



PLATTE RIVER
RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM

ACCOMPLISHMENTS REPORT 2007 & 2008

Prepared by Office of the Executive Director

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Annual Report of the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program

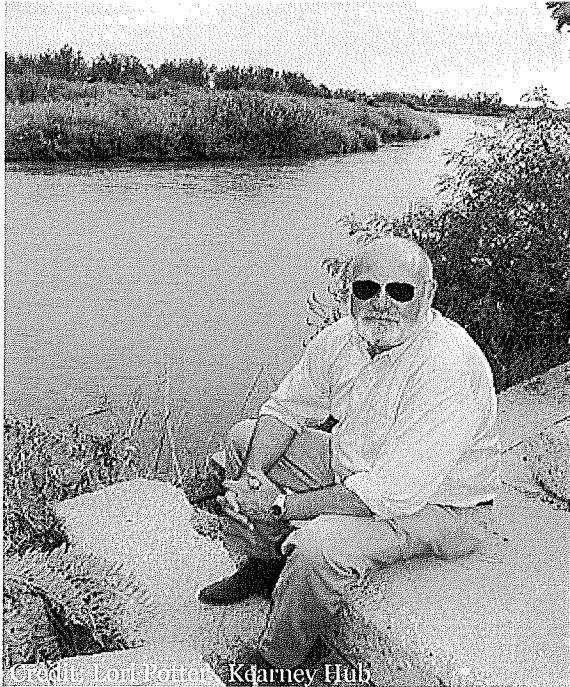
This is the first Accomplishments Report published by the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (PRRIP or the Program). This Accomplishments Report provides an overview of the activities of the Program and accomplishments achieved for 2007 and 2008. Hereafter, an Accomplishment Report will be produced annually.

On July 1, 1997 the governors of Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming and the Secretary of the Interior entered into a Cooperative Agreement to address the needs of four threatened or endangered species using the Platte River Basin. The named species were the endangered whooping crane, least tern, pallid sturgeon and the threatened piping plover. The agreement proposed a framework for a long-term Recovery Implementation Program to aid these species. Initially, the agreement was for three years to develop a basin-wide cooperative program. However, negotiations regarding the details of that program took place from 1997 to 2006.

In late 2006, the governors of Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming and the Secretary of the Interior signed the final program agreement, effective January 1, 2007. In May, 2007 an Executive Director was selected and began his tenure with the program on July 1, 2007. On May 8, 2008 the President signed into law legislation to implement the federal share of the Program as part of the Consolidated Natural Resources Act of 2008. This legislation included authorization for the federal funding for the Program.



Executive Director's Perspective



Credit: Lori Pottier, Kearney Hub

On July 1, 1997, the states of Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming together with the Department of the Interior entered into a Cooperative Agreement to deal with Endangered Species Act (ESA) issues in the Platte Basin in a coordinated, comprehensive manner. The product of the Cooperative Agreement was the plan for dealing with the ESA issues, the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (PRRIP or Program). In late 2006 the document was signed by the governors of the three states and the Secretary of Interior, and on January 1, 2007 the Cooperative Agreement phase ended and PRRIP phase began.

On July 1, 2007, ten years to the day after initiation of the Cooperative Agreement, I assumed the role of Executive Director of the Program. This correspondence of dates, to me at least, felt promising in its symmetry. A good omen if you will, in that a cycle was completed, a loop was closed, and the torch was passed. Time now for implementation of the program so carefully crafted over all those years and with all the blood, sweat, and tears spent in its making. That the day was a Sunday seemed significant as well, a day of rest needed for the labors ahead.

I and the Program staff working to make the Program a reality, not just a document, are highly aware of the legacy that we inherited and are now advancing. We are committed to completing the mission before us.

Of course it is not just I and Program staff with our shoulders to the wheel, the good people from all of the agencies and organizations that form the collaborative body of the Program are still deeply involved. Many of these people are the same people who have been in the thick of this effort since before even the Cooperative Agreement phase. Not all are still here, some have moved on and some have passed over. We are grateful for the contributions of those who came before just as we are of those in the moment.

We are now a year and half further down the road from that Sunday in July of 2007, and find it an appropriate time to take stock of what has been accomplished. This report provides a summary of the highlights of the accomplishments. A remarkable amount has been accomplished in that time. A great deal more remains to be accomplished. Each year from now through the remainder of the first increment, we intend to publish a similar report of accomplishments for that year. I look forward with anticipation for each of those years and the opportunity to chronicle the path of implementation.

