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New Guide Makes Community Drought Planning Easier

LINCOLN, Neb. -- Drought researchers in three states teamed with communities to create the "Guide to Community Drought Preparedness," released in summer 2010.

"We've made the drought management process easier," said Mark Shafer, an Oklahoma Climatological Survey researcher on the project. "The checklist walks people through what needs to be done, including some very general things that don't take a lot of time or resources to do. Communities can download the guide and walk themselves through the process."

"This guide builds on decades of experience with state and national governments and takes what we've learned about monitoring and reducing vulnerability down to the local level," said Mark Svoboda, the monitoring program area leader at the National Drought Mitigation Center, who led the research.

The guide suggests that at a minimum, communities should have someone checking regularly to detect emerging drought conditions that could affect water supplies. City officials then can take steps to reduce demand. The guide also recommends long-term measures to build drought resilience, such as water conservation education for K-12 students, homeowners and others.

The guide was produced as part of the Drought Ready Communities project, funded by the Sectoral Applications Research Program within the Climate Program Office of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Researchers on the project were from the NDMC at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Oklahoma Climatological Survey, the Illinois State Water Survey, and the Lower Platte River Corridor Alliance. They worked with community leaders, water suppliers and others in Nebraska City, Neb., Norman, Okla., and Decatur, Ill. to devise worksheets and processes.

"The City of Norman already had a water conservation plan that incorporated aspects of what to do in a drought, or when heading toward a drought," said Ken Komiske, director of utilities for the City of Norman. "The Drought Ready Community project added more details to our plan and laid out a better framework for increased communications. It also pointed out better sources of information to be able to predict when heading into a drought. These drought predictors are now part of our monthly reporting at the water treatment plant, giving us a three-month look into the future for weather patterns and the anticipated water demands."

Nebraska City is considering steps such as adding a link to the U.S. Drought Monitor to the city utility's web page, developing triggers for voluntary and mandatory conservation, partnering to develop landscaping alternatives to lawns, and ramping up its water conservation education, said Leroy Frana, general manager of Nebraska City Utilities. He noted that while the city is next to the Missouri River and

has a good water supply from wells, "it still needs to be treated before it goes into our water distribution system, so wise landscape water practices are beneficial to customers."

In Decatur, Drought Ready Communities led to "community-wide team building and comfort in knowing that when -- not if -- the next drought occurs, that the community already has a valuable and useful plan of action in place," said Keith Alexander, director of water management for the City of Decatur.

Jim Angel, the Illinois state climatologist, said that in the past, when he has helped communities plan for drought, "It's always been crunching the numbers." In contrast, with Drought Ready Communities, "actually sitting down with a wide range of stakeholders and listening to their concerns about drought and how to respond to drought was very interesting." Angel noted that because Decatur has faced the threat of water shortfalls in the past, it is further along than many other communities in planning for drought. Having a nationally devised drought planning process to go through may provide more assurance and credibility to city officials or investors than a strictly local effort would, he said.

The guide takes communities through a five-step process:

- forming a leadership team and involving the public and other interested parties,
- collecting information about water sources and users, about past droughts and impacts, and about underlying factors that determine how seriously drought affects a community,
- establishing drought monitoring and drought status updates,
- building public awareness,
- identifying steps to take before and during a drought to reduce drought impacts.

According to the research team, the benefits of being a drought-ready community include increased community awareness of water, climate and drought, reduced dollar losses during the next drought, less stress, protecting wildlife habitat and increasing community resilience to drought and other hazards.

Planning for drought is also a good way to focus attention on planning for climate change. "It is our understanding that current climate change trends are predicting more extreme weather events and conditions, both wet and dry. Therefore, drought planning is more important than ever," Alexander said.

"Climate change is a slow process that may easily be ignored by people believing that it will happen later -- in the next generation, or in 100 years," Komiske said. "A drought is something that most generations have experienced at one time or another, so planning for a drought will bring the thoughts of climate change closer to reality and get communities better prepared."

The guide is free and available online at <http://drought.unl.edu/plan/DRC.htm>. The research team is

interested in finding more communities that would like to go through the drought planning process. Community representatives or any other interested parties can contact the NDMC by sending email to ndmc@unl.edu.

"We want to learn from the experiences of more communities so we can share what does and doesn't work," Svoboda said. "Our goal is to help build a proactive approach and resilience to drought at the grassroots level everywhere."

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