



PLATTE RIVER RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM (PRRIP -or- Program)

Land Advisory Committee (LAC) Virtual Meeting

Wednesday, May 14, 2025; 9:00 AM – 11:00 AM CST

Land Advisory Committee (LAC)

State of Wyoming

Michelle Hubbard – Member (online)

Bill Brewer – Alternate (online)

Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation)

Brock Merrill – Member (online)

State of Colorado

Kara Scheel – Member (online)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service)

Matt Rabbe – Member

State of Nebraska

Ted LaGrange – Member (online)

Caitlin Kingsley – Alternate (online)

Environmental Entities

Power Districts

Dave Zorn – Chair

Jim Jenniges – Member (online)

Local Nebraska Rep. – Central Platte Natural Resources District (CPNRD)

Dave Carr – Member

Local Nebraska Rep. – Tri-Basin Natural Resources District (TBNRD)

John Thorburn – Member (online)

Local Nebraska Rep. – Joint CPNRD/TBNRD

None

Executive Director's Office (EDO)

Jason Farnsworth, ED

Tim Tunnell

Other Participants

Steve Labay - Service

Josh Wiese – Crane Trust (online)

Tyler Martin – State of Nebraska (online)

**WELCOME & ADMINISTRATIVE**

The meeting of the Land Advisory Committee (LAC) was called to order by Chairman Zorn. The minutes from the February 12, 2025, meeting were approved without amendment. Upcoming LAC meetings were scheduled for May 14, August 13, and October 15, 2025, all to be held in Kearney, Nebraska.

GENERAL UPDATE AND OTHER COMMITTEE COORDINATION

Rabbe provided an update from the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), which met in April. The TAC reviewed the 2024 fall whooping crane monitoring report but deferred approval pending updates to reflect a new population estimate from Aransas, expected in June. Additional updates were provided on the Program's bat monitoring efforts for northern long-eared and tricolored bats, data analysis around whooping crane stopovers and flyovers, sediment augmentation planning, and the lower Platte River hydrodynamic model. A significant discussion focused on the publication strategy for western whooping crane Ecotope data—whether to frame it primarily as research or also include implications for policy. The group agreed that the EDO should develop a draft to give TAC members something concrete to respond to.

Farnsworth updated the group on Water Advisory Committee (WAC) and Governance Committee (GC) activities. The main WAC issue involves assessing the feasibility of constructing an outlet from Elwood Reservoir to Plum Creek, which could allow the Program to reserve up to 15,000 acre-feet of excess flows per year. Currently, water stored in Elwood infiltrates and returns as groundwater far from the river. The proposed outlet would improve delivery efficiency. A preferred pipeline alignment has been identified, but securing landowner easements is still a key hurdle. A decision is expected by August. Additionally, a germination suppression flow release aiming for 1,500 CFS will begin soon under the driest conditions experienced during such efforts to date.

The GC held a virtual meeting in March and will meet in person June 17–18 in Cheyenne, Wyoming, major focus will include discussion of water contracts.

Tunnell reported on the Program's prescribed fire work, noting that they partnered with the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, Nebraska Game & Parks, and Central Platte NRD to consolidate burn units into one bid package. Two contractors were hired, but only three burns covering 650 acres were completed before a statewide burn ban was implemented. If moisture improves and the ban is lifted, additional burns may proceed. No major construction projects are planned for spring, although in-channel disking and OCSW rehabilitation projects are expected later in the year.

The lack of funding from the Nebraska Department of Agriculture has affected riparian vegetation control. PVWMA faces a reduced budget and will rely on airboats for spring vegetation treatment, with fall helicopter spraying planned if funds allow. A drone contractor was hired to treat areas within 300 feet of bridges from Columbus to McConaughy—challenging zones due to visibility and accessibility. The Nebraska Invasive Species Council also noted funding cuts, with NEDAG grant availability reduced to \$350,000 statewide. PVWMA will be submitting a grant application.