Program Oversight and Management

One of the innovative aspects of the Program is the organizational structure conceived for implementation. That structure is sufficiently unique that it warrants some discussion.

The organizational structure of the PRRIP is different than many of the other existing Recovery Implementation Programs. The key organizational difference is that the actual day-to-day implementation actions are carried out by private sector entities rather than a government agency. Control of the Program rests with a group of stakeholders that prominently includes State and Federal representatives, but the services of the Executive Director and Program Staff are provided through a contract with Headwaters Corporation. The Financial Management Entity services are provided through a contract with the Nebraska Community Foundation. The Land Interest Holding Entity services are provided through a contract with the Platte River Recovery Implementation Foundation. In most other Recovery Programs, these implementation functions are performed by Federal employees acting through their specific agency. This fairly unique structure was selected to embody the collaborative nature under which the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program has been undertaken.

To emphasize the understanding that *control of the Program rests with a group of stakeholders called the Governance Committee (GC)*, that statement is repeated. The GC is the ruling body that makes Program decisions and is ultimately responsible for implementation of the Program. The GC is a ten member body with representation by the States of Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming, the US Department of Interior agencies the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the US Bureau of Reclamation (Bureau), Downstream (of Lake McConaughy) Water Users, Upstream (of Lake McConaughy) Water Users, and Colorado Water Users, and three representatives (with two votes) of Environmental/Conservation Organizations. The Governance Committee is assisted in financial matters by the Finance Committee (FC), and is advised by the standing Technical, Water, and Land Advisory Committees (TAC, WAC, and LAC, respectively) staffed by appointees selected by the member entities of the GC. The Independent Scientific Advisory Committee (ISAC) also advises the GC, and its formation and function is described later in this report. The Environmental Account Manager (an employee of the USFWS) together with the Environmental Account Committee (EAC) and the Reservoir Coordinating Committee (RCC) also advises the GC on Environmental Account management activities and releases.

The contributions of the members of these committees cannot be easily measured, but the contributions and dedicated service provided by these individuals is invaluable in achieving the accomplishments that are chronicled in this report.

The accomplishments achieved by the Program for the 2007 to 2008 period are highlighted in the sections that follow.



Water Plan

Water is a vital component of any habitat and literally is the central thread defining this ecosystem. It is the *Platte River* Recovery Implementation Program, and to have a river you must have water. Because of the critical role of water, the Water Plan is one of the three plans that form the core of the Program. The goal of the water plan is to get more water in the river where and when it is needed. This can be in the form of additional water at times when flows are below target flows or in the form of a spring pulse flow to test whether bare sand in the channel and braided river forms can be maintained by flows rather than strictly mechanical means. Program efforts to this point have focused on investigations of water supply management and flow conveyance issues.

Water Supply Management

In the arena of water supply management, a *Water Management Study* was undertaken in 2007 and completed in 2008. Phase I of the study focused on investigating the way water supplies could be managed to meet target flows and to create pulse flows using the river or using the facilities of Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD) and Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District (CNPPID) in combination with the river. Phase I highlighted the need for storage capacity in the Lexington to Kearney section of the habitat area to most effectively manage the Program's water resources. Phase II of the study evaluated alternatives for these storage facilities and identified two alternatives considered most promising for further investigation. A team lead by Boyle Engineering (now AECOM – Water) performed this work.

Flow Conveyance

Impediments to flow plague the Platte River, particularly with the proliferation of phragmites in the past five to eight years. Moving water from Lake McConaughy over two hundred miles to Lexington and further downstream into the associated habitat reach is very important for management of Program water. Eliminating constraints and improving the flow of water is critical for the success of these efforts. The first location where a flow constriction in the river was tackled by the Program was at the *North Platte Choke Point* on the North Platte River upstream of the Highway 83 Bridge. Analysis and modeling of the area lead to a proposed, less intrusive solution involving significantly less channel modification than early investigations had suggested. Spraying and removal of phragmites in key areas has been accomplished, but work in the channel has been deferred until the cooperation of a land owner can be secured. Additional efforts at the choke point and downstream to the CNPPID Diversion Dam are being planned. A team lead by SEH, an engineering firm, performed the analysis and developed the alternative being implemented.

EA By-Pass Agreement

Before a pulse flow could be initiated, several pieces had to be in place – insurance, Federal authorizing legislation, and an agreement among the Program, CNPPID, NPPD, the State of Nebraska, and the US FWS was needed. The agreement amongst all of the parties formalized the process for initiating a pulse, defined roles and responsibilities, and assigned fiscal commitments. All of these pieces were brought into place in 2008 clearing the way for a test flow release in 2009.

