

**PLATTE RIVER RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM  
Water Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes**Virtual Meeting  
October 28, 2025

PRRIP Water Advisory Committee Meeting Attendees		
Name	Affiliation	Member or Alternate
<b>Department of the Interior (DOI)</b>		
Brock Merrill	U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR)	Member
Steven LaBay	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)	Member
<b>State of Wyoming</b>		
George Moser	Wyoming Water Development Office (WWDO)	Alternate
Michelle Hubbard	Wyoming State Engineer's Office (WY SEO)	
<b>State of Colorado</b>		
Kara Scheel	Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB)	Member 2025 WAC Vice Chair
Don Baggus	Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW)	
<b>State of Nebraska</b>		
Jennifer Schellpeper	Nebraska Department of Water, Energy, and Environment (NeDWEE)	Member
Kari Burgert	NeDWEE	Alternate
Ann Clay	NeDWEE	
Tyler Martin	NeDWEE	
Jack Mensinger	NeDWEE	
Brett Roberg	Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC)	
<b>Upper Platte Water Users</b>		
Dennis Strauch	Pathfinder Irrigation District	Member
<b>Colorado Water Users</b>		
Jon Altenhofen	Northern Water	Member
Joe Frank	Lower South Platte Water Conservancy District	Alternate
Rich Belt	South Platte Water Related Activities Program (SPWRAP)	
Jason Marks	Denver Water	
<b>Downstream Water Users</b>		
Cory Steinke	Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District (CNPPID)	Member 2025 WAC Chair
Brandi Flyr	Central Platte Natural Resources District (CPNRD)	Member
Jeff Shafer	Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD)	Member
Nick Lee	NPPD	
Nolan Little	Tri-Basin Natural Resources District (TBNRD)	
Scott Shaneman	North Platte Natural Resources District (NPNRD)	
Randy Zach	NPPD	



PRRIP Water Advisory Committee Meeting Attendees		
Environmental Entities		
Jacob Fritton	The Nature Conservancy	Member
Abraham Kanz	The Crane Trust	Member
Melissa Mosier	Audubon	Member
Executive Director's Office (EDO)		
Justin Brei	Engineering/Colorado Coordinator	
Libby Casavant	Hydraulic Engineer	
Jason Farnsworth	Executive Director	
Quinn Lewis	River Scientist	
Seth Turner	Water Plan Coordinator	
Ed Weschler	Water Resources Engineer	
Other Participants		
Sara Mechtenberg	Houston Engineering	

**Welcome and Administrative:** *Cory Steinke, 2025 WAC Chair*

Meeting participants were identified from Teams. Turner said the full presentation on the Water Action Plan Timeline and Evolution shown on the agenda would be delayed to February, but the updated Water Milestone Summary would be reviewed during this meeting. There were no edits to the original draft of the August 2025 WAC meeting minutes. Shafer made a motion to approve, second by Merrill, minutes were approved.

**Brief Water Updates:** *Ed Weschler and Seth Turner, EDO and Jason Farnsworth, ED*

**Platte Basin hydrology:**

Weschler presented a summary of recent hydrology at the Grand Island gage. There was a brief period of excess flows from September 15-19 but flows have otherwise tracked well below USFWS target flows for most of the period since early August. The temporary hydrologic condition for October-November is normal; Turner noted that the hydrologic condition remains temporary because the NOAA website that hosts monthly Palmer Drought Severity Index (PDSI) data has not been updated with monthly PDSI for September due to the ongoing government shutdown. Weschler showed maps of drought conditions across the Platte Basin, which were generally improved in late October relative to late July, particularly in southeastern Wyoming and parts of western Nebraska.

**Leasing, recharge, and recapture projects:**

Turner reported that the Program's 8 recapture wells had cumulatively pumped about 2,380 AF as of August 29. The wells were turned off through September, resumed pumping on October 6, and would be shut off at the end of October. The Cook well was finally operational again in late August after resolving a dead battery issue with the flow meter. Turner added that, given accounting analyses showing that net accretions from recharge and recapture decline significantly when the wells are operated for several months in a row, the EDO was testing the effects of alternating months with the wells on and off.



