

INTERVIEW OF
LYNDON VOGT
August 13, 2013

1 MR. BARR: This is Jim Barr. It's August 13th,
2 2013. I'm in Grand Island with Lyndon Vogt to talk about
3 some of his NRD experiences.

4 To begin with, Lyndon, would you mind just giving
5 us a quick background of your career and everything?

6 MR. VOGT: Sure. As Jim said, my name is Lyndon
7 Vogt. I actually started my career in 1996 with Lower
8 Niobrara NRD as -- out of Butte, Nebraska, as their water
9 resources manager. (I) worked for about a year as their
10 water resources manager, not quite, and moved up to their
11 manager at that time; ended up working there for five years.
12 I believe in June of 2001, I transferred to Chadron, to the
13 Upper Niobrara White Natural Resources District, as general
14 manager and honestly thought I would finish out my career
15 there to be quite honest with you, and ended up moving to
16 Central Platte NRD in Grand Island just two or three months
17 ago as of -- I guess June 1st was my first day of work here,
18 2013, as general manager. So this is my third district I've
19 worked in and it kind of surprises myself to be quite honest
20 with you.

21 MR. BARR: Do you want to go back a little bit on
22 where you came from and your education, that sort of thing?

23 MR. VOGT: Yeah. I actually went to high school
24 at Naper, Nebraska, and Naper hasn't had a high school now
25 for a number of years. (I) got an agribusiness degree out

1 of University of Nebraska at Kearney. It was actually
2 Kearney State College when I started college there and it
3 was the University of Nebraska when I graduated. I got an
4 agribusiness degree out of there, as I said, and actually
5 worked in the Kearney area for a number of years for a
6 farmer in that area before I went to the NRD system so -- I
7 was raised on a farm in Boyd County, Nebraska, as I said,
8 went to high school at Naper. I'm the youngest of six kids.
9 My parents farmed and ranched just three or four miles from
10 town and I guess it was only a couple miles from the South
11 Dakota border in north central Nebraska. I've always had a
12 interest in agriculture and natural resource issues.

13 MR. BARR: One of the things I wanted to talk to
14 you about particularly is, we haven't had any
15 representatives from some of the further north districts and
16 maybe you could kind of go over the sort of projects and
17 programs that were in both of those upper two, and any
18 thoughts you have on how that -- those districts might have
19 differed from some of the rest of the state.

20 MR. VOGT: You know, when I started in Lower
21 Niobrara, I started as their water resources manager and one
22 of my first duties working for the NRD was to write their
23 groundwater management plan and implement that groundwater
24 management plan. And at the Lower Niobrara, they didn't
25 have a groundwater quantity problem, they had a groundwater

1 quality problem with the nitrates. (There was) quite a bit
2 of irrigation in that area, fairly sandy soils in the
3 northern Holt County area, and so that was to address
4 nitrate concerns. The biggest difference between the two
5 NRDs, when I went from there to Chadron, to the Upper
6 Niobrara White NRD, is, I started -- I spent the first
7 couple years of my career there as a manager actually
8 focusing on a groundwater quantity plan. They had declines
9 in that Box Butte area. Actually, their quality was fairly
10 good in that area. There was a few pockets where we had
11 some quality concerns,
12 but -- so the difference in these two NRDs was actually
13 pretty substantial because one of them was -- we basically
14 addressed the quality aspects of things and spent a
15 tremendous amount of time with water sampling and landowner
16 education and that type of stuff dealing with quality. And
17 then the quantity aspect of it, you get to a much more
18 regulatory aspect pretty fast. And when I started my
19 employment at Upper Niobrara White, that was one thing the
20 board was very clear is that we need to address our decline
21 issues.

22 MR. BARR: Had they addressed it prior to your
23 arrival?

24 MR. VOGT: They had not. I mean, they had held
25 numerous meetings. They had done quite a bit of research.

1 Had actually even done some -- they had a Box Butte
2 groundwater model even to -- they had laid the ground work,
3 you know what I mean, for moving forward with a plan, that
4 was all done which made my job quite a bit easier when I got
5 there because we had the study -- a lot of the studies were
6 done, you know what I mean, that we could use as educational
7 tools for not only the producers, but for us, too, as staff
8 and our directors.

