

Public Niobrara Basin-wide Planning Survey Summary

Report for the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PUBLIC POLICY CENTER

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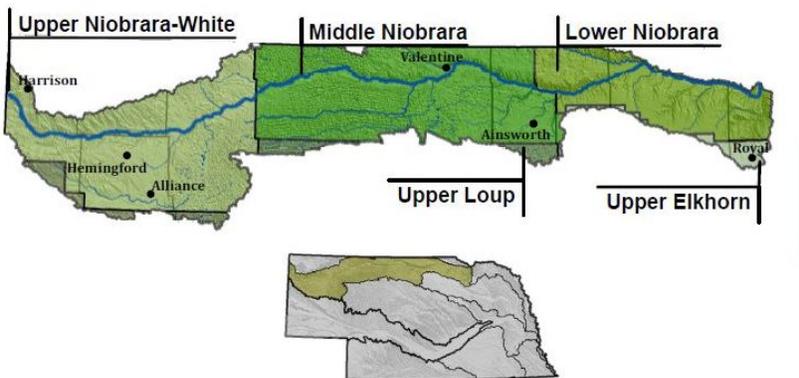
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Background

In early 2015, the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (NDNR) and five Natural Resources Districts (NRDs), initiated actions that will culminate in a Niobrara Basin-wide plan (Figure 1). The purpose of basin-wide planning is to sustain “a **balance between water uses and water supplies**” (Nebraska Revised Statutes 46-755). At the outset of the planning process, NDNR and the NRDs worked with the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center (PPC) to develop a survey to assess public interests and viewpoints about the process and plan.

FIGURE 1. NIOBRARA BASIN WITH NRD BOUNDARIES



Survey Design and Administration

The PPC designed the survey in collaboration with representatives of NDNR and the NRDs. The survey included seven Likert-scaled questions, one categorical question, and two open-ended questions, along with the option to provide contact information to stay informed about the process. The survey was made available to the public through **electronic and paper copies and an online survey tool**. The survey was first distributed on February 11, 2015 and the announced conclusion date was March 11, 2015. NDNR and the NRDs promoted the survey to their stakeholders in a variety of ways.

By March 23, 2015, **70 survey responses** were received (51 through the online survey and 19 through the paper survey). Most respondents identified themselves as a *Private Citizen* ($n = 37$) or *Agricultural Producer* ($n = 16$) (Table 1).

Respondents were asked to provide contact information if they were interested in receiving further communications about the planning process. Over **half of survey respondents (n = 42) provided contact information** to stay informed.

TABLE 1. RESPONDENT AFFILIATION

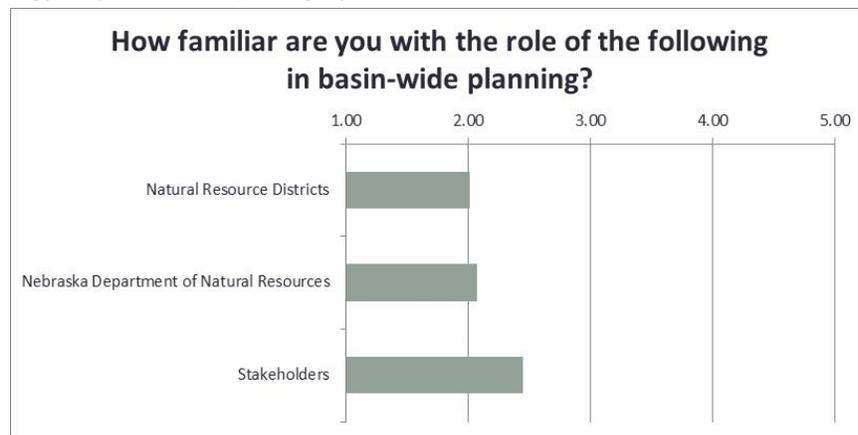
Select the option that best represents your affiliation	Number*	Percent
Private Citizen	37	45%
Agricultural Producer	16	20%
Non-profit Organization Staff or Board Member	10	12%
NRD Staff or Board Member	8	10%
Federal Government Staff or Elected Official	4	5%
Agricultural Related Business Staff or Owner	3	4%
State Government Staff or Elected Official	2	2%
Irrigation or Public Power District Staff or Board Member	1	1%
Municipal Staff or Elected Official	1	1%
Local/Statewide Association Staff or Board Member	0	0%
Consultant	0	0%
Media Representative	0	0%

