConaughy, is subsequently diverted from the Platte River near Sutherland west of North Platte, and then flows through the Tri-County Canal and a series of reservoirs toward Dawson, Gosper, Phelps, and Kearney Counties, where it has been used for irrigation since 1941. Deep percolation of water from these irrigation-distribution systems and from excess water applied to crops has raised groundwater levels more than 90 feet (Fig. 16). Groundwater levels have also risen in association with seepage from Sutherland Reservoir, Lake Maloney, and their associated canals in eastern Keith and central Lincoln Counties. Rises of as much as 60 feet in southern Sioux, Scotts Bluff and western Morrill Counties are also associated with irrigation canal systems.

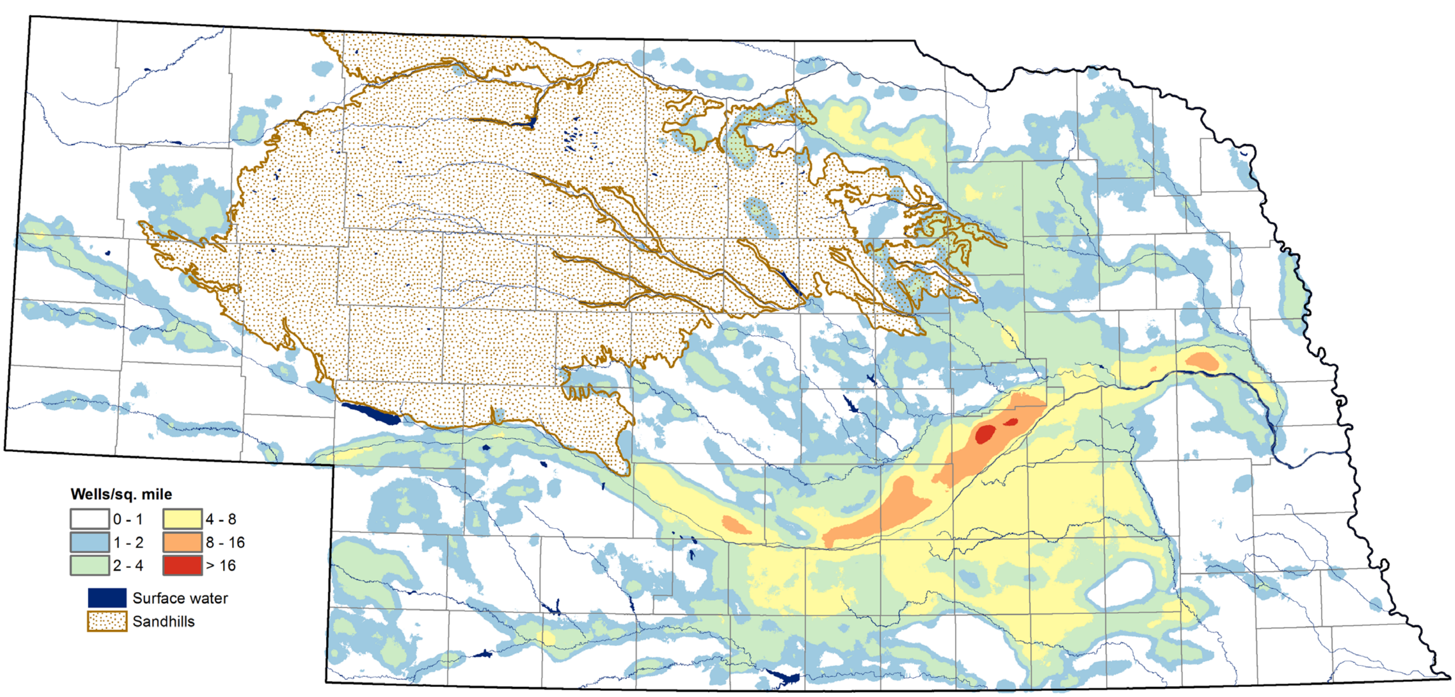
Groundwater-level rises of 10 to more than 60 feet occurred in portions of central Nebraska (Fig. 16). The highest water-level rises occurred in Valley, Sherman, and Howard Counties as the result of seepage from irrigation canals, Sherman and Davis Creek Reservoirs, and deep percolation of irrigation water applied to crops. Eastward of that area, rises occurred in aquifers that are relatively deep, have little connection to surface water, and have high densities of irrigation wells.

