

# UPPER BIG BLUE NRD WATER QUALITY MANAGEMENT PLAN

## Implementation Phase



## STAKEHOLDER MEETING 1 SUMMARY

In Partnership With



Zoom Meeting

Wednesday, December 16, 2020

6:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.

### ATTENDEES

Present	Name	Project Role
X	Marie Krausnick	Project Team - UBBNRD
X	Jack Wergin	Project Team - UBBNRD
X	Adam Rupe	Project Team - JEO Consulting Group
X	Andrea Gebhart	Project Team - JEO Consulting Group
	Elbert Traylor	Project Team - NDEE
X	Josh Bowers	Panelist (NRCS)
X	Andy Bishop	Panelist (Rainwater Basin Joint Venture)
X	Nathan Pflueger	Panelist (Pheasants Forever)
X	John Bush	Panelist (Nature Conservancy/UBBNRD)
X	David Cast	Stakeholder - Landowner/Operator
	Adam Darbro	Stakeholder - Municipality
	Tena Ehlers	Stakeholder - Landowner/Operator
	Anthony Kreifels	Stakeholder - Landowner/Operator
X	Gayle Marsh	Stakeholder - Landowner/Operator
	John Mittman	Stakeholder - Agri-Business
	Gary Moody	Stakeholder - Landowner/Operator
X	Patty Morner	Stakeholder - Landowner/Operator
X	Steve Moseley	Stakeholder - Recreation
X	Doyle Onnen	Stakeholder - Land Management
	Leslie (Les) Pohl	Stakeholder - Landowner/Operator
X	Aaron Sindelar	Stakeholder - Agri-Business
X	Jess Spotanski	Stakeholder - Landowner/Operator
	Brent Swartzendruber	Stakeholder - Landowner/Operator
X	Matthew Perrion	Technical Resource (NGPC)
X	Steve Melvin	Technical Resource (UNL Extension)
X	David Eigenberg	UBBNRD
X	Bill Kuehner	NRD Board Member
X	Ronda Rich	NRD Board Member

## MEETING MINUTES

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Note: These minutes are not intended to be a transcript of the meeting, but a summary of the discussion that took place. Digital audio recordings of the meeting are available upon request.

Presentation available at [www.upperbigblue.org/WQMP](http://www.upperbigblue.org/WQMP)

### 1. Welcome

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- Opening remarks by facilitator Andrea Gebhart (JEO)

### 2. Project Overview

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- Overview of current efforts provided by Andrea Gebhart (JEO)
  - Use stakeholder input to identify and prioritize best management practices (BMPs) to implement in the target areas identified in water quality management plan (WQMP)
  - Stakeholders are not signing up to implement at this time, rather helping NRD understand what resources and programs would be most useful and beneficial for district landowners/residents
- Project website now available: [upperbigblue.org/wqmp](http://upperbigblue.org/wqmp). Scroll down to bottom of page to see stakeholder meeting materials, as well as links to additional resources.

### 3. Stakeholder Hellos

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Stakeholders introduced themselves and what stood out to them from first meeting.

Andrea Gebhart (JEO) also introduced:

- Meeting Panelists, who join tonight to share information about existing non-NRD BMP programs and resources.
- Technical Resources, who will join meetings to help answer questions, as well as listen to stakeholder discussions. Contact information for these resources is available on the project website.
- NRD Board members, who have been invited to join and listen to meetings. May be able to provide some context of past NRD decisions, but primarily joining to listen.



#### 4. Existing Resources and Programs (Non-NRD)

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##### Setting the stage for the panelist (Adam Rupe, JEO)

- NRD looking to get as many BMPs on the ground voluntarily. In this effort, looking to address two questions:
  - Do existing programs need to be modified to improve use?
  - What needs can be met, or program gaps supplemented, by the 319 funding?