*The number does not sum to 70. Although respondents were asked to select one of the above categories, eight respondents checked two categories, one selected three categories, and one selected four categories. One respondent selected no categories.

Familiar with Roles in Planning Process

Respondents were asked to rate their familiarity with the roles of NRDs, NDNR, and stakeholders in the planning process (1 = *Very Familiar* through 5 = *Very Unfamiliar*, 6 = *Don't Know*). Most respondents reported they were *Very Familiar* or *Familiar* with the roles of these groups. On average, respondents reported feeling **most familiar with the roles of NRDs and NDNR**, and less familiar (statistically significantly) with the role of stakeholders (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. FAMILIARITY WITH ROLES

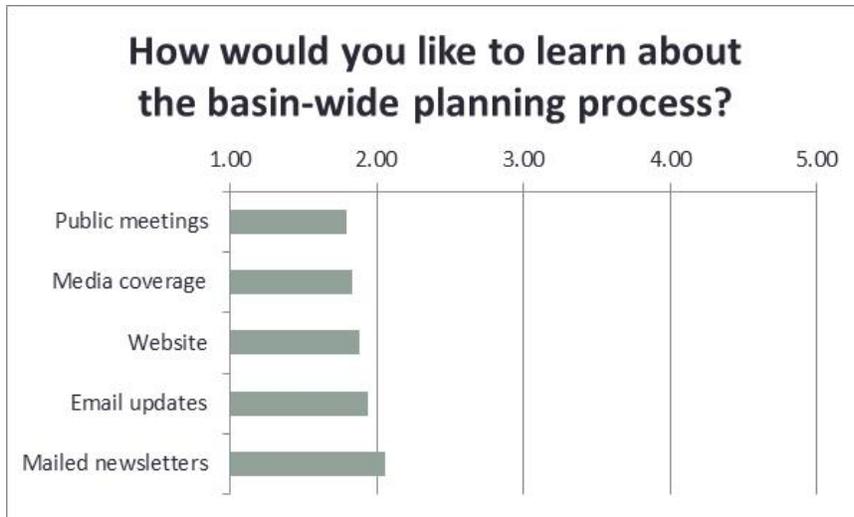


NOTE: Means exclude answers of *Don't Know*

Support Learning Opportunities

Respondents were asked to rate various ways they could learn about the planning process (1 = *Strongly Agree* through 5 = *Strongly Disagree*, 6 = *Don't Know*). Respondents *Strongly Agreed* or *Agreed* that each of the suggested learning channels would be useful to learn about the planning process (Figure 3), with no statistical differences among the choices.