Figure 16. Groundwater-Level Changes in Nebraska - Predevelopment to Spring 2013



Sources: U.S. Geological Survey, Nebraska Water Science Center; U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Kansas-Nebraska Area Office; Nebraska Natural Resources Districts; Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District

Figure 17. Density of Active Registered Irrigation Wells - January 2013



Source: Nebraska Department of Natural Resources

CHANGES IN GROUNDWATER LEVELS, PREDEVELOPMENT TO SPRING 1981 AND SPRING 1981 TO SPRING 2013

Prior to 1981, groundwater levels were declining in nearly all areas of the State. After 1981, however, markedly different changes occurred in the east compared to the west.

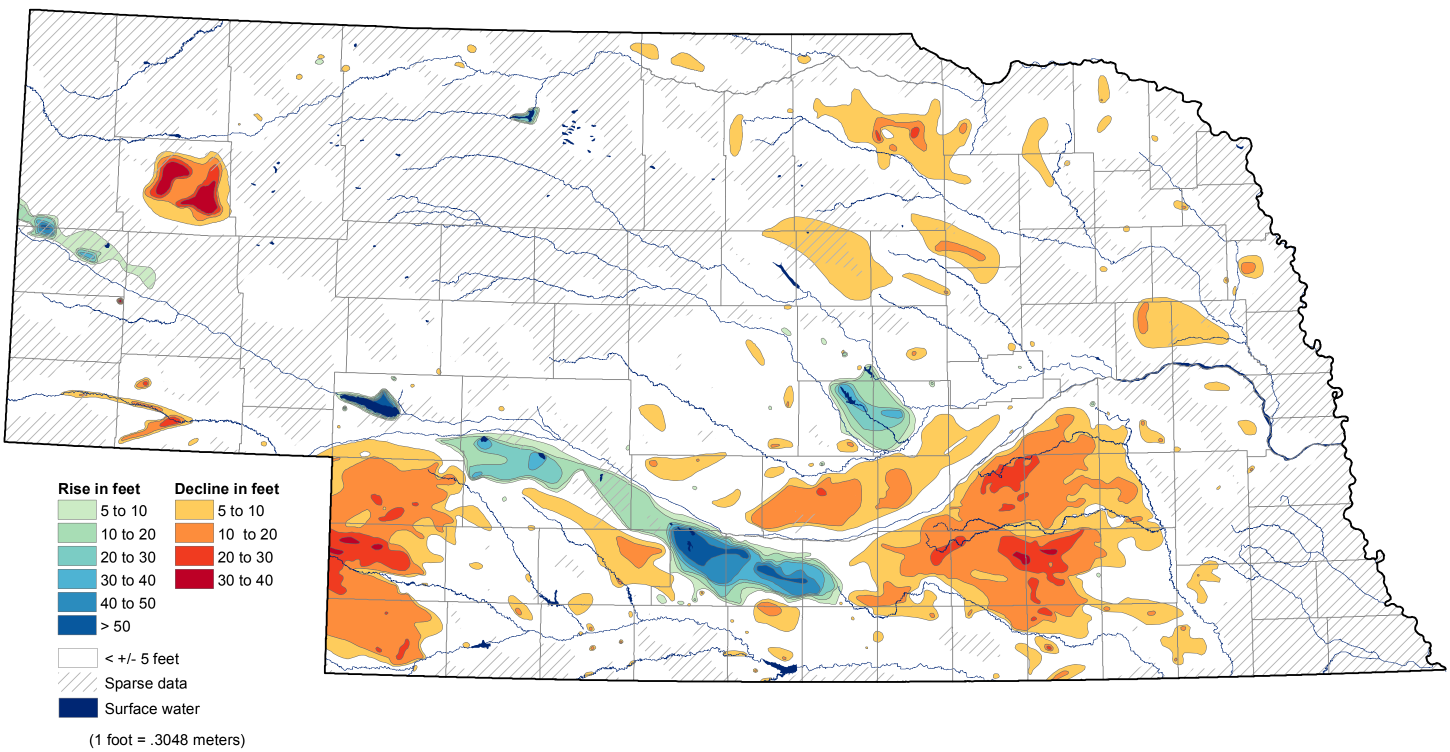
Groundwater-level changes from predevelopment to Spring 1981 reflect the responses of aquifers to the development of groundwater and surface water irrigation systems in Nebraska. Areas of significant groundwater-level declines generally corresponded to areas of dense irrigation well development (cf. Johnson and Pederson, 1981). Declines were generally equal in magnitude in eastern and western areas (Fig. 18). The largest areas in which declines occurred were in Box Butte County in the Panhandle, Chase, Perkins and Dundy Counties in the Southwest, South-Central/South East Nebraska, Platte River Valley, Central Nebraska, and northeast portion of the Sand Hills. Declines exceeded 30 feet in Box Butte County in the Panhandle, Chase County in the Southwest, and Clay and Fillmore Counties in the South-Central/South East portion of the state. Declines occurred in smaller areas of the Republican River drainage as well as the Northeast region. Almost all groundwater-irrigated areas of Nebraska experienced declines associated with groundwater withdrawals. Such declines are a necessary response of the aquifer to development according to laws of hydrologic mass balance (see Korus and Burbach, 2009a).