##### NRCS (Josh Bowers)

- Josh reviewed the primary programs that NRCS offers or administers: EQIP, CSP, ACEP, RCPP, and CRP.
- Primary take-a-way: When you have a resource concern or are looking to implement BMP, come to the NRCS office first. Our planning process will identify the best program for you.
- Stakeholder Discussion
  - Do you have an example of what would be covered by NRD that wouldn't be covered by NRCS?
    - Josh Bowers (NRCS): Two come to mind: (1) variable rate program and (2) the small dams program.
    - Jack Wergin (UBBNRD): With the small dams program, NRD provides the funding but NRCS still provides a lot of technical support.
    - Josh Bowers (NRCS): When we decide which funds to use, it depends on size of the project. If it's under \$7,500, we tend to lean toward NRD program. If it's a larger project that can be broken over several years, we'll look at EQIP.
  - Andy Bishop, Rainwater Basin Joint Venture: The NRCS EQIP and ACEP projects are often the cornerstone of what we do.
  - One thing that's been helpful from land management side is [that NRCS helps] identifying how much water is coming onto our farms and where that water is tracking.
  - Regarding filter strip program, when they come to conclusion or expiration date, are the contracts readily renewed?
    - Jack Wergin (NRD): Yes. Those contracts are typically 3-, 5-, or 10-year contracts, and when they come up on end of contract, it's usually county NRCS staff out there asking if landowners want to renew. Renewal percentage is pretty high.
    - Josh Bowers (NRCS): If your contract is coming up and you'd like to renew, don't hesitate to contact NRCS office. NRCS and NRD does try to identify expiring contract and see about renewing.
  - I see a lot of positive things with the filter strip program. I appreciate, like it, wish we could have more of it.



- Farmers looking at it from economics side, we're taking a high-income-producing piece of ground out of production, so that incentive to get a strip enrolled is important.
- One of the hurdles: you got to get someone in to prepare land, get the strip seeded and started. Not everyone willing to do that. Would like it if government entity had a contractor ready to support that, might help push it along.
- How does NRCS advertise and communicate these programs?
  - Josh Bowers (NRCS): News releases. Some newsletters. Word of mouth is really our best method. We do have website. Good partnership with local agencies.
- A lot of this information has acronyms and technical data. Is that understandable to stakeholders?
  - The acronyms are not intuitive. It takes initiative from individuals to learn.
  - Average farmer, when they think about NRCS and conservation practices, their mind automatically jumps to terraces, waterways, and dams. They don't have association with programs for cover crops or no-till. My recommendation, as you share information, focus on the easier-to-adopt programs, as it'll draw more interest. Older farmers think of EQIP as large-scale projects.
  - Steve Melvin (UNL Extension): Common to hear it's too much hassle, paperwork to participate or I'd have to do X, Y *and* Z when I just want to do X.
  - Producers more willing to pursue funding if offered help or assistance in the process. The administrative side is a big drawback. Some producers willing to eat entire cost of cover crops rather than do paperwork.
  - Josh Bowers (NRCS): Would it be helpful to share program information to crop consultants to share with producers?
    - Yes. Great idea to use crop consultants and farm managers. Any type of those influencer groups would have some value.
- Does the NRD program not have the same waiting period as NRCS?
  - Jack Wergin (NRD): The practices must meet same guidelines as NRCS, but as long as NRD has funding the producer could start as soon as he's ready. Once application comes into the NRD and is approved. Once the NRD provides an authorization, the landowner has 90 days to complete the work, then when done the NRCS will inspect and signs off, and then board of directors authorizes payment. Only limit is how much funding the NRD has available. Projects can also be split across fiscal years to help with funding hurdles.



- How long does it take from first NRCS visit to project approval?
  - Josh Bowers (NRCS): With EQIP, there's continuous sign-up up but we only rank and approve them once a year, typically around October. NRCS does not approve any projects until it is designed.
    - We typically don't get a lot of producers wanting to do sub-surface drip irrigation (SDI) through NRCS because NRCS does not design that, we have outside engineers do that.
- When you talk about ranking, do you feel like that deters participation?
  - Josh Bowers (NRCS): Sometimes we see that. If we get an application/project that's ready to go, we'll sometimes look for another program to get them going right away. Going through the ranking process is a result of having to go through the planning process.
  - In a neighboring NRD, I'm going through the ranking process for a project and we missed a good opportunity for dirt work this fall as we waited to hear if project was approved.
  - Josh Bowers (NRCS): In our local work group meetings, we've made recommendations to change the timing of the ranking process, but changes are nationwide, so there's not perfect timeline at this level. Because of that, when producer comes in the door, we let them know projects will probably be a year out. What I run into, notice rough spots during harvest and want it fixed before planting the next year. That generally doesn't fit in our program and funding timelines.

