

# The Rainwater Basin Joint Venture

## Annual Report

October 1, 2014-September 30, 2015





## The Rainwater Basin Joint Venture

The rich soils and plentiful waters of Nebraska's mixed-grass prairie region are the foundation of a system that supports exceptionally abundant and diverse life. That life includes native plant communities and wildlife ranging from microscopic invertebrates to massive flocks of cranes, ducks, and geese. It also includes generations of families who farm the land, as well as the crops and livestock they produce.

The people who care about this landscape are almost as varied as the land itself. The Rainwater Basin Joint Venture is a diverse and growing partnership of individuals and organizations, including government agencies, agriculture associations, non-government organizations, corporations, academic institutions and others. Our respective missions and purposes may differ, but we share a common interest: the future of the waters, soils, and other resources that make this a special place.

We'll continue to seek innovative ways to develop conservation opportunities that are beneficial to wildlife and economically viable for agriculture so that our partners – and the land itself – may thrive.

### Coordinator

Andy Bishop

### Management Board

Tim McCoy, Ph.D., Chair  
*Nebraska Game and Parks Commission*

Peter Berthelsen  
*Pheasants Forever*

Bob Bettger  
*Fillmore County Landowner*

Ardell Epp  
*Hamilton County Landowner*

Gloria Erickson  
*Phelps County Landowner*

Ken Feather  
*Upper Big Blue Natural Res. District*

John Denton  
*Ducks Unlimited*

John Heaston  
*The Nature Conservancy*

Clint Riley  
*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

Michael Onnen  
*NE Assn. of Natural Resources Districts*

Dave Raffety/Joe Bilka  
*Tri-Basin Natural Resources District*

Steve Shaw  
*Little Blue Natural Resources District*

Greg Reisdorff  
*Farm Service Agency*

Mel Taylor  
*Fillmore County Landowner*

Britt Weiser  
*Natural Resources Conservation Service*

## Science Coordinator

Dana Varner, Ph. D.

## Technical Committee

Kirk Schroeder, Chair  
*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

Jeffrey S. Abegglen  
*U.S. Forest Service*

Matt Hough  
*Ducks Unlimited*

Mike Estey  
*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

Ted LaGrange  
*Nebraska Game and Parks Commission*

Murray Laubhan  
*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

Ronnie Sanchez  
*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

Ritch Nelson  
*Natural Resources Conservation Service*

Rich Walters  
*The Nature Conservancy*

John Thorburn  
*Tri-Basin Natural Resources District*

Mark Vrtiska, Ph. D.  
*Nebraska Game and Parks Commission*

Ben Wheeler  
*Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever*

## The Year in Review: 2015

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In 2015 we focused not only on conservation achievements, but on communicating our accomplishments and insights to a variety of audiences. At its first meeting of the fiscal year, the management board took part in a communication assessment, a preliminary step in development of a new RWBJV Communication Plan that will identify the audiences that the partnership should seek to reach and the messages that should be communicated to those audiences. Work on the communication assessment and plan continued throughout the year.

We learned in January that the RWBJV and Playa Lakes Joint Venture had been honored with the 2015 Wings Across the Americas Conservation Award for habitat partnerships. This national award, given by the U.S. Forest Service, recognized the partnerships' collaborative efforts in restoring and maintaining habitat to meet the objectives of North America's four bird conservation plans.

In February, over 170 participants attended the RWBJV Informational Seminar, an annual event that has now entered its third decade. Morning plenary sessions focused on the geology of playa wetlands and the ecosystem services they provide. Breakout sessions covered a wide range of topics, but especially emphasized much-needed information about the 2014 Farm Bill.

Springtime habitat tours are a significant opportunity to communicate the importance of the Rainwater Basin and Platte River for migratory birds. We especially value the chance to show our work to groups that might not be familiar with the Joint Venture's collaborative approach to conservation. Groups that visited or toured south-central Nebraska sites this year included the Center for Grassland Studies, the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition, Congressman Adrian Smith's staff, and wind energy developers.

Also in March, we unveiled a new tool for making our science office's work available to partners and other conservation practitioners. The RWBJV website's GIS page, which now features over thirty GIS product reports and summaries, also includes links to applicable data files, so that they can be instantly accessed by users anywhere.



Grant funds for habitat conservation projects came from a variety of sources this year. These included a Cooperative Recovery Initiative grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to benefit whooping cranes. The \$223,925 will be used to restore and acquire the 120-acre Freda Wild tract adjacent to Ritterbush WPA in Franklin County. A \$300,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation will fund habitat restoration in the Sandhills, as described later in this report. In April, the Nebraska Environmental Trust awarded grants to several Joint Venture partners and approved \$536,615 in grants to the RWBJV for habitat projects in Rainwater Basin wetlands. Funding included \$51,250 to develop grazing infrastructure, \$75,000 for wetland management, \$60,375 for continued restoration of the Atlanta WPA watershed, and \$350,000 to improve and protect migratory bird habitat and wetland function throughout the region.