Groundwater-level rises from predevelopment to Spring 1981 were associated with irrigation canal systems and reservoirs (Fig. 18). The rise in southern Sioux and northern Scotts Bluff Counties was associated with seepage from the Interstate Canal System, among numerous smaller systems, and excess water applied to crops beginning in the early 20th century. The rise in these counties exceeded 60 feet in some areas. The rise in Cherry County was associated with seepage from Merritt Reservoir beginning in the mid-1960s and exceeded 20 feet immediately adjacent to the reservoir. Seepage from Lake McConaughy beginning in 1941caused groundwater levels to rise as much as 70 feet by 1981. Reservoirs and canals south of the Platte River, which are used for hydroelectric power production and irrigation, provided seepage that caused groundwater-levels to rise from eastern Keith County to western Kearney County (see discussion in previous section). Water levels began rising in this area after 1941 and had nearly reached their maximum by 1981. In Howard and Sherman Counties, groundwater levels began rising in 1963 due to seepage from Sherman Reservoir, its irrigation-distribution system, and deep percolation of irrigation water applied to crops. Rises of 10 to more than 30 feet occurred in in this area by 1981.

Compared to the changes discussed above, a much different pattern of groundwater-level changes has emerged in Nebraska since 1981 (Fig. 19). In central and eastern Nebraska, areas in which declines had occurred from predevelopment to 1981 experienced rises of 5 to more than 20 feet from 1981 to 2013. This pattern of pre-1981 decline and post-1981 recovery is observed in many wells, including the Hastings Recorder well, which has a continuous record dating to the mid-1930's, and the Aurora Recorder well, which dates to the mid-1950's (Fig. 20). Many areas in central and eastern Nebraska have returned to 1981 levels, or have had a net rise in groundwater levels. However, the extent and magnitude of net gains in groundwater levels has decreased in these regions since the spring of 2011 due to extreme drought conditions of 2012 (cf. Young et. al. 2012, pg. 17). With few exceptions in localized areas in central and eastern Nebraska, water levels are still within 5 feet of 1981 levels.

