

Governor's Water Quality and Quantity Task Force

DRAFT Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, December 16, 2025

Divots Conference Center

4200 W Norfolk Ave, Norfolk, NE 68701

Members Present: Joe Anderjaska, Jesse Bradley, Brian Bruckner, Devin Brundage, Russ Callan, Tom Downey, Jessica Groskopf, Brandon Hunnicutt, Brian Kissinger, Scott Knobbe, Steve Kyes, Matt Manning, Tim Mundorf, Scott Schaneman, Dean Settje, John Shadle, Marty Stange, Annette Sudbeck

Members Absent: Brittany Bartak, Don Batie

Staff and Audience Present: Isabella Peterson, Nebraska Department of Water, Energy, and Environment (DWEE); Clint Verner, Legislative Fiscal Office; Mike Murphy, Middle Niobrara Natural Resources District (NRD); Mark Hall; Wade Ellwanger, Lower Niobrara NRD; Traci Bruckner, Audubon Great Plains; Melissa Temple, Lower Elkhorn NRD; Sara Mechtenberg, Houston Engineering; Crystal Powers, UNL Extension; Chittaranjan Ray, UNL Nebraska Water Center; Jacob Garder, Houston Engineering; Jonathan Rempel; Audrey Woita, Hillside Solutions; Rachel Whitehair, Nebraska Corn Board.

Open Meetings Act Information: The meeting was called to order at 1:16 p.m. by Jesse Bradley. Bradley stated that the meeting was being conducted in accordance with the Nebraska Open Meetings Act and a copy of the current Open Meetings Act was posted and available for inspection and review near the back of the room. Bradley stated that a public meeting notice was published in the Omaha World Herald newspaper and the Nebraska Department of Water, Energy, and Environment's website on December 9, 2025 in accordance with state law.

Task Force members and audience introduced themselves. Governor Jim Pillen thanked the Task Force members for their commitment and the time dedicated over the past six months to advancing water quality and quantity discussions.

Approval of Meeting Minutes from 9/24/2025: Groskopf moved, and Sudbeck seconded, a motion to approve the Task Force meeting minutes from September 24, 2025. There was no opposition. Motion carried.

Final Subcommittee Recommendations: Subcommittee chairpersons presented overviews of the goals and action items developed by each subcommittee. Members reviewed a

redline draft document that was provided as a handout, which will also be posted to the Task Force webpage.

A. Methods and Resources Subcommittee

Report by Mundorf, on behalf of Chairperson Batie.

Goal 1 is to ensure nitrogen recommendations are agronomically, economically, and environmentally appropriate for Nebraska producers. Discussion focused on educating individuals who provide nitrogen recommendations, including consideration of a certified crop advisor program and potential use of an existing UNL online certification and badging platform.

Goal 2 is to incentivize producers to increase the percentage of nitrogen that is applied in season versus out of season to improve overall nitrogen use efficiency. The aim is to decrease the amount of fall-applied anhydrous ammonia and move toward more in-season nitrogen application. Members discussed variability in fertilizer timing practices across the state and the importance of understanding spring versus fall application rates.

Goal 3 is to increase adoption of sensor- and model-based nitrogen recommendation technology, such as Sentinel Ag, Adapt-N, or similar technologies. Fertigation was highlighted as a strategy to apply nitrogen later in the season based on crop need. Members emphasized inclusion of dryland practices and appropriate incentives for non-irrigated operations.

Goal 4 is to increase adoption of soil health practices which will allow producers to increase nutrient cycling and reduce overall nitrogen application rates over time. Improved soil health will also maximize water infiltration and crop utilization while limiting runoff.

Goal 5 is to educate Nebraska producers on nitrogen fertilizer and irrigation best management practices to limit nitrate leaching to groundwater. This goal focuses on nitrogen fertilizer and irrigation best management practices to limit nitrate leaching to groundwater. Includes irrigation technologies, inhibitors, in-season application of nitrogen, soil moisture probes, water meters, irrigation modeling, and evapotranspiration monitoring.

B. Nitrate Legacy & Drinking Water Access Subcommittee

Report by Chairperson Stange.

Goal 6 is to develop consistent education, marketing, and outreach materials related to water quality, quantity, and public health for use across the state. Stange noted some of the timeframes are aggressive, but that is because there are a lot of existing educational materials out there. Existing resources will be organized into a uniform framework while

allowing for local variation. Members noted the importance of outreach to medical providers serving rural communities.