9 MR. BARR: What did you remember -- what do you
10 want to comment about in relation to the implementation of
11 regulations and how -- any sort of issues that came up?

12 MR. VOGT: I think at Lower Niobrara one of our
13 biggest challenges in implementing nitrogen management
14 regulations was dealing with our fertilizer dealers, to be
15 quite honest with you. They were pretty adamant that we
16 were probably going to send them to the poor farm for lack
17 of a better word. We spent a lot of time educating
18 producers and our fertilizer dealers in those early years,
19 to be honest with you, about the nitrate level in the water
20 and how that's usable -- how that's a usable nitrogen for
21 their crops. And I don't think, if we wouldn't have had a
22 local board that was living under the same rules and
23 regulations, it certainly wouldn't have went over near as
24 well. And it still wasn't easy, you know what I mean? We
25 had a lot of what we thought were going to be two-hour

1 informational meetings that ended up being five- and six-
2 hour informational meetings, lots of questions. And I
3 think, in the end, most of the producers realized this was
4 something that had to happen and they did accept it after
5 time. They're drinking the same water, and their children
6 and their grandchildren and so on, are going to be drinking
7 that same water. They definitely -- I think once they got
8 beyond the educational aspect of how they could do things
9 different to help address that issue, they certainly did.

10 MR. BARR: Can you just reiterate the times when
11 that happened?

12 MR. VOGT: Yeah, that would have been in '96, '97
13 was when we was really putting that plan together and
14 working with our landowners and a stakeholders group that we
15 had formed to assist us in that plan.

16 MR. BARR: In the Lower Niobrara, what sort of
17 programs and projects had preceded your arrival that you
18 might remember?

19 MR. VOGT: I think one of the bigger projects that
20 they had done was a rural water system -- the West Knox
21 Water System was one of the early projects that they did and
22 that was before my time there, and I know that that ran into
23 a lot of snags. It was one of the earlier ones and that
24 system, I believe, when I was there, had about a couple
25 hundred -- I think 200-and-some rural hookups plus the city

1 of Verdigre, and I think actually now they're looking at
2 expanding. There's quite a bit of request to expand that
3 system now to include, I believe, Santee, the town of
4 Niobrara, and more -- some more rural interest as well. But
5 I think there was -- like I say, that was before my time,
6 but I know there was -- I know there weren't easy projects
7 at the time, there was a lot of opposition to the NRDs
8 coming in and doing some of that.

9 MR. BARR: Were there any board members there,
10 that you worked with, that might have been on the board
11 quite a while before you got there that you might mention?

12 MR. VOGT: You know, there was -- actually, I need
13 to get the name of the guy that -- Bernard -- that manages
14 that rural water system.

15 MR. BARR: Oh, yeah.

16 MR. VOGT: He's still there, actually, the guy
17 that originally -- yeah, he's still managing that -- I'll
18 look his name up.

19 MR. BARR: We'll get it eventually.

20 MR. VOGT: Yeah. But that West Knox Water System
21 manager is the only manager that system's ever had and he's
22 been there since day one when they started putting pipe in
23 the ground.

24 MR. BARR: Any of your board that had been on a
25 long time?

1 MR. VOGT: Yeah, you know, it's been a number of
2 years ago, it's been 12, 13 years ago since I worked there.
3 I know there is --

4 MR. BARR: We can get it after the interview.

5 MR. VOGT: Yeah.

6 MR. BARR: What about projects prior to your
7 arrival at the Upper Niobrara-White NRD what sort of things
8 had the NRD done in the early years? That's kind of what I
9 was getting at.