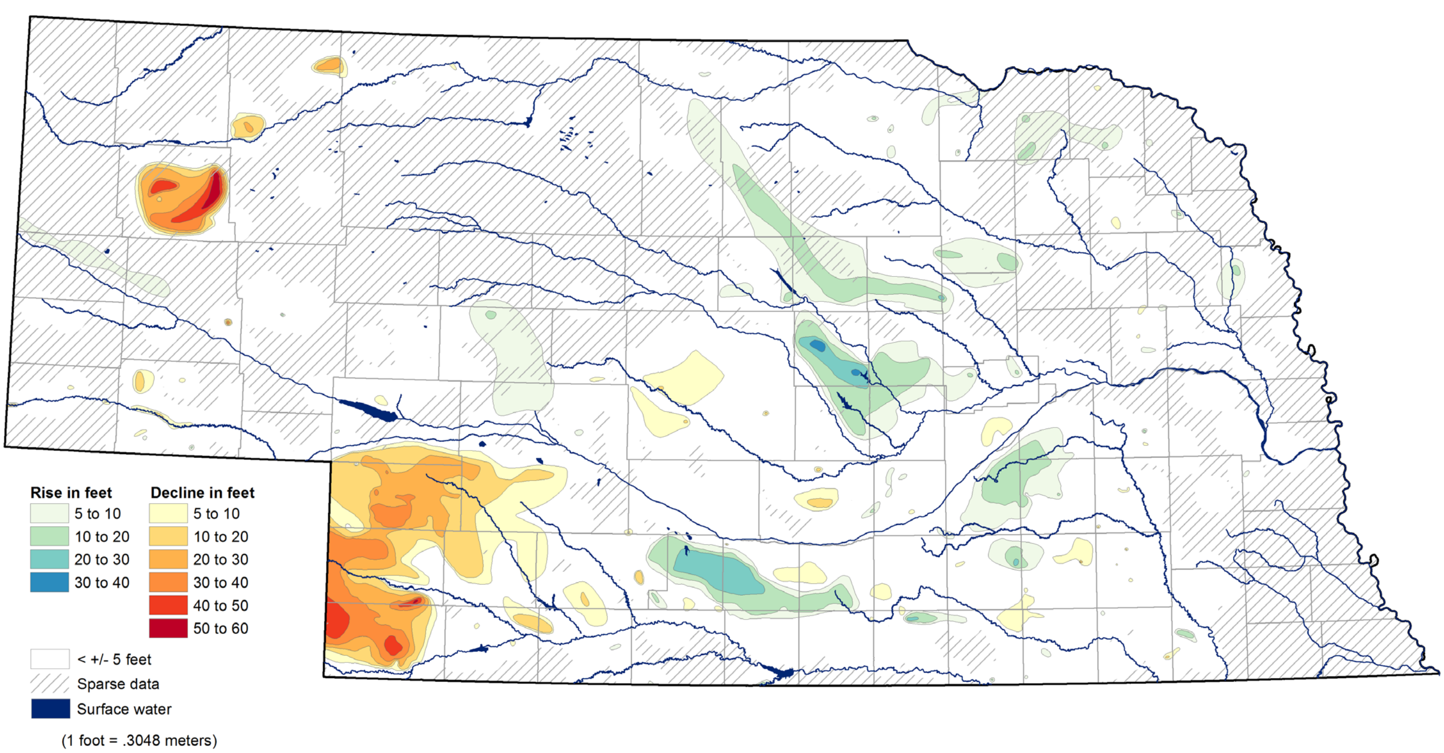
Declines in the South-Central/South East region of Nebraska reached a maximum in 1981 and have since recovered such that changes in some areas are now less than 5 feet compared to predevelopment levels (Figs 16, 18, 19). Groundwater levels in most of this area, however, remain below predevelopment levels. It is hypothesized that the post-1981 recovery of groundwater levels in central and eastern Nebraska resulted from a combination of factors, including (1) reduced groundwater withdrawals during several long periods of above-average precipitation, (2) increased irrigation efficiencies that resulted in reduced pumping rates and volumes, and (3) stabilization of groundwater-levels as the aquifer equilibrated to the new hydrological conditions imposed on it by irrigation development decades earlier (see Korus and Burbach, 2009a). Another possible explanation for these rises may be related to increasing rates of recharge. In some areas, a shallow water table aquifer is separated from the primary aquifer by a confining layer. Irrigation during the first several decades after development was primarily by means of flooding along rows of crops. This method resulted in over-application and deep percolation, which thereby recharged the shallow aquifer. Evidence for this phenomenon is shown in the hydrograph for the Exeter Recorder Well, which is screened in the shallow aquifer (Fig. 16). The steady rise from 1956 to 1981 in this well corresponds to the steady decline observed in nearby wells that are screened in the deep aquifer. This excess water may have served as a source of new recharge to the primary aquifer in areas where the confining layer is sufficiently permeable.

Figure 18. Groundwater-Level Changes in Nebraska - Predevelopment to Spring 1981



Sources: U.S. Geological Survey, Nebraska Water Science Center; U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Kansas-Nebraska Area Office; Nebraska Natural Resources Districts; Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District

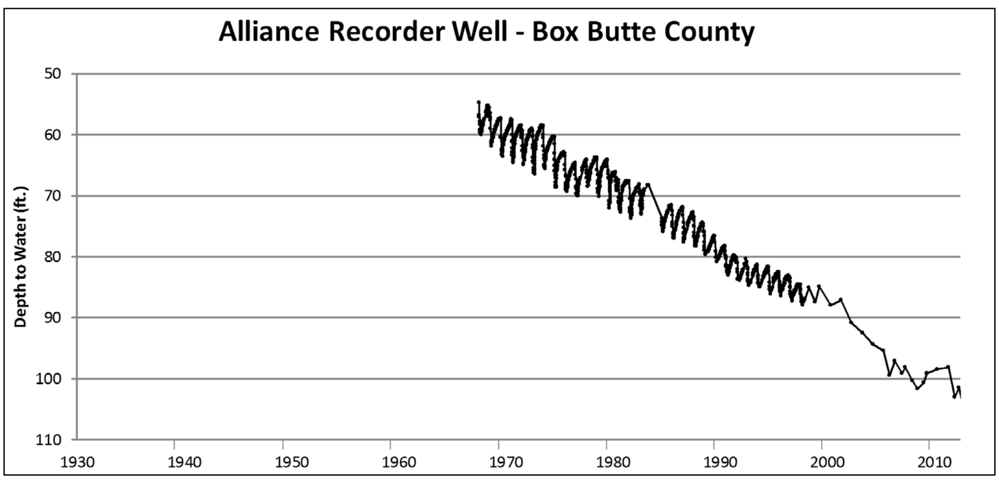
Figure 19. Groundwater-Level Changes in Nebraska - Spring 1981 to Spring 2013