Looking to the Future

Efforts initiated in 2008 toward developing a revised Water Action Plan will be brought to conclusion by the end of 2009. The Water Action Plan was last defined in 2000. The Water Action Plan will provide the road map for developing the water supplies needed to implement the Program.

Land Plan

Land is obviously central to habitat restoration. The goal of the Program is to acquire 10,000 acres between Lexington and Chapman during the first increment and restore habitat suitable for the target species. Most of the land must be river ground or basically adjacent to the river. Once acquired, the land must be restored and managed for the benefit of the target species. These restoration activities typically involve removal of woody vegetation, control of invasive plants and noxious weeds, establishment of prairie grasslands, and creation of bare sand and braided river forms in the channel.

Land can be acquired by fee simple purchase, through easement, or through leasing. Whatever the form of acquisition, the transactions are entirely willing seller/willing buyer. The willing seller/willing buyer approach is central to the Program's Good Neighbor Policy that also includes elements such as paying taxes on the land and working to avoid injury to neighbors or rectifying any injury caused by our actions.

Wyoming Property and Cottonwood Ranch

The Wyoming Property (470 acres owned by the State of Wyoming) near Kearney and the Cottonwood Ranch (2,650 acres owned by NNPD) between Overton and Elm Creek are both properties owned by others that count toward the Program's 10,000 acre first increment goal. The Program has different levels of responsibility toward these two properties. A **Lease Agreement for the Wyoming Property** defining these responsibilities and transferring land management obligations to the Program was signed in 2008. Developing a Draft Land Management Plan, making boundary surveys, and implementing various basic land management actions were the primary activities associated with the Wyoming Property. A **Sponsorship Agreement for the Cottonwood Ranch** is still under negotiation, and should be finalized in the first half of 2009.



Establishing the Foundation for Acquisition

Until the Federal Authorizing legislation was in place, purchasing land would have been procedurally difficult because Federal money could not be used. Consequently, efforts prior to passage and signing of the authorizing legislation were focused on establishing the foundation required to move forward with land acquisition. Among the key steps in establishing the foundation were the following:

- Activation of the **Land Advisory Committee (LAC)** and working with the LAC to fully develop the land evaluation process and procedures.
- Establishment of the **Land Interest Holding Entity** that will hold titles, easements, and leases to the properties acquired. A 501-C (3) non-profit entity separate from, but affiliated with the Nebraska Community Foundation, was formed in 2008 to accomplish this task. The name of this entity is the Platte River Recovery Implementation Foundation (PRRIF).

Activating the Process

With the foundation established and the authorizing legislation in place, the land acquisition process began in full speed in May 2008. Over the following seven months, the following statistics were compiled for 2008:

- 50 parcels were evaluated and brought before the LAC
- 44 parcels moved past the initial screening and advanced for further consideration
- 13 of the 41 parcels moved to the Governance Committee and were approved for appraisal/negotiation
- One of the 13 parcels (360 acres) was brought before the Governance Committee with an Offer to Sell, which was approved. Finalization of the deal is anticipated in the first quarter of 2009.

Looking Ahead

The land evaluation process has several properties under consideration and the Program is still approached regularly by landowners interested in participating in some form with the Program Land Plan. As of early 2009, five Offers to Sell have been accepted and are in the process of closing. These alone will bring in over 1,000 additional acres to the Program. An active year ahead in further acquisitions and implementation of management actions on the acquired properties is expected.



Adaptive Management Plan

The concept of Adaptive Management and the goals of the Adaptive Management Plan are a little more abstract than those of the Land and Water Plans, but no less important. Adaptive Management is a scientifically rigorous and methodical process of gathering data and observations which provides a means of making more informed decisions about the management of our resources.

We don't know everything we need to know about recovery of the species, and we don't all agree about the meaning of many things that we know or think we know. Adaptive Management provides a means of moving forward in the face of this uncertainty. We don't have the luxury of waiting to know everything we need to know before taking action; it would likely be too late to be of benefit to the target species at that point. Based on the knowledge we have now, hypotheses are formulated, experiments devised, information gathered, and actions revised based on this new knowledge.