10 MR. VOGT: Yeah.

11 MR. BARR: Anything that's -- and I can ask
12 Williams.

13 MR. VOGT: Yeah, why don't you ask John. John
14 would have been their original manager and I don't know that
15 I would answer that very fair to him because --

16 MR. BARR: What kind of -- what did you take away
17 from the experience of implementing both the quality program
18 and the quantity program that you might find -- might be
19 useful to people further down the line?

20 MR. VOGT: I think the fact that we put
21 stakeholders groups together from the general public, not
22 just our board. We held regular stakeholder meetings and
23 made the general public really feel that they were a part of
24 that. I shouldn't say made them feel that, they were a real
25 part of that and we wanted them to be a part of that, but

1 it's hard to get people to come to meetings. And I think
2 once we selected our stakeholders, it made the process a lot
3 easier after that. It maybe made our meetings last a little
4 bit longer, but what we found is our stakeholders were going
5 back and talking to their neighbors, or going to the coffee
6 shops, you know, and the fertilizer dealers and the pivot
7 dealers, and we had another voice out there all of a sudden,
8 it seemed like, and I think that helped sell both of those
9 programs probably more than anything else we did. Because,
10 like I said, you can hold all the meetings you want, but if
11 no one attends them they don't do much good.

12 MR. BARR: Yes.

13 MR. VOGT: But it seems like, on both of these
14 entities, we put the stakeholder groups together and we held
15 quite a few informational meetings. I mean before
16 implementation and even before our hearings on that stuff,
17 we held a lot of public meetings. And, we certainly weren't
18 trying to hide anything from the public and what we were
19 trying to do was actually long-term sustainability of our
20 resources. It's a hard process to get the public to set up,
21 take notice, and want to be a part of that, and I think that
22 stakeholder group got us there as much as anything.

23 MR. BARR: Did it have any particular effect on
24 the board members?

25 MR. VOGT: Actually, I think it took a little

1 pressure off of our board members because when I was at
2 Lower Niobrara, I had 17 board members and I believe we put
3 together a 21-member stakeholders group and suddenly you've
4 got twice as many people that are the people that's being
5 affected. And whether it be someone from the municipality
6 or someone from the cattlemen or the corn growers, or
7 surface water users or ag users, or groundwater users or
8 even our power folks, you know what I mean, the rural
9 electricians. We made sure we had a very wide variety of
10 interest on those stakeholders groups. I think it actually
11 took a little pressure off of our board once we got them
12 together and they were being used properly.

13 MR. BARR: You mentioned the fertilizer dealers in
14 the Lower Niobrara. Were there any particular agribusiness
15 or other related industries that were particularly concerned
16 in the upper one when you did that project?

17 MR. VOGT: You know, in the upper one I would say
18 that our --

19 FEMALE VOICE: Lyndon?

20 MR. VOGT: Yes.

21 FEMALE VOICE: Ron is on the phone.

22 MR. VOGT: I'm in a -- tell him I'm in an
23 interview with Jim Barr and I'll call him back in a little
24 bit.

25 FEMALE VOICE: Oh, I'm sorry.

1 MR. VOGT: That's okay. Thank you.

2 Sorry about that. I think the groups we had -- we
3 probably had three groups in the upper -- I need to get my
4 concentration back here on what I was talking about.

5 MR. BARR: Sure.

6 MR. VOGT: In the upper, we had -- we probably had
7 four dynamic groups there. We had the surface water guys.
8 We had the groundwater guys. We had the pivot dealers, the
9 irrigation service folks, the pivot dealers, and we had the
10 folks that sell electricity. And we're going to an
11 allocation -- I believe, in 2003, we put a -- I started
12 working there in 2001. In 2003, we put a moratorium
13 on -- this would have been prior to LB962 or any of those
14 issues, we put a moratorium of no new acres, no new wells,
15 not even helper wells. And so we had -- those four main
16 interests were really concerned about what was going on. I
17 think our pivot dealers felt that they were probably not
18 going to be able to ever sell any new pivots. Our
19 electrical folks thought that if we were going to limit
20 pumping to 13-and-a-half inches a year, it's going to
21 definitely limit their income potential. And, of course,
22 the groundwater folks were concerned about their bottom
23 line, you know, because we are -- at 13-and-a-half inches,
24 you're below the consumptive use of corn out there and so
25 there was quite -- it was a very dynamic group with all the

1 interests we had on there, much more so than doing the
2 quality aspect of a plan.