In June the Conservation Planning Workgroup completed the RWBJV Research, Inventory and Monitoring Plan and submitted it to the management board for approval. This document identifies the key uncertainties and assumptions that underlie the 2013 Implementation Plan and bird conservation plans, and it outlines research needs that should address these uncertainties.

We announced in September that, after a nationwide search, the RWBJV's Habitat Specialist position had been filled by Ele Nugent, who for the previous three years had worked with the partnership's GIS office. In her new role, Ele will coordinate with public land managers and private lands biologists to help implement vegetation management. She will also communicate with landowners and agriculture producers about the partnership's conservation programs and opportunities.

As we look to the new year, we plan to find additional ways to help our partners share information about our conservation programs with a wider audience. And we'll continue to communicate the many benefits of cooperative, science-based conservation.



## Expanding the Partnership

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The Rainwater Basin continually seeks to enlist new partners who can help the partnership achieve its conservation objectives, and who recognize that working with the Joint Venture can also help them achieve their own objectives. In Fiscal Year 2015, the RWBJV welcomed the opportunity to expand our cooperation with the agricultural community by working with manufacturers of center pivot irrigation systems and with University of Nebraska agronomy experts and researchers.

Our first such project is called “The Economics of Wetland Restoration.” In it, we seek to quantify for the first time the effects of strategic wetland restoration on net farm income. Several willing Rainwater Basin landowners will restore their farmed wetlands through NRCS’s Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program, adapted specifically for Rainwater Basin agriculture producers. This WREP allows the producer to pass a center pivot irrigation system over enrolled acres, thus maintaining the efficiency of irrigation on adjacent crop lands.

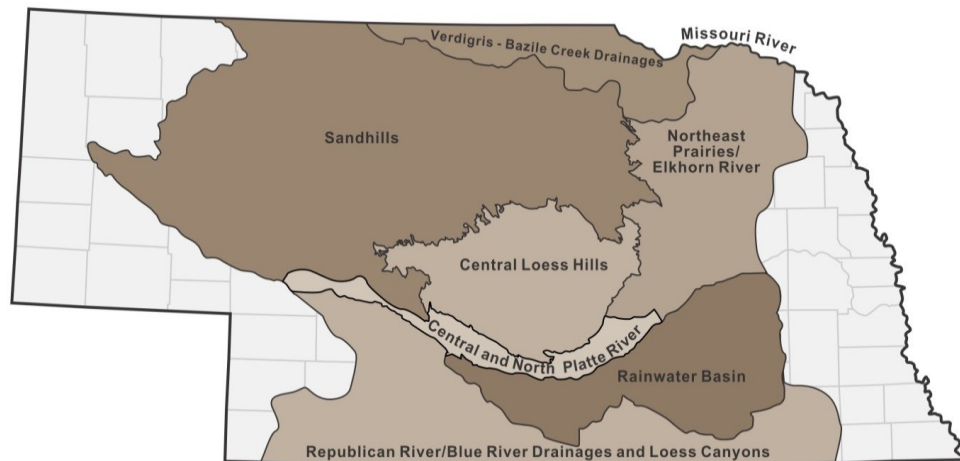
To further improve efficiency, irrigation system manufacturers will partner with the RWBJV to help upgrade the irrigation systems with Variable Rate Irrigation Technology (VRI). As Jerry Gerdes, Product Manager for Water Applications and VRI at Valley Irrigation explains, this project has the potential to help their customers maximize yields and profits. “It will let them irrigate, in a good way, as many acres as they can and do a good job of irrigating those acres.”

Brad Dunbar, Lindsay Corporation’s Regional Manager for the Central U.S., notes that agriculture producers and conservation groups, despite their different objectives, share certain goals, including a big one: “to use water more wisely.” Furthermore, he says, “this project is a great example of the fact that there’s always a benefit we can derive from working together.”

As the irrigation professionals’ comments suggest, the RWBJV’s aim is to develop conservation programs that improve habitat while also demonstrably benefiting agriculture. To that end, the University of Nebraska’s Water for Food Initiative became a partner in this project. Researchers will evaluate net farm income after participants have completed the wetland restorations and adopted VRI and a customized grazing program. Results will be compared to those of reference fields with similar characteristics, where the wetland was not restored and irrigation was not upgraded to VRI.

Peer-reviewed and published analysis of the economic impact of conservation programs will help producers make informed decisions about their options for marginal lands. We look forward to pursuing similar partnerships in the future.





**Geographic Focus Areas in the RWBJV Administrative Area.**

## **Conservation across the Region**

In the years after its 1992 inception, the RWBJV was focused exclusively on restoring and protecting playa wetlands and surrounding grasslands in the Rainwater Basin region. As outlined in the 2013 RWBJV Implementation Plan, however, the partnership has been expanding its geographic reach to advance conservation not only in the Rainwater Basin, but also in other important habitats throughout Nebraska's mixed-grass prairie region.