The Program is taking a very disciplined approach toward Adaptive Management. Our approach is to make sure that all efforts are tied directly to management actions, so what we learn has specific meaning to the management actions we take in the river and in the adjacent habitat. This keeps our research efforts focused sharply on the "need to know" versus the simply "nice to know" and should allow the efficient implementation of the Integrated Monitoring and Research Plan (IMRP).

Accomplishments in Adaptive Management arena have been numerous, and are organized into Monitoring, Research, and Process categories on the following pages.

Monitoring

Monitoring is a vital, yet often neglected portion of Adaptive Management. This is primarily the regular and routine observation of species or collection of some specific type of data, such as water quality data. This information however is often the proof needed to test the hypotheses of the experiments. A number of monitoring efforts have been continued or instituted over the 2007-2008 period, including the following:

- **Whooping Crane Habitat Use Monitoring** – During the spring and fall migrations, whooping crane use of the river is monitored. This is the continuation of a program initiated under the Cooperative Agreement and is conducted in close association with broader whooping crane monitoring efforts organized by the USFWS. The monitoring work is performed for the Program under contract by AIM Environmental.
- **Tern and Plover Monitoring** – During the time the terns and plovers are in Central Nebraska, their nesting and fledging activities are monitored on the river and at sand pits. This monitoring is the continuation of a program initiated under the Cooperative Agreement and is performed in cooperation with the USFWS and cooperators from the Central Platte Natural Resources District (CPNRD), CNPPID, and NPPD.
- **Forage Fish Monitoring** – Soon after the terns and plovers leave the river, to avoid disturbing the birds, sampling of forage fish is undertaken to determine if fish populations are sufficient for the terns that feed on these small fish. This monitoring is the continuation of a program initiated under the Cooperative Agreement and is performed in cooperation with Program Staff, CPNRD, CNPPID, and NPPD.
- **Water Quality Monitoring** – Protocols have been developed for water quality monitoring for the Central and Lower Platte. These protocols will be implemented starting in 2009. The protocols were developed by a team led by EA Engineering and Technology together with Program Staff and the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and a Water Quality Subgroup of the TAC.
- **Geomorphology and In-Channel Vegetation Monitoring** – Protocols for geomorphology and in-channel vegetation have been developed and will be implemented beginning in 2009. These protocols were developed by a collaboration of the TAC, Program Staff, and a consultant team consisting of Ayres and Associates and Olsson and Associates.

Research

Investigating the physical and biological features of the habitat either in the field, in the laboratory, or in the library is the means of pushing forward the boundaries of our knowledge.

Several steps have been taken in this arena, but the major push will follow completion of items described subsequently in the Process section. The accomplishments in Research include the following:

- **Lower Platte Stage Change** – The Lower Platte is habitat for the Pallid Sturgeon, the fish species among our target species. This study was initiated in 2008 to investigate the hydrologic and hydraulic characteristics of the Platte below the confluence of the Elkhorn River and involves extensive field data collection under a range of flow conditions. This work should be completed at the end of 2009 and is being performed by a team lead by HDR Engineering, Inc.
- **Pallid Sturgeon Information Review** – A comprehensive review and compilation of information about the Pallid Sturgeon was undertaken and completed in 2008 by Dr. Edward Peters and Dr. James Parham.
- **Tern and Plover Foraging Habits Study** – The foraging habits of terns and plovers in the associated habit area will be performed by a team led by the US Geological Survey from their Northern Prairie Research Center. The contractor selection occurred in 2008 and the study efforts will be initiated in 2009.

Process

Process is closely related to both Monitoring and Research, but particularly at this early stage of the Program, Process and the development of Processes is felt to warrant its own section. It is through Process that the specifics of Monitoring and research are established and validated.