During the September 15-19 excess flow period, NPPD made diversions into the Dawson County Canal resulting in 452 AF of net recharge (measured diversions minus returns/spills). Also in September, 4,800 AF of leased water was released from the Pathfinder Municipal Account and 10,876 AF was released from the Pathfinder EA. A combined volume of 14,237 AF (91% of releases, after transit losses) was credited to the Lake McConaughy EA.

Other credits to the Lake McConaughy EA in October included 14,312 AF from the CPNRD surface water lease; 3,306 AF from the NPPD surface water lease; 847 AF from the CNPPID irrigator lease; and 314 AF from No-Cost Net Controllable Conserved Water (NCCW).

***Wet meadows:***

Farnsworth explained that the Program put together a 6-chapter data synthesis for wet meadow research on the central Platte, specifically considering sites that would be high quality wet meadows. The essential question was what water management, e.g., raising stage or pumping wells, would need to be done to replicate those conditions. One peer reviewer had concerns about model overfitting. On the recommendation of the Program's former hydrogeology Special Advisor Bill Hahn, the EDO hired Calvin Miller as a Special Advisor to revise that element of the report. Miller re-did the modeling using ModFlow and re-wrote the relevant chapter. The TAC had some comments, and appropriate edits are now being incorporated. Once that is complete, the chapter will be provided to the original peer reviewer again to determine if the model overfitting has been addressed sufficiently. If yes, the chapter will be moved along to the GC for approval and also provided to the TAC and WAC.

The main conclusions are that when the ground level is not at or below river bed elevation, it is difficult to raise groundwater levels by putting more water in the river. When that approach is used, the water only makes it so far into the meadow. Pumping requires a lot of high-capacity wells to artificially create 60-70 acres of wet meadows when the ground is a few feet above groundwater, and that also creates complications with ag usage.

Altenhofen and Farnsworth discussed wells and pumping directly from the river. Farnsworth said the issues are making sure you're not just cycling water and also the number of wells required to cover the land area. The basic conclusion is that if you want to create or maintain wet meadows, you need to find locations where the topography works relative to the desired river stage. LaBay asked about flow frequency and return periods to see the desired effects in wet meadows. Farnsworth said that locations such as Mormon Island and Binfield work as wet meadows even with dry hydrology because the meadows are at or below the river invert, so they're just "wet." At locations requiring water out of the banks, you need at least a 2-year event to reach bankfull discharge. Effects are very location specific, as some sites have low banks and others do not.

**WY2026 Environmental Account AOP:** *Steve LaBay, USFWS*

LaBay reviewed the Lake McConaughy Environmental Account (EA) Annual Operating Plan (AOP) for Water Year 2026. He explained the origins of some of the different types and



priorities of EA releases. The plan for 2026 is to once again prioritize the May-June EA release for germination suppression; this will be the 7<sup>th</sup> year for that release, dating back to 2020. LaBay noted that the EDO is conducting an evaluation of germination suppression with the goal of developing more effective management tools for the release. Assuming there isn't a significant winter drought, it is estimated that there will be about 100,000 AF available in the EA at the time the germination suppression release would start in late May 2026.

**2026 Water Work Plan and Budget:** *Seth Turner, EDO*

Turner went over Water Plan budget line items for 2026, including groundwater recharge and recapture, surface water leasing, water monitoring, and general property maintenance for the State Channel Berm at the North Platte Chokepoint and other properties acquired by the Program for future water projects.

Given remaining pre-paid volumes and credit balances, there are no expected expenditures for excess flow diversions to the Phelps, Elwood, and Cottonwood Ranch recharge projects. In late 2022, the Program pre-paid for 50,000 AF of Phelps diversions and nearly 135,000 AF of Elwood diversions; from January 2023-October 2025, deliveries under that agreement were only 1,800 AF for Phelps and 11,400 AF for Elwood. About \$791,000 remains of the Cottonwood Ranch credit balance from the delivery pipeline construction; CNPPID's costs for project operations and maintenance will also be deducted from that balance until it is used up.

