



“The Heart & Soul of Our Community”

NRD Partners with Beaver Crossing on Improvements to Historic Park

When a massive tornado tore through Beaver Crossing on Mother’s Day 2014, it destroyed or damaged virtually every home and business in the small community, ripped trees out by the roots, and left farm buildings lying in heaps of twisted metal. Power lines blocked the roads and center pivots with wheels in the air were scattered across fields.

The city park, just a few blocks from downtown, became the unofficial dumping grounds during the clean-up phase. Debris littered what was once the main gathering place for the community. “We wondered if we would ever see green grass there again,” said longtime resident Marsha Barth. “There were huge piles of trees and there was broken glass and nails everywhere.”



It took more than a year to finish repairs to homes and businesses before work on restoring the park could begin. Municipal funds were involved in the clean-up, but there wasn’t money in the village’s budget to rebuild the ballfields, grandstands, and other amenities. “It was a labor of love for the whole community,” to

Thankfully, no one in Beaver Crossing was hurt; neither was the community’s spirit harmed.

bring the park back to life, explained Terry Barth, Marsha’s husband and a lead volunteer on the park renovation. Even older folks who couldn’t do much physical labor came out to help. “With their trembling hands, they would hold the bolts or pass the wrenches,” recalled Terry.

Immediately, residents began the long, slow process of clearing away the wreckage and working together to build back stronger than before.

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UPPER BIG BLUE NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT
BLUEPRINT



It took years to raise the funds necessary and renovation happened in stages, a bit at a time. Thanks to contributions from citizens and businesses, hundreds of volunteer hours, and support from the Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District, the park is once more a focal point for the village. The latest upgrade included improvements to the park's main building, which houses restrooms and the concession stand (the proceeds from which support youth sports). Through the Upper Big Blue NRD's Parks Program, the NRD's board of directors approved the village's request to provide 25 percent of the local cost-share up to \$10,000 toward the total \$80,000 needed for the renovation.

"We feel good about the work that Beaver Crossing has put in to their park as well as the whole town itself in rebuilding," said Roger Houdersheldt, chairman of the Upper Big Blue NRD board of directors. "The amount of labor and machinery that has been volunteered is remarkable and a testament to the town and surrounding area."

Summer 2020 was the perfect time for park improvements, as the pandemic meant the cancellation of regularly scheduled baseball and softball tournaments. The renovation was completed at the end of September, including upgrades to the bathrooms for ADA compliance. "We wanted to make sure the park was accessible for everyone," said Jere Leif, who has worked with Terry to coordinate funds and volunteers for the project.

"We couldn't have done all of this without the help of the NRD," explained Marsha. In addition to funds through the NRD's Park's Program, which supported the recent facility upgrades and the installation of a half-mile walking trail around the perimeter of the park, the NRD also supplied trees in the aftermath of the

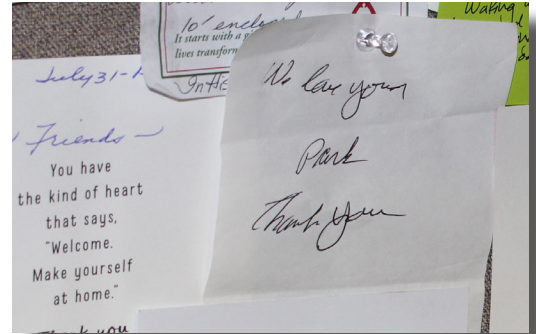
tornado. The NRD's Storm Damaged Tree Program provided 170 new trees for planting on public and private property throughout the village in 2014.

Now fully restored, the Beaver Crossing City Park is used by community members daily. Families enjoy the swimming pool, tennis and basketball courts, and playground equipment. Seniors exercise on the walking trail. High school teams compete at the ballfields. A ladies group meets for coffee most days at the picnic shelter. The annual Beaver Daze community festival is held there (though this, too, was cancelled in 2020), featuring live music, a rib cook-off, and other events.

The park is also frequented by visitors who make use of the six RV hookup spots available for a free-will donation. The park is close enough to I-80 to be convenient for cross-country travelers, yet far enough away from the traffic to be a peaceful place to stop. "We hear from campers all the time that they are amazed such a small town has such a great park," said Jere, noting that many travelers have also contributed funds to the community's effort to rebuild.

"This park is the town's heart. It is the heart and soul of our community," said lifelong resident Johnny Davis. A retired farmer, Davis has volunteered his time, labor, and tractor for park improvement projects since the tornado.