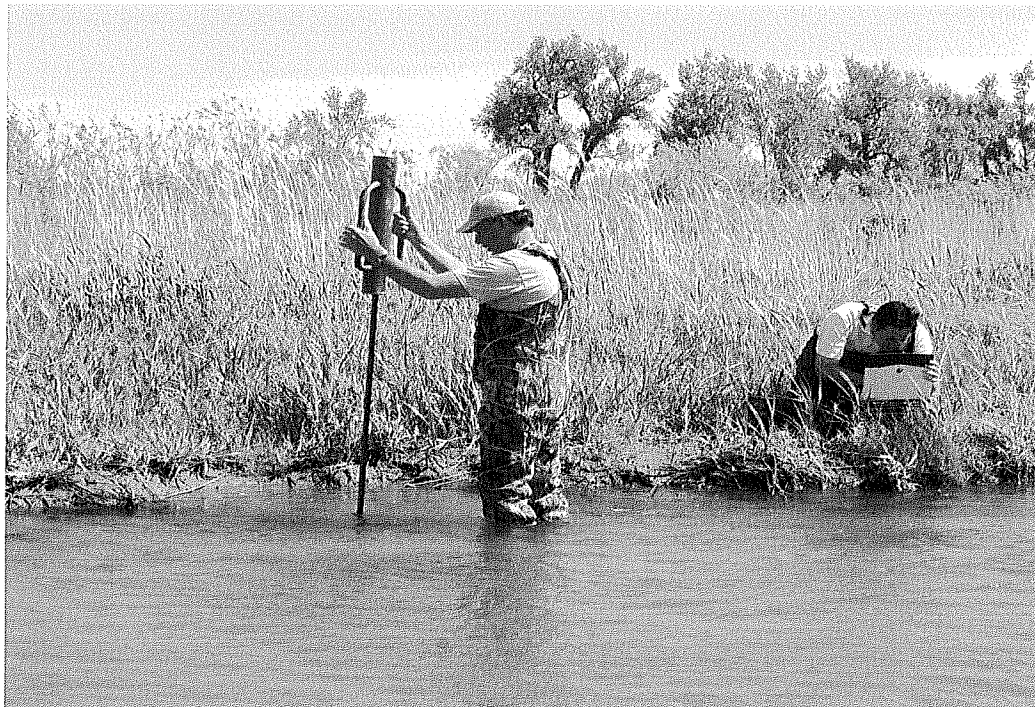
Ultimately, Process once established and institutionalized, becomes largely transparent, but for now deserves a piece of the spotlight. Two key aspects of Process will be discussed as follows:

- **Independent Scientific Advisory Committee (ISAC)** – Scientific rigor is critical to the validity and credibility of the findings of the Adaptive Management efforts. The ISAC together with Peer Review Panels representing various discipline areas are key to accomplishing this rigor. A distinguished group of five independent experts in the fields of adaptive management, geomorphology, statistics, hydrology, ecology, and ecosystem restoration have been impaneled to provide guidance and review of the Program's Adaptive Management efforts. The initial meeting of ISAC will be in March 2009. Assistance in developing nominees for the ISAC as well as the Peer Review Panels was provided by PBS&J, an engineering and environmental consulting firm.

- **Workshop Approach to Research Plan Development** – The Program is tasked with testing a multitude of hypotheses. The most efficient means of gathering input and brainstorming to develop the design and plan for implementation of experiments to test these hypotheses was deemed to be through intense day-long to several day workshops. A series of workshops were initiated in 2008 and will continue in 2009. These workshops are lead by Program staff and include representatives of Program partners, special advisors to the Program, and contractors with specific expertise in the appropriate fields. In these workshops a variety of techniques have been employed including a Structured Decision Making process with Rapid Prototyping (with the assistance of Dr. Drew Tyre of the University of Nebraska). These workshops have been considered successful to date, with the goal of being ready to implement a largely complete battery of replicated experiments in the field in 2010.

Looking Ahead

The existing monitoring activities of the Program will continue and additional monitoring efforts will be added in 2009. Extensive efforts will be expended in the completion of the research and experimental plan in 2009 to allow replicated implementation of a battery of experiments in the field in 2010. Work with the ISAC and Peer Review panels will help insure that scientific rigor and validity is maintained in all aspects of the development and implementation of the Adaptive Management Plan.



Data and Database

Closely associated particularly with the Adaptive Management Plan, but important to the Land and Water Plans as well are data collection and analyses and the database management system that will provide a secure home for the vast amount of data and information in all arenas that has been collected during the Cooperative Agreement phase and will be collected over the course of the First Increment.

Data

A variety of different types of data are being collected under the various Adaptive Management activities described elsewhere. The data collection efforts described in this section are focused on those actions the Program staff have had primary responsibility. These activities are summarized as follows:

- **Stream gages** – Through cooperation with the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (DNR), two new stream gages on the Platte River were installed and activated in the fall of 2008, one at Lexington and one at Shelton. Stage-discharge measurements are taken currently, but water quality probes will be added to both locations in the spring of 2009.
- **Data Analysis Summary Report for May 2008 High Flow Event**– Prolonged, intense rains over a major portion of the Platte Basin below North Platte provided a natural pulse flow event over the Memorial Day weekend of 2008. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Program staff together with cooperators and contractors gathered channel survey data, aerial photography, and sand bar data immediately after this event. The data and analyses performed were compiled in a summary report. This event provided an invaluable opportunity to test processes and procedures, establish baseline data, and perform a trial run of monitoring efforts for future managed pulse flows.
- **Lidar** – Contracts have been signed for gathering of topographical data of the river corridor from Kingsley Dam near Ogallala to near Columbus using aerial laser optics (Lidar). This data will be gathered in the first quarter of 2009 when the right conditions are available – no snow cover, ice off the river, low flows, and leaf off vegetation.