Goal 7 is to provide support and resources to public and privately owned drinking water wells to ensure safe and reliable drinking water for Nebraskans. Discussion emphasized the need for improved planning tools and better communication of nitrate trends, including potential outreach to realtors.

Goal 8 is to expand rural water systems and regionalization of water systems. The goal is to connect communities with limited water resources to systems with greater capacity. Members emphasized coordination among NRDs, DWEE, communities, and municipalities, as well as addressing financial barriers through loans and other assistance.

C. Water Conservation & Quantity Subcommittee

Report by Chairperson Schaneman.

Goal 9 is to expand water measurement across the state for groundwater and surface water. Members discussed integrating data into Producer Connect or a similar NRD database, while addressing data security concerns. Survey results indicated that more than 50% of wells statewide are already metered, with some NRDs fully metered. Real-time metering was discussed, including benefits and challenges.

Goal 10 is to develop strategies to support large water users and continued economic growth in the State, noting that concerns exist regarding water availability for industries, especially in water-short areas. This purpose of this goal is to determine how to accommodate industry water needs, starting with launching a public-facing portal within 18 months. Members noted that a statewide “large water user rule” has been in place since 2012, but the definition of “large water user” is generic. Callan noted that Lower Loup NRD is currently working with HDR to define “large water user” based on variations throughout the district, with the aim being to require users exceeding a certain threshold to demonstrate they are not causing adverse effects. Integration of economic development professionals into water availability discussions was emphasized.

Goal 11 is to expand water storage opportunities and management of water consumption, noting that opportunities exist to work with surface water entities to recharge groundwater. Strategies include reservoirs, recharge systems, and retention projects, as well as outreach to educate stakeholders. Metrics include development of a public resource or map identifying storage opportunities and increased stakeholder engagement.

D. Financing and Incentives Subcommittee

Report by Chairperson Hunnicutt.

Goal 12 is to establish a centralized clearinghouse to inventory and prioritize water quality and quantity projects across Nebraska. The clearinghouse will be updated annually to reassess priorities and monitor progress.

Goal 13 is to identify and implement sustainable, diversified funding models to support the development, implementation, and maintenance of priority water projects in Nebraska. DWEE will conduct a funding analysis to identify existing resources, gaps, limitations, and overlaps. Members discussed opportunities to leverage private investment and the value of a clearinghouse in directing outside funding to Nebraska projects. Bradley provided an example that Google is already working with farmers in the state on various projects. Creating a clearinghouse can help to guide outside investments to specific projects – the goal is to make it easy for them to choose Nebraska over other states for funding.

Goal 14 is to recommend funding priorities for ONE RED funding and other potential funding sources. Discussion focused on developing a tiered incentive program informed by ONE RED survey results provided in a handout and effectively communicating market value and education benefits to producers and crop consultants.

Scheduling and Logistics

Bradley outlined next steps for the Task Force. A full draft report will be distributed to the Task Force in about a month. Members will have from mid-January through mid-February to review again and provide additional comments. The final report is expected to be completed by the March meeting.

The next full Task Force meeting will be held March 25, 2026 in Lincoln (location to be determined). Meeting materials will continue to be updated on the Task Force webpage at: <https://dnr.nebraska.gov/water-quality-and-quantity-task-force>.

Public Comment

Mike Murphy, Middle Niobrara NRD, emphasized that water quality is a statewide issue and benefit, and recommended protecting areas with currently high-quality water in addition to addressing higher-risk areas.

Crystal Powers, UNL Extension, described existing and upcoming UNL Extension resources related to nitrates in groundwater, including programs for early childhood educators, farmers, and rural health clinics, and expressed interest in coordinating outreach with the Task Force.

Chittaranjan Ray, Nebraska Water Center, commented on Goal 10 and requested additional information regarding excess water system capacity in Omaha, the Tri-Cities, and western Nebraska.

Melissa Temple, Lower Elkhorn NRD Board member (speaking in her individual capacity), recommended increased well registration and education, addressing abandoned wells, incorporating public health considerations into agronomist education, considering limits on fall fertilizer application, evaluating lower nitrate thresholds, and expanding requirements related to well testing and landlord responsibilities. Temple recommended that UNMC's recommended limit of 3 ppm for nitrate should be considered instead of the EPA's 10 ppm limit.

Jonathan Rempel, individual, discussed logistical and economic challenges associated with in-season fertilizer application on his operation and urged the Task Force to consider cost impacts and data-driven justification before implementing new requirements. He also expressed concern regarding the economic impacts of expanded water metering.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 3:41 p.m.