The park has been here for more than a century said Davis, reminiscing about the spring-fed, gravel-bottomed swimming pool and the vintage grandstand that used to be on the property. Davis recalled with a smile the memory of practicing with the high school football team at the park many decades ago and getting tossed, pads and all, into the old pool as part of freshman initiation to the team. While the park looks a bit different today, it remains a place where good times are celebrated and memories are made, thanks to the efforts of Beaver Crossing's citizens and the partnership with the Upper Big Blue NRD. ♦♦♦



Geneva Boys Pond To See Upgrades

NRD Supports Community Fishing Spot

Since the 1900s, residents of Geneva have been enjoying local flora and fauna at a little fishing spot simply dubbed the Boys Pond. Surrounded by benches and bisected by a walking bridge, the one-acre pond offers several places to quietly cast a line and enjoy the songs of the crickets, birds, and frogs. Sheltered picnic tables and barbecue grills make it a great place to gather and enjoy a meal. A fountain keeps the water moving and regular stocking means there are plenty of fish for anglers to enjoy. A paved path invites visitors to walk the shaded circumference of the pond and enjoy the swaying foliage of the willow trees dancing over the surface of the water.

Big things are in the works for this picturesque community gem. A planned upgrade to the site would increase the footprint of the pond by about 25 percent, extending it to an adjacent property to the south. A playground and basketball court may also be added, as well as a dock with improved access. The project is a partnership between the City of Geneva and the Geneva Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department, whose members fundraise and manage upkeep and improvements at the park.

At the August board meeting for the Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District, Jeff Wusk, an industrial technology teacher at Fillmore Central and volunteer firefighter in Geneva, requested support from the NRD for the pond expansion project. The NRD board voted to allocate \$10,000 in the next two years for the project. Additionally, Jack Wergin and Jeff Ball of the NRD Projects Department will provide technical assistance during the planning phase, along with input from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Other funds for the project will be provided by community members in Geneva.

Through the NRD's Parks Program, district cities and villages have access to planning and financial assistance for the development or improvement of natural resources in nature areas, campgrounds, and park facilities that encourage tree planting, creation of wildlife habitat, and open spaces.

The Geneva Boys Pond has been improved many times in its 120 years, always with the help of community volunteers. A free fishing clinic is held at the pond each June to introduce kids to the sport, hosted by the Geneva Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department. While anyone is allowed to fish at the Boys Pond, those 16 and under or 62 and over are the target audience for the community amenity. And despite its gender specific title, girls are also very welcome.

According to Geneva City Administrator Kyle Svec, Boys Pond has been an integral part of Geneva's town history for decades. "While it is a city park, the volunteer fire department has taken on the general care of the area as a way of giving back to the community," Svec said. "The firemen are continually looking for ways to improve Boys Pond. We are very thankful for their dedication as well as the contributions of the Upper Big Blue NRD as we improve Boys Pond for generations to come." ♦♦♦





Conservation & Recreation

NRD Private Dams Program Offers Landowners Assistance for Improvements

The water in the pond on Dwaine Kubicek's farmland in Milligan is low, having been drained recently for improvements to the dam structure. Still, it is the prettiest spot in the area on this warm day in early fall. Bullfrogs are hopping, crickets are singing, and a family of ducks is paddling across the pond toward the haven of a small island. Trees hug the shoreline, providing cover for white tailed deer and mule deer. Kubicek has seen plenty of bobcats, rabbits, pheasants, quail, and numerous species of waterfowl at the communal watering hole. In the spring, dozens of endangered whooping cranes will pause their annual migration for a short stay on the property, filling up on last year's corn in the neighboring fields and bedding down on the water at night.

This robust and diverse ecosystem is made possible by the dam on the north end of the pond. Originally installed by Kubicek's father in 1964, the dam collects runoff from 1,600 surrounding acres and holds 78 acre-feet (25.4 million gallons) of water in the conservation pool. After 56 years of use, the dam was still functional but had begun to show its age. Parts of the tube were rusted through. Kubicek knew that water

seeping through the pipe could wash out the soil underneath and lead to the dam's eventual failure.

"I didn't want to just break it open and not catch all that water," said Kubicek. "I wanted to keep that conservation practice going." Kubicek partnered with the Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District on the repairs, taking advantage of cost-share funds in the Private Dams Program. These funds provide landowners with an opportunity to correct or re-build privately owned dams. The NRD will contribute 75 percent of the project costs up to a maximum cost-share of \$50,000. Eligible costs include construction and design services provided by a private engineering firm. The NRD works with the Natural Resources Conservation Service for the design and construction support services provided to this popular program.



The repairs to Kubicek's dam, which included removing the old pipe and installing a new one, as well as a new riser and other reinforcements, cost about \$71,000, of which the NRD contributed \$50,000. "When my dad built it, it cost \$10,000. Now just to replace the tube is over \$70,000. But I guess that's progress," Kubicek jokes. "I was most appreciative that

the Upper Big Blue decided to help me out on that because it would have been a much bigger decision for me otherwise.”