There was some discussion regarding the future of NPPD canal recharge under item WPRT-1 Retiming Projects: Canal Recharge. Turner said the current Water Service Agreement (WSA) with NPPD expires December 31, 2025. Net recharge has been limited under the current WSA (2,817 AF in 2020 and 1,265 AF total from 2021-2025, all in the Dawson County Canal) largely due to drier hydrology and the timing of the available excesses. The NPPD canals can generally only divert for recharge during the spring/fall shoulder seasons between winter and irrigation season. Zach asserted NPPD's desire to extend the agreement; Turner said the EDO's preference would be a 7-year agreement through 2032 so the project is locked in through the end of the Extension. Zach said NPPD would be fine with a 7-year agreement. Steinke added that even if this project isn't yielding a lot of water, it's not advisable to cut available water supply sources until the Program has too much water. Scheel asked what it is that the Program pays for with this project; Turner said it's the net recharge, calculated as measured diversions minus any river returns or spills. If the GC is in favor of extending this recharge project when discussed at the November special session, the EDO and NPPD can work up an agreement for review and approval at the December GC meeting.

Although no budget is needed for water diversions into Elwood Reservoir, item WPRT-2 Retiming Projects: Reservoir Recharge includes \$353,000 for continuation of the Elwood Outlet Feasibility Study by LRE Water (now Spheros) and their subconsultants. Turner reminded the committee that subconsultant RJH presented on Phase 1 – 30% Design at the August meeting. About \$52,000 of remaining budget is being re-budgeted for continued work on certain aspects of the pipeline design in 2026. An additional \$301,000 is proposed for a Phase 2 refined



evaluation of Plum Creek primarily by subconsultant Inter-Fluve. This would include development and calibration of a 2D hydraulic model of the ~28 miles of meandering Plum Creek between the pipeline discharge near Hwy 283 and the mouth of the creek at the Platte River; erosion and bank stability analyses; field work to gather data to inform the modeling; and conceptual designs for both erosion mitigation measures and infrastructure replacements of existing culverts and ag crossings. Turner said Inter-Fluve came up with a wide cost range of about \$1.8-\$10 million during the reconnaissance-level study and this additional work is necessary to refine those cost estimates to better determine viability of the proposed Elwood outlet project.

One-year surface water leases with CPNRD, NPPD, and CNPPID are proposed under item WPST-1 Storage Leases: Lake McConaughy sources. Unit cost \$110/AF and volumetric limit terms are assumed to be the same as the 2025 leases with CPNRD and NPPD. The lease with CNPPID has not yet been implemented, but it is hoped that discussions will resume. Total budget for these proposed leases is \$3.114 million for up to 28,306 AF of water.

WPWM-1 Water Monitoring Activities has a budget of \$55,000 and includes stream gages, weather stations, and miscellaneous monitoring equipment. Stream gages at Cottonwood Ranch and the J2 Return channel are maintained through an agreement between the USGS and NPPD and paid for by the Program. The Program also has a cost share with CNPPID for the Overton stream gage, contributes funds for the Grand Island gage camera through CPNRD, and maintains weather stations at Morse and Binfield through Nebraska Mesonet.

Total proposed Water Plan budget for 2026 is about \$4.34 million.

**Water Action Plan Timeline and Evolution:** *Seth Turner, EDO*

As noted previously, the planned presentation on the Water Action Plan timeline was delayed to February but Turner said the April 2021 Water Action Plan Update Report covering that topic during the First Increment from 2007-2019 was included in the available meeting documents.

Turner showed the committee a recently-updated October 2025 version of the Water Milestone Summary reflecting some changes in Water Action Plan projects, priorities, estimated scores, and estimated costs since it was last updated more than 3 years ago. Projects are categorized as Operational (96,110 AF estimated score), Operational-Uncertain Future (14,500 AF), and Concept (14,200 AF). Operational-Uncertain Future projects include those that are active but not secured through longer-term agreements such as the CPNRD (11,000 AF) and NPPD (2,600 AF) surface water leases and NPPD recharge (900 AF). Conceptual projects include the Elwood outlet (5,000 AF) and CNPPID lease (9,200 AF) that were included in the budget discussion. Revised score numbers reflect that CPNRD recharge and the CNPPID irrigator lease have been discontinued and the experience of reduced surface water lease volumes in wetter years such as 2023. A total estimated score of 124,810 AF reflects that both the Elwood outlet and CNPPID lease are necessary to achieve the objective of 120,000 AF. If all other projects score as



estimated but those 2 conceptual projects are unsuccessful, then the Program is currently sitting at about 110,000 AF of deficit-reduction capacity.