### **Rainwater Basin Joint Venture (Andy Bishop)**

- Primary take-a-way: Public-private partnership aimed at leveraging partnerships and available resources to make it economically viable for producers to adopt BMPs.
- Stakeholder Discussion
  - Stakeholder perspective on participation in RBJV
    - I had 54 acres that grew great crops when it didn't flood out
    - Andy got in contact with me. Otherwise would not have known the program was out there.
    - Variable rate irrigation working well. The prescription provided was close, not precise.
    - We put fence around it. Put pivot bridges in. Wetland is expanding.
  - What do you say to those who don't have livestock?
    - You can rent it out. And it works.
      - We put in solar powered well for livestock tank.
    - Andy Bishop (RBJV): Website has a grazers network site where we try to link grazers up with grazing lands. We have a waiting list for people looking for grazing land.



- Andy Bishop (RBJV): We really try to set project up so it's part of the operation, not an impediment. We have a lot of flexible funding, making it additive to the funds provided by other partners/programs.
- When you cold call, do you have takers or is there a common reason people pass?
  - Andy Bishop (RBJV): We're building this community of conservation. We send out 5,000 mailings annually. If we get 1% who apply, we consider that a success. But personal contacts are significantly more impactful than cold calls. It's important to continue building this community of conservation to address these resource concerns, water quality, habitat, etc.
  - Jack Wergin (NRD): We have portable corral stored at UBBNRD yard that guys who are out grazing wetlands can use free of charge, with proof of insurance and a couple forms.
- No one wants to take crop ground out of production, do you run into that obstacle?
  - Andy Bishop (RBJV): It's a mindset. I look at it as: we're not taking cropland out of production; we're transitioning it to a different operational use within that farm or ranch.
    - And I think that's where we need to build rapport with crop consultants and farm managers. While the impact might not affect gross income, we can prove the net income and make these decisions more palatable to producers. Also need to show, quantify the ecological enhancements. It's a different currency, but it plays into the landscape.
  - It's conversation like tonight that help. I didn't know this program existed.
  - With precision ag, there's more opportunity to show producers the agronomical benefits on the front end.

### **Pheasant Forever (Nathan Pflueger)**

- Key Take-a-way: My position is more based around soil health and linking that to a wildlife benefit, but working with me doesn't mean you're going to plant perennial vegetation.
- Stakeholder Discussion
  - Is winter wheat considered a winter cereal?
    - Nathan Pflueger (Pheasants Forever): Yes.
      - Circling back, the foregone payments is not specific to winter grains.
  - I do winter wheat, but it isn't viable or profitable on my property. I need my cover crops to provide a bunch of nitrogen. Soybeans work well for me, so I double crop soybeans behind wheat, would the wheat be considered cover crop?
    - Nathan Pflueger (Pheasants Forever): No; but we do have legume-heavy mixtures for those who want to follow it up with some nitrogen credits. Pheasants Forever is looking for more diversity than single species soybeans.



- Would volunteer wheat that's a foot tall qualify?
  - Nathan Pflueger (Pheasants Forever): No. That is a cover crop, we just won't cost share on that. Maybe as program develops, we could because we do like small grain in the rotation.
    - Producers can "test drive" this on a few acres before committing to a whole field.
- Forgone income payments perked my ears. \$40/acre is actually some income.
- What kind of environment do you need to have that would promote pheasant to flourish and increase population?
  - Nathan Pflueger (Pheasants Forever): Whole culmination of things. As perennial habitat decreases, that pushes them into smaller areas, which is easier for predators to find them. As small grains move out of system, that's taken away another crutch for them. It really comes back to habitat, unfortunately.
- I think the fur trade is affecting pheasant population. Ever since they gotten rid of coyote furs, no one is hunting them anymore and the coyotes are getting the pheasants.
- Are turkeys predators to pheasants?
  - Nathan Pflueger (Pheasants Forever): From what I've read, turkeys are not a problem for pheasants.
- How long are the Nebraska Environmental Trust secured for?
  - Nathan Pflueger (Pheasants Forever): Five years, and we plan to submit another application for continuation. It's been pretty successful so far. This year we had 21 or 25 contracts. Year one we started in March and I was able to get 12 contracts.
- Regarding cover cropping, can you tell us your experience with aerial dropping?
  - Nathan Pflueger (Pheasants Forever): We've looked at aerial seeding, and it's had mixed effects. It's going to come down to seeding rate, seed to soil contact, if you're getting rain, and guys willing to irrigate are better off. If broadcasting, make sure to bump up the seeding rate. In year one, we worked with some who dropped out of high-boy spreader, and that worked well. Again, it comes down to watering it in and getting canopy opened up for seedlings. It's no wonder you see seed corns guys doing it because you have sunlight down there, and they can get it watered in to get good growth.
- Is there a planting date deadline?
  - Nathan Pflueger (Pheasants Forever): We've been going off NRCS date, October 15 for fall cover crops, but it is flexible to work with producers and weather conditions. We may move the date based on what we see this spring.
- Is there a spring date you have to leave it growing until?



