

Brief summary of major themes from the 2019 Nebraska Water Center Conference
BUILDING A CLEAN WATER FUTURE IN NORTHEAST NEBRASKA
October 9-10, 2019 in Norfolk, Nebraska

Although the title of the conference references “Northeast Nebraska,” it had a statewide perspective while highlighting specific activities going on in northeast Nebraska.

*“We have some wicked water problems”
“It’s all one water and we are all responsible for it.”*

THE PROBLEM IS REAL

- Nebraska is responsible for 62% of the nitrate contamination in the nation’s groundwaters. People have gotten lackadaisical, maybe have heard about it too often or think it’s already being handled. Acknowledge other pollutants in our waters.
- Health concerns: Nitrates can bind with the oxygen in our bloodstreams, reduce the delivery of O₂ to our cells; Growing research into and evidence of nitrates causing some pediatric cancers; Industrial chemicals also present in our groundwater.
- Extreme weather events (cf recent flooding) can back up sewers, pollute drinking water wells, leave behind pathogens.
- *We’re not crying wolf; we have to make this relevant to everyone.*

WE CAUSED IT

- The overuse of farm chemicals, especially nitrogen and atrazine, will have negative impacts far into the future. Example: The plume of 2,000 pounds of nitrogen nearby that’s already in the vadose zone. Pumping groundwater may actually cause nitrates to move downward more quickly.
- Other pollutants (example, flame retardants) can cause serious illnesses. Dangerous bacteria present in some surface and groundwater supplies.
- Refer to the University’s research on potential impacts of climate change on Nebraska.

WE CAN SOLVE IT IF WE GENUINELY COMMIT TO DOING SO

- Most producers want to do the right thing. Need to keep in mind farmer’s perspectives, economic challenges. Use social marketing and behavioral economics to help educate and persuade.
- *“Grow another crop. It doesn’t make sense to grow corn on sandy soil.”*
- Can sometimes feel like it’s a mission impossible, but we can’t give up. Need balance between the carrot and the stick. Legislation with enforcement? Education?

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

- Research underway into Innovative Technical Solutions. Examples: floating wetlands for lakes, algae tubes to clean water, injected carbon layers to filter out nitrates.
- More and more people committed to doing something positive. Examples: Newly forming statewide group, the Nebraska Nitrate Initiative; Teams of high school students sampling their watershed’s lakes and streams and testing for pollutants.