3 MR. BARR: Did you notice any change in crops or
4 anything like that as a result of the program?

5 MR. VOGT: We did and I think you will still see
6 them if you travel through that -- the northern/northwestern
7 panhandle of Nebraska. We started seeing -- we definitely
8 started seeing more winter wheat under pivots, more edible
9 beans. They're high-water-use crops out there are corn and
10 soybeans, and potatoes are right up there, too, I
11 guess -- sorry, not soybeans, corn, sugar beets, and
12 potatoes. They don't -- there are no soybeans out in that
13 country. But you're seeing these rotations change. There's
14 been -- there used to be very little wheat grown underneath
15 the pivots and now, all of a sudden, those allocations were
16 a four-year allocation and we'd let them use that water any
17 way they wanted in those four years, and so we suddenly saw
18 wheat coming into that four-year rotation where maybe they
19 were only using two or three inches of water that year on
20 wheat. And we started seeing full pivots of sunflowers
21 occasionally, too, for that same purpose. So we -- you are
22 seeing a cropping change out there and there's a lot of
23 edible chickpeas and beans growing in that area, and there's
24 more and more of them coming in that are low-water-use crops
25 that they're putting into their irrigation rotations, and

1 they about have to grow -- if they want to grow a fully
2 irrigated crop four years in a row, one or two of those
3 years are going to have to be a fairly low-water-use crops.

4 MR. BARR: Any other side effects, or whatever you
5 want to call it, that you notice or would comment on?

6 MR. VOGT: Well, I think our irrigation dealer
7 concerns ended up not being much of a concern. We required
8 meters so a lot of them changed. They're still servicing
9 pivots. Crop prices today has -- a lot of new pivots are
10 going in, replacement pivots, actually allocations in those
11 areas resulted in a lot of our gravity flow being changed to
12 pivot because we actually gave the same allocation to
13 gravity flow as we did pivot irrigation and so it resulted
14 in quite a few more pivots going in because of that, and it
15 kind of changed the dynamics of their workload, I think, but
16 it certainly did not diminish it any. And we didn't really
17 expect -- we knew that work was always going to be there,
18 but I don't know that we quite saw the change that happened
19 coming either, you know what I mean?

20 MR. BARR: Switching back to the lower one, what
21 kind of side effects did you notice, if any, there?

22 MR. VOGT: I don't know that we noticed any side
23 effects, but after two or three years of preaching about
24 taking credit for your nitrates in the groundwater, which
25 was, I think, a really hard sell statewide to be honest with

1 you, we started to have producers come to us. I remember
2 one producer in particular that came to me and I can't
3 remember how many pivots he had, but it was -- I mean, he
4 had nine or 10 pivots and he actually made the comment that
5 he had saved \$40,000 that year on his nitrogen costs just by
6 taking credit for the nitrogen in his groundwater. And I
7 think that's -- once we got a few of those leaders or the
8 early folks to make that change, and their neighbors saw
9 that their costs were quite a bit less but their yields were
10 the same is when that started taking off then. And I think
11 that was -- it's those early adopters that you need in every
12 area, you know what I mean, and once that started to happen,
13 that change happened fairly fast.

14 MR. BARR: At this point, do you have any general
15 observations about -- that you'd like to make or how
16 particularly -- and I'm trying to get you on those two
17 Niobrara NRDs because I don't have --

18 MR. VOGT: You know, one of the -- I guess there's
19 an upside and a downside to every district if you want to
20 look at it. Both of these NRDs have had very active boards
21 really wanting to do the right thing and I think that's true
22 for every -- I've worked at three districts now and I can
23 tell you, every district wants to make the most of their
24 funds and make the most of -- do the best they can. The tax
25 base up there is challenging, you know what I mean? The

1 smaller tax base in the Niobrara Basin makes it much harder
2 to take on larger projects. That's kind of the -- that's
3 one of the main issues up there when it comes to larger
4 projects is funding them and --

5 MR. BARR: One of the original concerns by some
6 people was that some of these districts were too small. Do
7 you have any thoughts on rather there would have -- how
8 things would have been if it had, say, been a
9 One Niobrara NRD?

