

## Rural Nebraskans rethinking water priorities in wake of 2012 drought

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LINCOLN—Eighty percent of rural Nebraskans with farming interests experienced a loss of business income because of last year's drought, according to the Nebraska Rural Poll.

Poll responses also indicated rural Nebraskans' priorities for water uses have shifted since they last were surveyed on the issue, in 2004.

The 18th annual University of Nebraska-Lincoln poll was sent to 6,320 households in Nebraska's 84 nonmetropolitan counties in March and April. Results are based on 2,317 responses.

Nebraska was wracked in 2012 by what has been described as the worst drought in at least 50 years. Eighty-eight percent of rural Nebraskans with occupations in agriculture reported decreased farm production in 2012, with 42 percent saying they experienced this to a great extent.

Eighty percent of respondents said they lost income. While national reports tended to focus on the near-record farm income levels due to higher prices, the poll shows that for Nebraskans in the middle of the drought, price increases could not overcome production losses.

"It serves as a reminder that agriculture faces unique production and economic risks and points to the critical nature of delayed action in Washington, D.C. over future agricultural policy," said Brad Lubben, UNL public policy expert.

With memories of that drought in mind, rural Nebraskans also appear to be rethinking priorities for water use. Seventy-three percent rated indoor use in existing homes as a high priority; 56 and 51 percent listed livestock and crop irrigation, respectively, as high priorities. In 2004, only 48 percent of respondents listed livestock as a high water-use priority.

Only 28 percent of respondents listed indoor use in new housing developments as a priority use, and only 10 percent listed outdoor recreation, down from 34 and 18 percent, respectively,

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Poll respondents seem to be saying “we can’t just build businesses and homes and add new uses without knowing the water will be there,” said Lubben.

Randy Cantrell, rural sociologist with the Rural Futures Institute, added: “There’s a message here for economic developers. They have to be participants in these discussions about water.”

Seventy-three percent of poll respondents said they had voluntarily reduced water use in response to last year’s drought.

“That strikes me as a positive note about rural Nebraska’s willingness to contribute,” Cantrell said.

Also, 75 percent reported loss of wildlife and wildlife habitat.

The Rural Poll is the largest annual poll of rural Nebraskans’ perceptions on quality of life and policy issues. This year’s response rate was about 37 percent. The margin of error is plus or minus 2 percent. Complete results are available online at <http://ruralpoll.unl.edu>. The university’s Center for Applied Rural Innovation conducts the poll in cooperation with the Nebraska Rural Futures Institute with funding from UNL Extension and the Agricultural Research Division.