Nebraskans have made a large investment in building dams across the state. There are over 2,900 dams on the Nebraska Dam Inventory; 57 percent of them are privately owned. Most of these dams are considered “small” (storage of 15-250 acre-feet). According to a report from 2018, 43 percent of Nebraska’s dams are more than 50 years old, and nearly 500 Nebraska dams are in poor condition, meaning they may fail under expected conditions. To rebuild these dams (at an average cost of \$60,000 each) the total investment would be \$122,820,000.

Dams like Kubicek’s provide sediment and erosion control. They also control flooding and store water for future irrigation use. Water that would have been lost instead stays on Kubicek’s land and recharges the aquifer. Kubicek is considering the installation of a second dam on another part of his property for

additional flood control.

After the flooding Nebraska saw in 2019, Kubicek isn’t the only one who recognizes the value of dam investments. Across the state, the flood control benefits of Nebraska’s dams provide an estimated benefit of over \$62 million per year.

The work on Kubicek’s dam was completed in August and with the rainy week at the beginning of September, the water level was on the way back up. One of the final components to the project was reseeding the area that had been damaged by work crews and heavy machinery with native grasses to prevent erosion and restore the wildlife habitat.

Kubicek stocks the pond annually and says the fishing and hunting at the dam site are both good. “There are six of us eating off of that area,” he says. And that, in addition to the many other benefits, is an investment worth protecting. ♦♦♦

Water Leaders Academy Scholarship Available

Abundant clean water is an essential component of Nebraska’s economy and the health and wellbeing of all Nebraskans. Stewarding this valuable resource through educating leaders is the goal of the Nebraska Water Leaders Academy. Through six 1.5-day trainings over the course of a year, participants learn from a variety of people working in the field and tour locations around Nebraska to see how resources are managed.

The board of directors of the Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District believes that the Water Leaders Academy is a great opportunity for district residents, especially those with interest in serving on the board of the NRD in the future. The board has approved a sponsorship for one district resident to attend per year. This sponsorship is not limited to those working in natural resources or land management. Any district resident may apply. The total cost of attending the Water Leaders Academy, including lodging and some meals, is \$2,000. The NRD sponsorship would cover \$1,500 of that cost.

The board’s originally proposed plan would have offered the NRD sponsorship for participation in the 2021 Water Leaders Academy program. However, the 2020 WLA session was disrupted by the global pandemic. In 2021, the cohort will be made up primarily of those from the 2020 class who were unable to complete the program and the format will be altered. Therefore, the sponsorship from the NRD will be available starting with the 2022 Water Leaders Academy. Applications will be taken in September 2021. For full details on how to apply for the sponsorship from the NRD and apply to attend the Water Leaders Academy, visit www.upperbigblue.org/education. ♦♦♦



Improving Soils to Improve Harvests

Registration Now Open for Project GROW Winter Workshop 2020

What drives soil health? What are the costs and benefits of improving your soil? These questions and more will be explored at the upcoming Project GROW Winter Workshop, December 3. The third annual Winter Workshop will feature Dr. Jill Clapperton, owner and principal scientist at Rhizoterra, Inc. Other speakers will include Dan Leininger, NRD water conservationist, and Al Dutcher, associate state climatologist with UNL.

All are invited to attend this free educational event, which will be held from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Holthus Convention Center (3130 Holen Avenue). You can register for the Project GROW Winter Workshop online or call (402) 362-6601 by November 25.

Attending the workshop will be of added benefit to producers in need of nitrogen management certification, as it fulfills the training requirement for recertification. In past years, this option was only open to those who had previously certified and needed to renew certification. This year, even those producers who are certifying for the first time will be able to receive the requisite training credits by attending this event, plus a short meeting afterward.

Dr. Clapperton is a well-known international speaker on topics relating to creating and managing healthy and productive soils, crop rotation, and cover crops. She is working to develop and adapt technologies for improved on-farm decision-making based on science. Her work focuses on how improving soil health increases productivity as well as the nutrient density of the food produced. In short, healthier soils produce healthier foods.

Prior to founding Rhizoterra, Clapperton was the rhizosphere ecologist at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Lethbridge Research Centre in Lethbridge, Alberta, for 16 years. In addition to her work with Rhizoterra, she ranches in the Bitterroot Valley of western Montana. She is often seen during the growing season on the Rhizoterra Experimental farm north of Reardan, Washington. She travels extensively as a speaker on soil health topics and a consultant for agricultural systems.