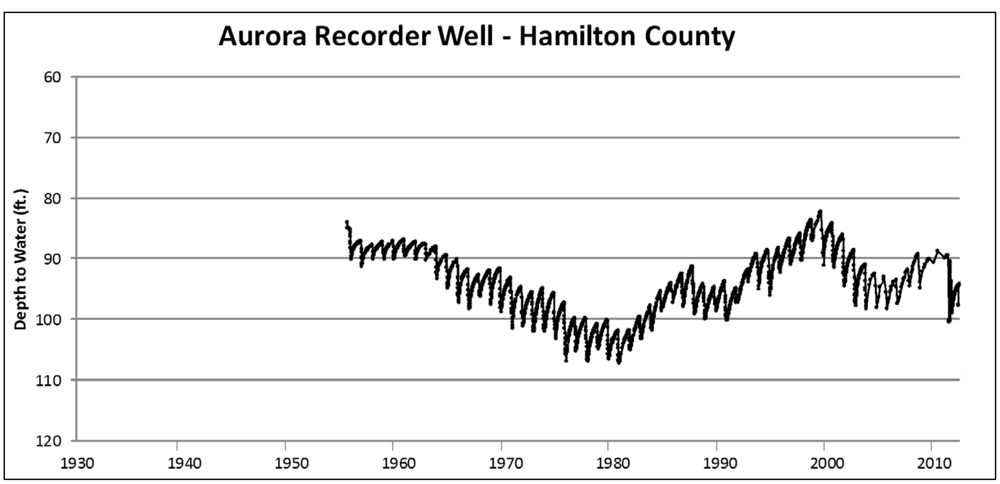


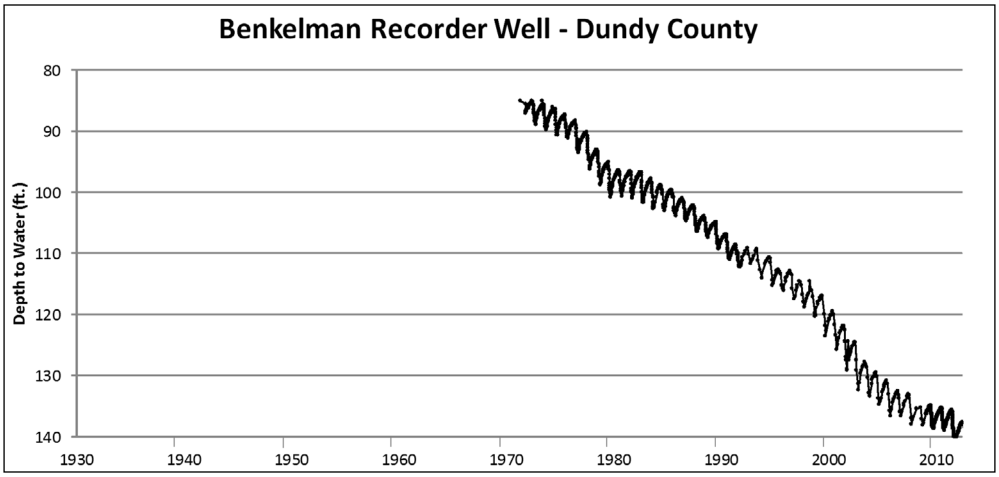
Sources: U.S. Geological Survey, Nebraska Water Science Center; U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Kansas-Nebraska Area Office; Nebraska Natural Resources Districts; Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District