Water Action Plan expenditures from 2020-2025 totaled about \$27.5 million, including construction costs for the Cottonwood Ranch recharge project and recapture wells; pre-payment for Phelps and Elwood recharge water (and a \$2 million contribution to the dam seepage repair at Elwood Reservoir); annual surface water leasing from several sources and additional excess flow diversions for recharge; and various annual O&M costs for recapture wells, etc. Estimated costs for 2026-2032 total nearly \$43.4 million (of which about \$24.1 million is for the 2 conceptual water projects), for a total estimated Extension (2020-2032) water cost of about \$70.9 million. This is less than the \$89.1 million Extension water budget projected in 2019.

Mosier asked if the conceptual project costs could be separated from the operational project costs to provide a bit of additional clarity. Turner said they're shown together to emphasize the importance of achieving the conceptual projects but it should be easy to revise the Water Milestone Summary tables to show totals with and without the conceptual projects. Mosier also asked what would be shown for projects "not included in the current water strategy." Turner said that previously included now-discontinued projects such as CPNRD recharge and the CNPPID irrigator lease. Farnsworth added that it also represented high cost, low certainty projects.

Turner also emphasized the importance of switching focus to controllable supplies over the last 6+ years, allowing the Program to have more water that can be managed for scientific purposes such as germination suppression, whooping crane migration releases, etc. Being able to control releases back to the river provides a lot more value for the Program than 5-8 cfs of retimed baseflow accretions from groundwater recharge. The Elwood outlet, if constructed, would provide up to 100 cfs of controlled releases to the river. This is much less than is possible with a Lake McConaughy EA release but 10 times the water that can be pumped with recapture wells during periods of shortage. It would allow the Program to make much more effective use of retimed excess flows than slow returns from recharge over years to decades. Steinke echoed the value the Elwood outlet could provide for the Program.

Given this context regarding the status of the Water Action Plan, Farnsworth shifted the direction of the conversation: how do we start having conversations about water plan pursuits for the next few years, and in what venue? Steinke asked if the WAC is to be part of determining the number for the water objective volume, or will it be assigned for the WAC to pursue? Farnsworth added that projects have been taken off the table, e.g., CPNRD recharge and CNPPID irrigator lease, but new project ideas are not being added to replace them. The EDO needs guidance. Mosier asked Farnsworth if he's looking for an assessment of where we're at to help policy decisions? Farnsworth said we have projects that are operational but with an uncertain future. We have conceptual projects like the CNPPID lease that are important but we've not had meaningful discussions since 2022. Are these projects real or not? Does the conversation start at the WAC and move to the GC, or does the GC tell the WAC what to do?



Altenhofen asked, if the Elwood outlet comes through, isn't the water goal met? Shouldn't we focus on locking down that and the CNPPID lease rather than seeking something new? Farnsworth confirmed that if the projects are real (as in viable over the longer-term) and can be implemented, then the current 120,000 AF water objective would be met. Altenhofen suggested it's a GC-level issue, and they need to negotiate to complete the projects.

Steinke reiterated his question whether it's the WAC's place to say what the water objective should be. Is it the WAC's job to get to the 124,000 AF we could potentially achieve with the current portfolio? If it's instead 110,000 AF, what projects provide the best benefit for cost? The Elwood outlet is a big, expensive project, is it the job of the WAC or GC to say "pursue it?" Steinke suggested the WAC should take the position of pursuing every water option.

Mosier emphasized the importance of showing that we're NOT at 124,000 AF right now and to emphasize the space where we are and where we need to be, make the gap more obvious. Farnsworth added that we should show the difference between operational and conceptual projects.

Steinke asked if the shift towards controllable water supplies suggests that the water objective should be reconsidered, possibly a question for the TAC. Our current scenario is very different from when the water objective was established and the mix of Water Action Plan projects expected to be viable at that time. No one then anticipated there would be 70,000-80,000 AF of storage water available all the time. Farnsworth said the original focus was on recharge and retiming, as there was expected to be little controllable water available. Referring to the Lake McConaughy EA, Turner noted that even with the water objective not met, the Program has never been short of water for meeting intended release objectives.