Dan Leininger has been with the Upper Big

Blue NRD since 2004, working to educate local producers on soil health and water conservation. At the Winter Workshop, he will present an update on the Project GROW demonstration fields in York, where many soil health practices have been implemented to restore soils on the city's wellhead area.

Al Dutcher will return to the Project GROW winter workshop again this year to provide insight on 2020 weather patterns and present a 2021 agricultural forecast. Lunch will be provided by Kerry's of McCool.

An added bonus to this year's event will be a soil health activity for area high school students the day before the Winter Workshop. "We wanted to take full advantage of Dr. Clapperton's visit and offer something extra for students," said Leininger, who is one of the event's organizers. "The youth portion of the workshop will be hands-on, with stations set up to keep students engaged and learning." ♦♦♦



REGISTER NOW



Register now for the free
Project GROW Winter Workshop at
www.upperbigblue.org/WinterWorkshop
or call (402) 362-6601



Tree Time is Just Around the Corner!

Each year the Upper Big Blue NRD Conservation Tree Program provides thousands of low-cost trees to district residents for windbreaks, fruit orchards, wildlife habitat, and landscape improvements of all kinds. Tree orders are collected November 1 to March 30, so that seedlings will arrive in time for spring planting. Orders can be made through the website (www.upperbigblue.org/trees) or you can call or stop by the office to get an order form. Cost-share funds are available for windbreak installation and renovation projects. Contact us at trees@upperbigblue.org to get started!



NRD Employee Recognition

Gentlemen, thank you for your years of service!

Jack Wergin (5 years)
Projects Department Manager

John Bush (10 years)
Water Resources
Technician

Kyle Yrkoski (5 years)
District Forester

BLUEPRINT



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Investing in Soil Health: *Producers Sought, Funding Soon Available*

Are you a producer who is interested in adding conservation activities such as cover crops, but have been deterred by the costs involved in changing your operation? Good news! There will soon be funds available for soil health improvement practices in the district, thanks to funding from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service through the Resource Conservation Partnership Program (RCPFP).

The Upper Big Blue NRD and the Central Platte NRD are partnering with Nebraska NRCS and The Nature Conservancy on the soil health initiative Resilient Futures for Nebraska Soil. The goal of the program is to improve soil health through various practices on 100,000 acres of Nebraska cropland over the next five years.

The funding will provide \$4.4 million for technical and financial assistance for producers in the two central Nebraska districts. Eligible producers will have the option of implementing three soil health practices: cover cropping, reduced tillage, and diversified crop rotations. Payments will vary from \$15 to \$40 per acre depending on the type of soil health practice implemented.

Healthy cropland soils boost fertility and reduce water pollution. Healthier soils also provide a more stable yield, reduce erosion, and improve nutrient availability and moisture holding capacity.

The funds will provide a financial benefit to producers, who will see an immediate impact on their bottom line as well as a long-term impact on their soil health. Reports detailing return on investment will be available, along with reports on individuals' soil carbon and water quality outcomes. Producers will also have year-round assistance with planning, implementation, and management for new soil health practices, as well as opportunities to attend trainings with leaders and experts in soil health and agronomy.

An exciting component to this partnership is the access it will provide producers to the newly created Ecosystem Services Market Consortium. This carbon marketplace will connect companies looking to offset their carbon footprint with producers who are implementing soil health practices that capture carbon. Payments will not be tied to carbon storage but will be guaranteed by acre. It will be a win-win for Nebraska producers, as it will provide the benefits of improved soil health on their farms and ongoing payments for the practices.

Carbon markets are an emerging field and there are many risks and unknowns. The managed marketplace available through this program will give producers a low-risk way to approach this new opportunity to improve their operations. Participating companies will include Cargill, Target, McDonald's, and others.

Producers will control their data in this program, including who sees it, how it's used, and where and how long it is stored. With producer permission and anonymity controls in place, project data will be shared wherever possible to achieve the greatest public benefit.

The NRDs are hoping to enroll producers across the spectrum of soil health experience, from those with no knowledge or experience with reduced tillage, cover crops, and diverse rotations, to those with a practice that already incorporates these things. Producers with an existing soil health practice (such as reduced tillage) can add a second or third practice to qualify for payment or could increase the practice (as in moving from strip tillage to no-till). There is no gross income cap for these payments and no maximum amount that one farm operation can receive.

Project partners are still working out logistics, with the plan to enroll 20,000 acres in the first year. The program is expected to begin enrolling producers from December 2020 to March 2021; however, producers can get on the advance list to participate by contacting their NRD office. Interested producers can reach out to NRD water resources technicians John Bush (Upper Big Blue NRD, jbush@upperbigblue.org, 402-362-6601) and Courtney Widup (Central Platte NRD, widup@cpnrd.org, 308-385-6282) for more information. ♦♦♦