Discussion on fire management revealed ongoing challenges. Farnsworth and others noted that early spring burning may not align well with objectives for warm-season grass management, while contractor availability remains an issue. There was general agreement that integrating fire into management plans must be more strategic and adaptable. Weise described an alternative approach using rotational grazing



to simulate fire's structural effects, though it lacks the nutrient release benefits of burning. This led to conversation about backup strategies such as patch haying followed by targeted grazing. These methods can approximate fire's effects depending on grassland composition and treatment timing.

PLATTE RIVER RECREATION ACCESS PROGRAM – PUBLIC USE REVIEW

The Public Recreation and Access Subcommittee met on March 31 to review the past year's implementation and propose updates. Rabbe presented the subcommittee's minutes and walked through proposed changes. The LAC approved the FY 2024 Public Use Review Report and recommended outreach coordination with Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Education Division. LaGrange abstained from the vote.

GRASSLAND WORKING GROUP

The Grassland Working Group has met to revise management plans for Shoemaker Island and Cottonwood Ranch. Their approach centers on implementing rotational grazing, haying, and rest strategies, while acknowledging that prescribed fire has yet to be fully integrated into plans. Rabbe emphasized that fire planning needs to be flexible and potentially independent of grazing schedules to avoid being derailed by unpredictable conditions. Zorn and Carr emphasized the need for contingency planning and prioritization to improve the likelihood of successfully implementing prescribed fire. Weise highlighted fire's unique role in controlling woody encroachment and proposed targeting fire in the most at-risk areas.

Shoemaker Island was identified as a priority site for testing new strategies to preserve grassland diversity. Monitoring has indicated a slight downward trend in diversity, with cool-season grasses and exotic species increasing. The new plan calls for splitting management units into subunits on a three-year cycle that includes rest, early grazing, and late grazing. Hay meadows will follow a two-part rotation with one half hayed and the other rested each year. Unit 4, adjacent to the river and important for whooping crane habitat, will continue to be grazed intensively to maintain open viewsheds and prevent woody encroachment.

Tunnell reported that GEI was selected as the contractor for vegetation monitoring. Their proposal was mid-range in cost but ranked highest overall, offering a good balance of value and expertise. A draft contract is under review and will soon be finalized.

SECOND INCREMENT COUNTING OF CONSERVATION LANDS

The LAC also reviewed conservation land accounting for the Second Increment. Tunnell presented GIS data and landownership details for AHR conservation lands. Farnsworth asked members to verify the accuracy of acreage and dates and to identify any useful contextual distinctions (e.g., habitat buffers, land type). The LAC's role is to compile and validate the data, while decisions on what counts toward the Program's conservation targets are left to the Governance Committee. Historical nuances, such as treatment of pre-1997 tracts and different ownership entities (e.g., Crane Trust, TNC, Audubon, NGPC), were acknowledged. The goal is to present a finalized dataset to the GC in June, supported by maps and summary tools.

Rabbe suggested using a similar approach to how land tracts are evaluated for acquisition—based on habitat value—without diving into policy decisions about crediting. Farnsworth emphasized that the goal is not to debate what should count, but to ensure that data are accurate and useful to decision-



makers. Zorn asked all parties to submit corrections by the end of the month to ensure the package is ready in time for the June 17 GC meeting.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

There were no items requiring executive session.

PUBLIC FORUM

Chairman Zorn invited public comments; none were offered.

LAC MOTIONS

Two motions were formally approved:

Approval of the February 12, 2025, LAC Meeting Minutes.

Approval of the FY 2024 Public Use Review Report (LaGrange abstained).

Future calendar events:

August 13, 2024 - 9:00- 11:00 CDT 3rd [Quarter LAC meeting](#), Kearney, NE

October 15, 2024 - 9:00- 11:00 CDT 4th [Quarter LAC meeting](#), Kearney, NE

LAC MEETING END

The meeting adjourned at 10:48 AM Central Time.