Steinke said that controllable water is in reservoirs, and reservoirs are expensive and competitive. But is that control worth more to the Program in terms of meeting the water objective? It's not the WAC's job to say the objective volume should be reduced, but maybe we should ask. LaBay asked why the Program would stop short of 130,000 AF. Shouldn't the effort be made to find the extra water to get over that mark? Who decides if it's "justified?" Turner said the thinking in the 2017-2018 timeframe going into the Extension was that we had a planned water portfolio that made 120,000 AF achievable for a reasonable cost, but that last 10,000 AF was expected to be much more expensive given water supplies thought to be available. The thought was that the Program could get to 120,000 AF around now (by the mid-2020s) and do "science" to determine if there was a need that would justify the cost of the last 10,000 AF. Eight years later, there may be more cost-effective options out there, but we don't know since we just have the two conceptual projects. As for who decides if it's "justified" there wasn't a solid plan at the time.

Schellpeper circled back to the question of what the WAC should do about the uncertain and conceptual projects and echoed earlier suggestions that the WAC can make recommendations but these are ultimately questions for the GC to resolve. Farnsworth agreed and said that the



question of whether the last 10,000 AF is necessary is really a resource allocation question. If there is just a certain amount of funding available, it's up to the policy makers on the GC to decide the best use and where between 120,000 AF and 150,000 AF is the best use of money for water.

Farnsworth offered that the WAC has done all it can relative to water and water supply projects. Projects that didn't make sense were taken off the table, and projects that were reasonable and cost efficient were implemented or built. Requirements for Plum Creek mitigation are an uncertain aspect of the Elwood outlet project but that's why there's money in the budget to tighten up that analysis. Water for the project is available (in the form of pre-paid excess flow diversions for the existing Elwood recharge project) so it's a question of what political and economic levers need to be pulled at the GC level. It's not a technical project to be wrestled with at the WAC level. If the GC says "find more water," the WAC needs to think about what water could be brought in from a regulatory perspective given the Program's limited ability to pursue physical infrastructure projects.

Turner said that while the conceptual project list is down to two items now, it's not for lack of pursuing other projects over the last decade. After the J2 Regulating Reservoirs project was deemed infeasible, the EDO scrambled to find other water supply projects that could make up the lost score. The Cottonwood Ranch broad-scale recharge project was built but the original concept that there would be maybe half a dozen similar projects across the central Platte proved infeasible because of the land acquisition and water availability requirements. A slurry wall gravel pit project was designed but shelved because the price kept increasing and the potential score kept shrinking. The Program pursued a plan to "acquire-and-retire" agricultural water rights; one small project was initiated but didn't pan out. The CNPPID irrigator lease ran for 10 years but didn't yield enough water to justify the high cost relative to other sources of supply. There was an initial concept for something like 40 recapture wells to improve the efficiency of existing recharge projects. The Program installed 8 recapture wells near the river and the Expanded Recapture Reconnaissance Study found that there would be little to no benefit of putting in more near the river. Additional wells would need to be further from the river, which leads to skyrocketing costs.

Schellpeper returned to Steinke's earlier comments about controllable water and suggested that the GC could task the WAC with looking at how much controllable water the Program has now versus what was expected in the past. It would be good for the WAC to look into before jumping into a big GC conversation about the water objective. Mosier asked how the WAC and TAC might support future GC decision-making. Farnsworth said it might be similar to the 2015 tern and plover structured decision-making process, but the path forward right now is uncertain.

**Additional Business:** *Cory Steinke – 2025 WAC Chair*

WAC meetings in 2026 are tentatively scheduled for February 3, May 5, August 4, and October 27. Turner said placeholder meeting invites would be sent out in December. There was discussion of having a water projects tour in 2026 (the most recent having been in May 2023)





and responses were favorable for doing so. Proposed options included planning a tour to follow the May WAC meeting or potentially moving the June GC meeting to Kearney and having it then. Farnsworth said the EDO would discuss and come up with a plan.

### **Action Items**

#### **General WAC**

- N/A

#### **EDO**

- Send placeholder invites for 2026 WAC meetings.
- Plan for a water projects tour in 2026.