The RWBJV's Administrative Area encompasses the portions of Bird Conservation Region 19 – the Mixed-Grass Prairies – that lie within the state of Nebraska. For planning purposes, we have divided the administrative area into eight Geographic Focus Areas, illustrated on the map above. Some examples of conservation efforts in the broader geographic area include:

**Grassland and Wetland Enhancement in Nebraska's Sandhills.** Through a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, RWBJV partners, led by the Sandhills Task Force, plan to restore and protect nearly 50,000 acres of wetland and grassland habitat on public and private lands in the Sandhills.

**The Central Loess Hills Prescribed Fire Training Exchange Program.** The RWBJV sought grant funding from the Nebraska Environmental Trust in 2014 to help facilitate use of prescribed fire to manage vegetation in the Central Loess Hills. The three-year grant builds on the success of the program hosted by the Nature Conservancy's Fire Learning Network since 2010.

**In the Platte River valley,** RWBJV partners have provided GIS support to analyze data from waterfowl and sandhill crane surveys conducted for the past two years on the North Platte and South Platte Rivers. The analysis will help identify sandhill crane roost sites and evaluate their characteristics to inform future conservation plans.

We're optimistic that the experience we gained through years of conservation in the Rainwater Basin can help partners elsewhere and thus benefit Nebraska's diverse wildlife species and the habitats on which they depend.



# Income and Expenses — Fiscal Year Ending September 30, 2015

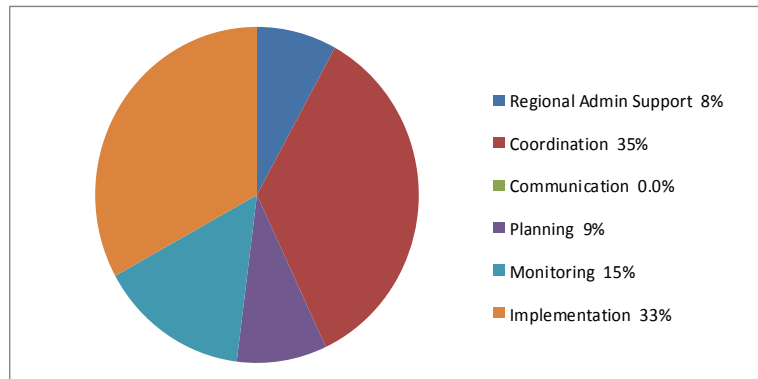
## FUNDING

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Allocation		457,695.00
Grants		
Nebraska Environmental Trust	480,770.48	
Other Grants and Funding Awards	5,580,115.95	
Total Grants and Other Funding		6,060,886.43
<b>Total Available Funding</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>6,518,581.43</b>

## EXPENSES

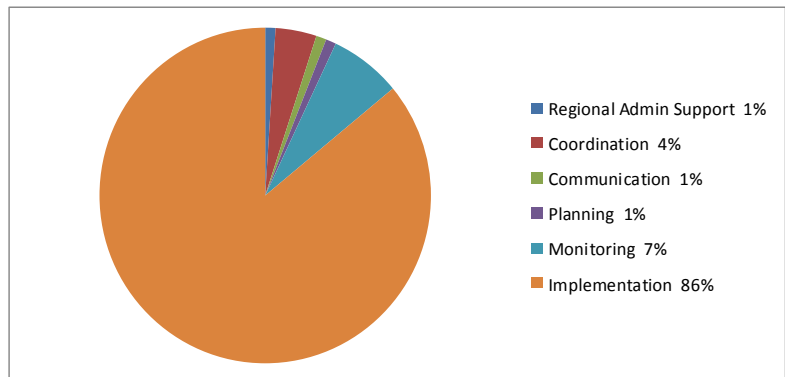
Regional Overhead and Admin. Support	36,974.84	
Coordination	272,273.68	
Communication	83,318.31	
Planning	86,789.15	
Monitoring, Evaluation and Research	466,733.85	
Project Development and Implementation	5,572,491.60	
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>6,518,581.43</b>

### 1234 Federal Allocation: Expenditure by Funding Category



### Rainwater Basin Joint Venture 2015 Partnership Funding

Funding from federal and non-federal RWBJV partners totaled \$6,060,886.43. \$5,421,582.23, or 90% of this, went to implementation. Funding from partners leveraged the 1234 Federal Allocation into total partnership funding of \$6,518,581.43, 86% of which went to implementation.



**Rainwater Basin Joint Venture  
Partners include:**

Rainwater Basin landowners  
Nebraska Environmental Trust  
Ducks Unlimited  
Farm Service Agency  
Little Blue Natural Resources District  
Natural Resources Conservation Service  
Nebraska Association of Natural Resources  
Districts  
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission  
Pheasants Forever  
The Nature Conservancy  
Tri-Basin Natural Resources District  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
U.S. Forest Service  
Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District  
County Highway Departments

....and many other groups and individuals



**JOINT VENTURE**  
ESTABLISHED 1992

[www.rwbjv.org](http://www.rwbjv.org)