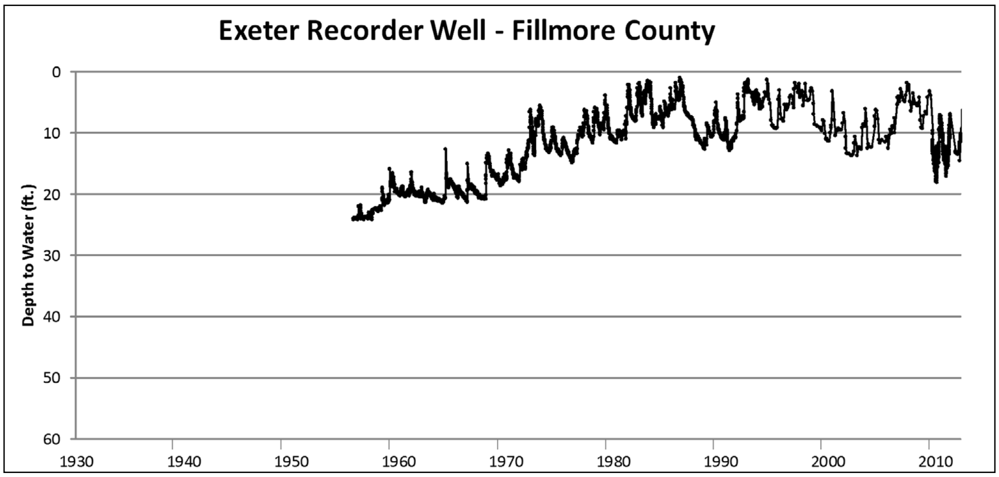
In contrast to the groundwater-level rises in the east, levels continued to decline in parts of western Nebraska from 1981 to 2013 (Fig. 15). The Alliance, Benkelman, and Imperial Recorder wells show declines of - 60 feet in just 50 years, an average of about 1 foot per year (Fig. 16). Brief periods of unchanging or rising groundwater levels occurred, but the rates of decline were steady overall despite changes in groundwater management practices, water use allocations, and fluctuations in the amount of annual precipitation over the past 30 years. The pattern of long-term groundwater-level decline over a large region, such as southwest Nebraska or Box Butte County, is a normal response of aquifer to irrigation development. Such declines reflect the release of water from storage in the aquifer and the adjustment of the water table to new hydrological stresses (see Korus and Burbach, 2009a). These declines will stabilize only if groundwater withdrawals do not exceed the total yield of the aquifer, which is a function of its hydrogeological characteristics as well as its sources and rates of replenishment.

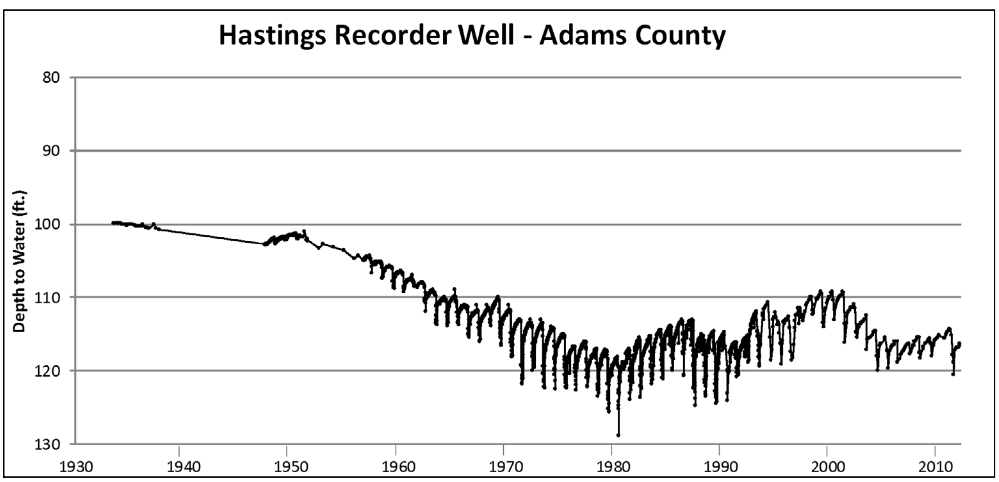
Figure 20. Groundwater-Level Hydrographs Typical of Southeast and Southwest Nebraska

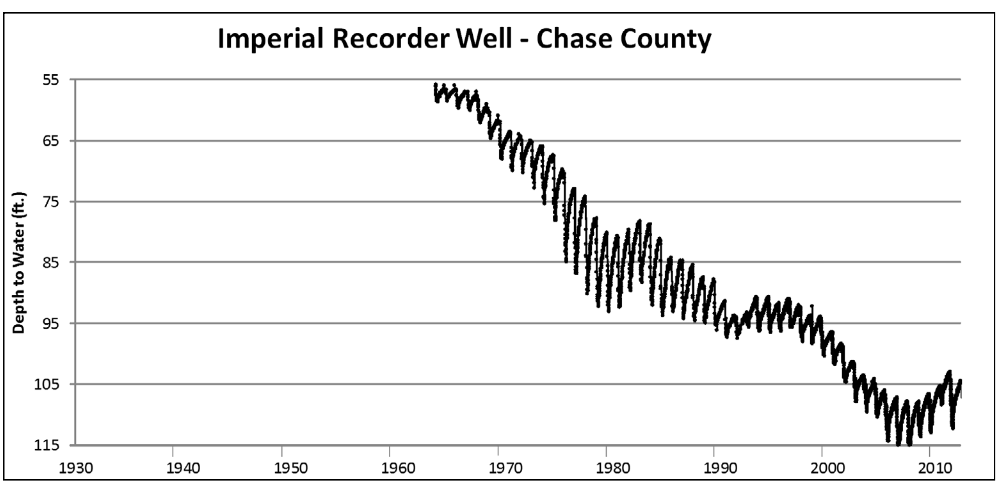





Benkelman Recorder Well - Dundy County
Depth to Water (ft.)
80
90
100
110
120
130
140
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
1980
1990
2000
2010