Database Management System

Developing a database and database content management system is critical for the success of the Program. Storing, organizing, analyzing, and providing the ability to access the data collected is essential if we are to effectively use, understand, and gain knowledge and insight from the data.

A sole-source contract was awarded to the Technical Applications Team (TAT) of the USFWS in 2007 and work commenced in early 2008 on development of this system. These efforts were cut short by a re-organization in the USFWS that disbanded the TAT. After consideration of options, a Request for Proposals was issued in December 2008 to solicit Proposals from contractors interested in performing this work. Sixteen proposals were received and a selection will be made after interviews are held. The selection will be made during the first quarter of 2009.

Commissioner's Cooperative Conservation Award

On April 21, 2008 the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program received the Commissioner's Cooperative Conservation award from the United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation. The award was in recognition of outstanding cooperative conservation achievements to conserve water resources and enhance species habitat in furtherance of Reclamation's mission. The Secretary of the Interior also recognized the members of the Program's Governance Committee for their years of working diligently to develop this important species recovery program.



Program Administration and Outreach

While not necessarily the glamorous aspects of a Recovery Program, the establishment of a solid base of administration and administrative process is vital to the ultimate success of the Program. These activities, particularly those establishing process, must be accomplished in advance of the implementation of most of the other aspects of the Program. A brief listing of the accomplishments in the Administration arena follows:

- An Executive Director was selected on May 2, 2007 who assumed his duties July 1, 2007. The Office of the Executive Director was established in Kearney, Nebraska in July 2007. The services of the Executive Director and program staff are obtained through a contract with a private, for -profit corporation.
- The process of adding Program staff necessary to implement the Program was initiated almost immediately. At the end of 2007, a staff of five was on board. At the end of 2008, a staff of nine was on board. It is anticipated that approximately a Program staff of twelve will be required. Program staff is dispersed across the basin at locations in Colorado and Nebraska.
- A contract between the Governance Committee and the Nebraska Community Foundation (NCF) was signed to allow the continued service by the NCF as the Financial Management Entity for the Program. The NCF had provided this service through the Cooperative Agreement phase.
- Insurance was acquired to provide protection for the Program associated with pulse flows and other forms of liability associated with ownership of land and other actions of the Program.
- A Procurement Policy defining procurement processes including the issuing and evaluation of Request for Proposals and Solicitations for Bids, the hiring and payment of contractors, and the processes for authorizations by the Finance and Governance Committees.

Outreach

Communication of information about the Program and general education oriented activities are an important function to gain and advance acceptance of the Program in all of the stakeholder communities that we operate in. These communities extend geographically from our local neighbors in the Central Platte, to each of the three states in the basin, to the national and even international levels. These communities involve diverse socio-economic interest/vocational groupings that extend from farmers and ranchers, to recreational users of the Platte, to the biological sciences community, to bird watchers, to cultural anthropologists, and beyond to many segments of the population. We have a broad and diverse public to which we must communicate effectively. Some of the key outreach activities we have been involved with include the following:

- An interim website was established to serve until the fully functional website to be developed as part of the Database Management System is in place. The website address is www.platteriverprogram.org, and has a link from the Bureau of Reclamation site used during the EIS/ Cooperative Agreement phase.
- A Program logo, displayed on the front cover of this report, was adopted and a strategy for use of the logo and other materials is being developed for outreach branding purposes. The Program logo was developed and graciously donated by Olsson and Associates.
- Connections and cooperative efforts have been established with other organizations with outreach functions such as Rowe Sanctuary, The Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust, Crane Meadows (soon to be renamed the Nebraska Nature and Visitors Center), the University of Nebraska – Lincoln/ Water Center, the University of Nebraska – Kearney, and the Colorado Foundation for Water Education, among others.
- Program Fact Sheets for General Information, the Water Plan, and the Land Plan have been developed and distributed.
- Program staff regularly present at conferences, workshops, classes, and other meetings on an average of three times a month.