10 MR. VOGT: You know, since I've worked at both
11 ends of the Niobrara Basin, I've worked at the lower and the
12 upper, I haven't worked in the middle, there's a tremendous
13 difference between the two. I mean, they have very little
14 in common. Actually, just the flow of the river itself,
15 when you're dealing with that, I don't know the exact
16 numbers but I believe the Niobrara River comes in out of
17 Wyoming at about two or three cfs (cubic feet per second)
18 and it flows out of the Upper Niobrara White, even at the
19 upper end, at almost 80,000 cfs, I believe, and so it's --
20 there's a tremendous change in that river between the three
21 NRDs. And the size of the districts, it's -- I think the
22 district sizes are pretty good. I'm in a -- I moved from a
23 district that was almost three times larger than the one I'm
24 in right now, but only had a population of about 30,000
25 people, and so the tax base has nothing to do with the size

1 of the district, it has to do with the population of the
2 district more than anything.

3 MR. BARR: Did you do any joint projects between
4 the three of them, or any coordination maybe is a better
5 word?

6 MR. VOGT: We did. Actually, we were just in
7 all three NRDs were in a joint agreement with the Department
8 of Natural Resources on a Niobrara model. We were looking
9 at a model of the entire river. That model was going to be
10 broken up into the upper regions of the river and the lower
11 regions of the river, but we were still working together on
12 these projects. So that -- I think that coordination still
13 takes place, to be quite -- I know that coordination still
14 takes place, but to have the Niobrara Basin one NRD, it's --
15 there's just such a tremendous difference in them. You have
16 the Sandhills in the middle NRD, you know what I mean --

17 MR. BARR: Yeah.

18 MR. VOGT: -- and it's --

19 MR. BARR: Now, I haven't had anybody to talk to
20 in the middle. Do you have any recollections of anybody
21 that was particularly active there, managers or board
22 members?

23 MR. VOGT: Well, Dean Graff would have been --

24 MR. BARR: Dean, okay.

25 MR. VOGT: Yeah, Dean Graff would probably be a

1 very good contact for them.

2 MR. BARR: Well, at this point, if you have
3 anything else to offer, go ahead.

4 MR. VOGT: I don't know that I do. It's
5 been -- I've only been in the NRD system about 17 years.
6 It's been a great career and I've met a ton of people, and
7 it's very interesting working with the general public, I
8 guess, and it's been very rewarding working with the public.
9 And I know in the short 17 years I've been around, the
10 changes that have taken place have certainly been positive I
11 think. I think the NRD system is a wonderful system.

12 MR. BARR: Would you want to elaborate a little on
13 the changes?

14 MR. VOGT: Well, I think just -- there's been so
15 many legislative changes over the years and
16 responsibilities, you know what I mean, the -- of course, at
17 the NRD we like to call them unfunded mandates that keep
18 coming up from the legislature, but I think there's probably
19 been a few growing pains within the districts in keeping up
20 with some of the changes and staffing needs and
21 requirements, but from having worked with three districts I
22 can tell you that each one of these districts addresses the
23 needs that need addressed in their NRDs and I think most
24 people state-wide don't realize the differences in these
25 needs. From going from a quality issue to a decline issue

1 to Platte River flow issues where I'm at now, three
2 different NRDs, three different issues, different funding
3 sources, different needs, it's -- I think the NRDs do a very
4 good job of addressing local concerns, local needs, and
5 local issues, and it's very surprising how different they
6 are as you go across Nebraska.

7 MR. BARR: Yeah. Well, thank you very much.

8 MR. VOGT: Yeah, thank you, Jim.

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