Exeter Recorder Well - Fillmore County
Depth to Water (ft.)
0
10
20
30
40
50
60
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
1980
1990
2000
2010


Hastings Recorder Well - Adams County
Depth to Water (ft.)
80
90
100
110
120
130
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
1980
1990
2000
2010


Imperial Recorder Well - Chase County
Depth to Water (ft.)
55
65
75
85
95
105
115
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
1980
1990
2000
2010

AVERAGE DAILY STREAMFLOWS, 2012

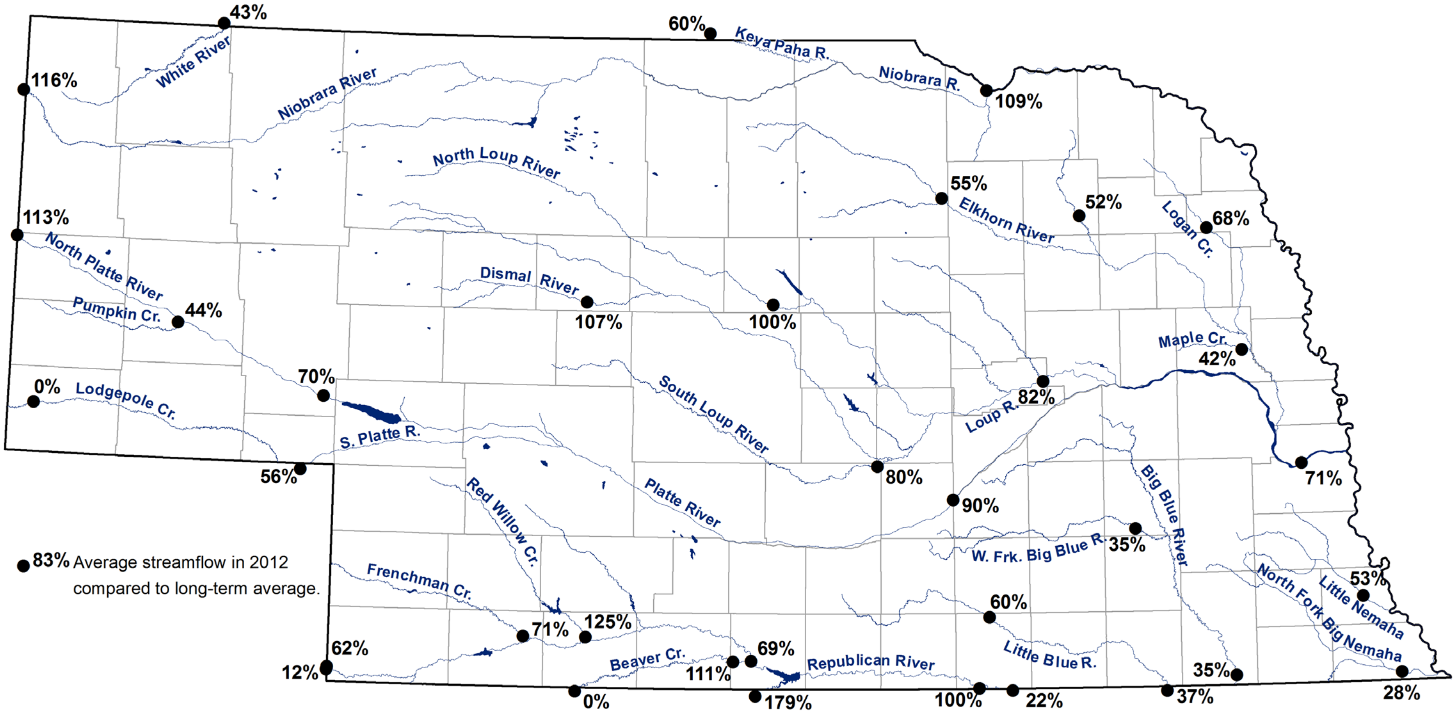
Below-average precipitation resulted in normal to much below normal streamflows throughout most of the State in 2012.