FIGURE 3. LEARNING CHANNELS

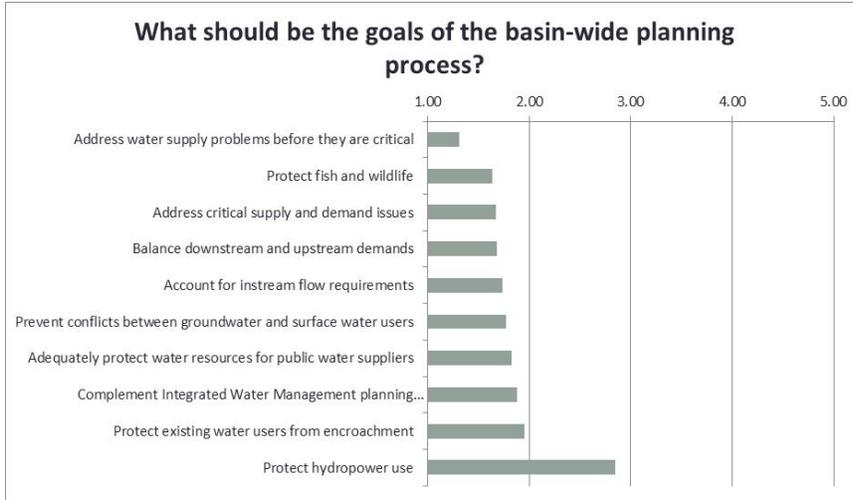


NOTE: Means exclude answers of *Don't Know*

Support Numerous Goals

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of a variety of goals for the planning process (1 = *Strongly Agree* through 5 = *Strongly Disagree*, 6 = *Don't Know*). Respondents *Strongly Agreed* or *Agreed* that each of the suggested goals were important, with the exception of protecting hydropower, to which the most popular response was *Neither Agree Nor Disagree*. There were no statistically significant differences among all the items between that with the strongest agreement (i.e., *Address water supply problems before they are critical*) and the one with the most moderate agreement (i.e., *Protect hydropower use*). Accordingly, there were significant differences between those two items and all the other items.

FIGURE 4. GOALS

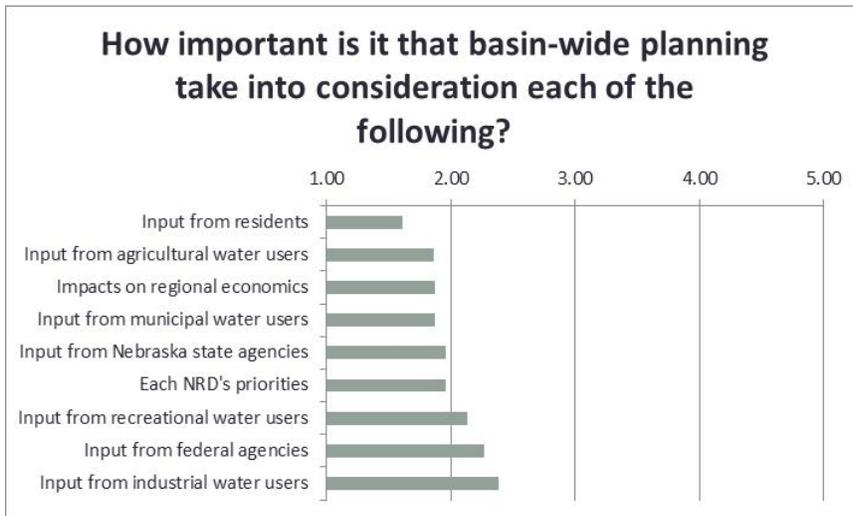


NOTE: Means exclude answers of *Don't Know*

Want Important Considerations Accommodated

Respondents were asked to rate possible considerations that should be incorporated into the planning process (1 = *Very Important* through 5 = *Very Unimportant*, 6 = *Don't Know*). Most respondents rated each of the suggested items as *Important* or *Very Important* (Figure 5), with *Input from residents* being the only statistical different step between each successive item.

FIGURE 5. CONSIDERATIONS



NOTE: Means exclude answers of *Don't Know*

Confidence in Water Players Varies

Respondents were asked to rate their confidence in a variety of players that manage water (1 = *Strongly Agree* through 5 = *Strongly Disagree*, 6 = *Don't Know*). The only sequential (from organization to organization along continuum of most *Strongly Agree* to most *Strongly Disagree*) statistical difference is between *Municipalities* and *Agricultural Producers*.