- Nathan Pflueger (Pheasants Forever): No, we don't have a date because we know that when you got to go, you got to go. Down the road, we might throw out a date, but generally, the longer, the better.
- What ways have you done outreach and awareness?
  - Nathan Pflueger (Pheasants Forever): A lot of presentation around different events. Hosted a field day. This year we sent out postcards to producers in the nine counties. Also reached out to NRCS offices in the region. Word of mouth. Also, when I'm going down the road and I see small grains, I'll look him up and cold call to inquire about the operation.
- What do people like/not like about program?
  - Nathan Pflueger (Pheasants Forever): A lot of guys enjoy the program because of the flexibility. Some decided it wasn't for them because they wanted single species cover crop, and we require a minimum of three species.

### **The Nature Conservancy (John Bush)**

- Key Take-a-way: Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) in development, start date still unknown.
- Stakeholder Discussion
  - How many years would I need to quit growing cover crops to be enrolled?
    - Josh Bowers (NRCS): Not sure if there's set timeframe. If you've been using cover crops, we're probably looking at adding additional species.
  - And how do you add cover crop when you're already using corn, beans, and wheat?
    - John Bush (UBBNRD/Nature Conservancy Information provided to date indicates you must add a crop into your rotation.
    - Josh Bowers (NRCS): We're trying to be flexible and enroll those looking to advance or add on to a system.
  - What would be considered another crop mixture?
    - Josh Bowers (NRCS): If you already have a diverse mixture, we likely won't be looking at you to add more. Also remember, with these payments, we're looking to incentivize producers to do it for a couple years to get them started and hooked on it.
    - Marie Krausnick (NRD): This program was also designed to help bridge the gap if producers lose some income while transitioning their operations or trying new things. Also created to provide technical assistance through the process.
  - I wish I had had someone to hold my hand 20-25 years ago when I started down this path.
  - How does this differ from current NRCS cost-share opportunities?
    - Marie Krausnick (NRD): This is a separate pot of money. The RCP has been separated from EQIP. This money can be used in Central Platte and Upper Big blue.



- So, this wouldn't be as competitive as NRCS funding?
  - Marie Krausnick (NRD): Or we could take some producers away from EQIP and make eligibility easier into that program.
- UNL Extension has an on-farm research program. We'll help them set up a replicated strip trial that we can do statistical and economic analysis to help determine value. No cost associated with this. UNL Extension helps set up experiment and producers continue with the operation.
- Are there any private sector programs or partners that producers are working with?
  - Everyone is after the almighty dollar. Haven't heard of any local non-government agencies that does something for farmers.
  - Make sure you look into Indigo Ag before working with them.
  - Central Valley Ag has access to Truterra through Land O Lakes. It's a sustainability tool. You enter in a grower's management information, and it gives a snapshot of sustainability as well as economics tied to it. What I like about program is it aids in decision making. It will also identify some conservation programs available for specific practices.
    - Do you use perennial component?
      - Yes. You can not only quantify cover crops and not till, but also how grass waterways and terraces impact sustainability.
    - Would like to move more into sub-field precision conservation approach, just haven't gotten there yet.
    - Is Truterra a type of tool stakeholders find value in and be willing to try?
      - I think so. A lot of producers understand the environmental impact, and this helps illustrate how BMPs impact bottom line. We can get as accurate of an economic impact at the level of detail provided by grower. If you are a CVA customers, it's a no-charge service.

## 5. Next Steps

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- Let Marie or Jack know if you have additional thoughts, comments, questions before next meeting.
- Please share idea/topics you'd like to see on agenda for meeting #3.
- Stakeholders to mark calendars. Meetings will be virtual until further notice.
  - Stakeholder Meeting 3: Wednesday, February 17, 2021, 6:30-8:30 p.m.
  - Public Meeting/Input: March 2021