The flows in Nebraska streams have several different sources. Snowmelt in the Rocky Mountains west of Nebraska provides springtime flows for the Platte River as it enters Nebraska. Variations in the amount of winter snowpack have a profound impact on discharges, but can also affect the timing and amount of releases from dams in Nebraska, Wyoming, and Colorado. Runoff from precipitation is the source of many of the peak flows in Nebraska streams. Runoff is greatest on soils with low infiltration rates and/or high slopes. As such, many streams in eastern Nebraska have 'flashy' discharges characterized by high flows immediately following large precipitation events. Streams with headwaters in the Sand Hills are characterized by steady flows year-round because high infiltration rates in the sandy soils limit runoff and provide constant groundwater discharge to streams.

Average daily streamflow values during 2012 can generally be classified into two categories. Most rivers with headwaters in the Sand Hills had streamflow values that were near normal to slightly below normal. The North Platte River also experienced flows close to average values. These rivers have sources which provide somewhat steady flows even during dry years. Most other streams in Nebraska recorded flows that were below normal to much below normal. Flows in most of these streams are dominated by runoff from precipitation, rather than groundwater discharges to streams. The drastically reduced precipitation due to the drought of 2012 has greatly reduced flows in many streams, particularly in eastern Nebraska.

The factors affecting streamflows are numerous and complex. Nonetheless, groundwater-level declines in areas where streams are well-connected to aquifers have lowered or altogether halted flows to some streams that overlie the High Plains Aquifer (Sophocleous, 1998). Continued monitoring of groundwater-level changes throughout Nebraska is necessary in order to evaluate and manage these interconnected resources.

Figure 21. Average Streamflow in Water Year 2012, as a Percentage of the 30-Year Average



Sources: U.S. Geological Survey, Nebraska Water Science Center; U.S. Bureau of Reclamation; Colorado Department of Water Resources; Nebraska Department of Natural Resources

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Groundwater-Level Changes in Nebraska Map Series
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Reports Containing Water-level Information

Year	Publication and Number	Author(s) and year published
pre 1954	U.S.G.S. Open-File Rpt. 54-138	Keech, C.F.; Case, R.L., 1954
1954	U.S.G.S. Open-File Rpt. 55-80	Keech, C.F.; Case, R.L., 1955
1955	U.S.G.S. Open-File Rpt. 56-70	Keech, C.F., 1956
1956	U.S.G.S. Open-File Rpt. 57-61	Keech, C.F., 1957
1957	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 4*	Keech, C.F., 1958
1958	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 5*	Keech, C.F., 1959
1959	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 6	Keech, C.F., 1960
1960	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 9	Keech, C.F., 1961
1961	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 12	Keech, C.F.; Hyland, J.B., 1962
1962	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 13	Emery, P.A.; Malhoit, M.M., 1963
1963	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 14	Emery, P.A.; Malhoit, M.M., 1964
1964	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 17	Emery, P.A.; Malhoit, M.M., 1965
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1967	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 23	Keech, C.F., 1968
1968	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 24*	Keech, C.F.; Svoboda, G.R., 1969
1969	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 26*	Keech, C.F., 1970
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1972	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 34	Ellis, M.J., 1973
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1975	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 43*	Ellis, M.J.; Pederson, D.T., 1976
1976	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 44	Ellis, M.J.; Pederson, D.T. 1977
1977	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 45	Ellis, M.J.; Pederson, D.T., 1978
1978	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 49	Pederson, D.T.; Johnson, M.S., 1979
1979	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 50*	Johnson, M.S.; Pederson, D.T., 1980
1980	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 51	Johnson, M.S.; Pederson, D.T., 1981
1981	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 52	Johnson, M.S.; Pederson, D.T., 1982
1982	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 56	Johnson, M.S.; Pederson, D.T., 1983
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1984	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 59	Ellis, M.J.; Pederson, D.T., 1985
1985	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 61	Ellis, M.J.; Pederson, D.T., 1986
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1988	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 66	Ellis, M.J.; Steele, G.V.; Wigley, P.B., 1989
1989	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 67	Ellis, M.J.; Steele, G.V.; Wigley, P.B., 1990
1990	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 69	Steele, G.V.; Wigley, P.B., 1991
1991	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 71	Steele, G.V.; Wigley, P.B., 1992
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2009	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 76	Korus, J.T.; Burbach, M.E. 2009
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2011	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 79	Korus, J.T.; Burbach, M.E.; Howard, L.M.; 2011
2012	Nebraska Water Survey Paper 80	Young, A.R.; Burbach, M.E.; Korus, J.T.; Howard, L.M.; 2012
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