FIGURE 6. CONFIDENCE



NOTE: Means exclude answers of *Don't Know*

Water Is Urgent and Impactful

Respondents were asked to rate the urgency of water quantity issues in Nebraska (1 = *Very Urgent* through 5 = *Not At All Urgent*, 6 = *Don't Know*). The most common response (44%) was *Extremely Urgent*, with the items having a Mean of 1.89 (excluding answers of *Don't Know*).

Respondents were asked whether their **area of the state is suffering adverse water outcomes** (1 = *Yes*, 2 = *No*, 3 = *Don't Know*). The most common response was *Yes* (88%).

Hopes for Basin-wide Planning Accomplishments and Other Comments

The survey had two open-ended questions. One asked “What do you hope the basin-wide planning process will accomplish?” The other invited respondents to “Please share any additional comments you may have.” Responses to these two questions had similar themes and have been summarized below.

Respondents expressed **desire for broad participation in the planning process**. Respondents suggested that the participation should extend beyond governmental entities to a wide array of other interests. Some suggested that the process should extend beyond the NRDs to move beyond the “economic and agricultural interests” they already represent. Some suggestions for additional stakeholders included Friends of the Niobrara, landowners, National Park Service, Nature Conservancy, Nebraska Game & Parks, Nebraska Wildlife Federation, Niobrara Council, NPPD, outfitters, Sandhills Institute, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and wildlife experts and enthusiasts. Several

respondents volunteered their help and facilities. Some thought the process should be based on local decision making while others advocated participation beyond the basin. Respondents want a fair process. Several participants noted that they would like to see the process free of politics and lobbying by special interest groups. Several respondents noted that the planning process should use science and data to make decisions, some of which should be available from the state. Others suggested that additional data collection was needed.

For many respondents, the hoped for end result would be that **water is available for those who need it**. Respondents hoped that the planning would prevent shortages in the Niobrara of the severity being experienced in other parts of the state. Individuals expressed the desire to meet water use needs without “harming, overusing, misusing, this wonderful resource.” One individual suggested that the result should benefit “all parties that rely on the river for life: humans, animals, crops.” Some noted that the use of groundwater and surface water should be equitable and that transfers of uses should reflect these changes in groundwater and surface water levels. Others noted that water quality should also be included in the planning process.

A number of individuals noted that planning will require **balancing multiple public and private water management interests**, while others advocated for reprioritization of current uses. Some respondents suggested that it is important to act now “while competing needs are manageable.” Some respondents were hopeful that many interests could be addressed: “I hope that the Niobrara Basin can stay healthy and be made healthier through win-win solutions for all state holders.” Others suggested that water efficiency and conservation practices may help reduce wasteful practices. Several respondents noted that the plan should ensure long term sustainability for future generations. Some respondents felt that the current policies disproportionately privilege agricultural interests, while others believed that existing uses should be protected. One person suggested that “water policy is one of those issues where everyone needs to be willing to give up some self-interest for the benefit of all.” Some of the interests noted by respondents were:

- Streams – Several respondents suggested that instream water flows are an intrinsic value that should be protected.
- Agriculture – “I’d like to see that recreational needs don’t over shadow the needs of the agriculture industry.”
- Habitats/Natural Environment – “A plan that includes the needs of our natural resources (fish, wildlife, plants) and not just consumptive water users (industrial, municipal, agriculture).”
- Aquifer stabilization – “STABILIZE the aquifer in a serious way!”
- Recreation – “To keep Nebraska viable, we need a good mix of recreation to boost the economy as well as agricultural needs.”
- Municipalities
- Industry

A number of participants are hopeful that the basin-wide planning process will result in **regional vision for water management that is supported by many stakeholders**. One individual noted that this may mean that the plan is one that “nobody is happy with, but everyone can live with and that treats everyone fairly.” Some also mentioned that it will be important to educate the public about the plan’s vision.

Some comments were specifically **related to the survey**. Some were pleased that the survey had been conducted and thought that the survey was a “good start” and that the survey results should be made available. Others felt the survey should have included recreation business and economic activities, or had been designed to obtain a particular response outcome.