

INTERVIEW WITH ROD HORN  
BY ANN BLEED

January 29, 2014

1 MS. BLEED: This is Ann Bleed and I am  
2 interviewing Rod Horn, who is the manager of the South  
3 Platte NRD. And, Rod, if we could just start out -- if you  
4 could just tell me a little bit about your background, where  
5 you came from, and how you got into this natural resources  
6 district business.

7 MR. HORN: I was born and raised in Fresno,  
8 California. When I was about 18 years old, graduating from  
9 high school, decided to come to the University of  
10 Nebraska-Lincoln. Spent five years there, received a  
11 bachelor's of science degree in natural resource in the  
12 College of Agriculture.

13 MS. BLEED: And you were on the football team,  
14 weren't you?

15 MR. HORN: I wasn't going to mention that, but I  
16 tried.

17 (Laughter.)

18 But thanks for reminding me, anyway. But anyway,  
19 during that period of time, I was very fortunate to have an  
20 excellent advisor, also teacher as well, Howard Wieggers,  
21 who's, I believe 98-99 years old. But during that period of  
22 time is the first time I was exposed to the NRD or natural  
23 resources district concept, I guess, coming from California.  
24 There were many factors in coming to the University, one was  
25 football, but also was obtaining an education in natural

1 resources. And so, that was my first exposure to that.  
2 When I did graduate, I did play -- went on to play a little  
3 bit of pro ball, retired from that. First job I had was a  
4 temporary job with the southeastern part of Wyoming with the  
5 Game and Fish. That was just a very short stint, and  
6 accepted a position down at Forbes Tinchera Ranch as a  
7 natural resources manager on the ranch.

8 MS. BLEED: Is that in Wyoming?

9 MR. HORN: That was in southern Colorado, the San  
10 Luis Valley a Mexican land grant that Mr. Malcolm Forbes of  
11 *Forbes* magazine purchased. And he actually purchased it,  
12 had an acquisition of about another 90,000 acres on the  
13 north side of the ranch there, what's called Mount Blanca.  
14 It's probably the third, fourth highest peak. The property  
15 went through that. So, I spent a few years there and tried  
16 to gain some experience in natural resources. Wanted to try  
17 to get back to Nebraska, and there was an opening as -- with  
18 an assistant manager position under Marlin Ferguson, with  
19 the South Platte NRD. And went through an interview process  
20 there and was accepted. And January 2<sup>nd</sup>, actually, a  
21 Monday, 1986, is when I first started with the South Platte  
22 NRD. And main responsibility was to try to build up the  
23 conservation tree planting program. And at that time we  
24 just had a very small staff. Marlin Ferguson, and then our  
25 secretary, and myself, and had a couple field office

1 secretaries, who were heavily involved with the tree  
2 planting program. Early on then, in the '80s, it seemed  
3 like water quality was coming on with a lot of legislation,  
4 chemigation, for example. And I think, just at that time,  
5 the groundwater management plan was required to be pulled  
6 together, and that was accepted. But that was prior -- that  
7 was, like, '85 when that took place, and was completed, I  
8 believe, in '86. And, you know, soil and sediment and  
9 erosion control took place. So, that's sort of the entrance  
10 into the NRD system, anyway. But my first exposure was  
11 somewhere in between 1978 and '80, and I remember Howard  
12 talking about that, and learning a little bit more about a  
13 local government, you know, your local, state, and federal  
14 government. Learned a little bit more about that, but did  
15 not really pull all that together until a little bit later  
16 when that -- when I was trying to get back -- I wanted to  
17 get back into Nebraska. And then had that exposure, had the  
18 opportunity with the South Platte. Here I am today, after  
19 28 years later. I don't know if it's good or bad.

20 MS. BLEED: Did you hear any discussion or talk  
21 about those very early years and the formation of the  
22 District and what it was like before you got on the staff?

23 MR. HORN: Oh, probably just a little bit. It was  
24 probably a little bit more afterwards that I, in seeking the  
25 assistant manager position out there, doing more research

1 and history and just the uniqueness of this concept. It was  
2 really fascinating.

3 MS. BLEED: So, since your early time when you're  
4 dealing with soil and water conservation, then you got into  
5 water quality, how have things changed over this time? I  
6 know your office has grown.

7 MR. HORN: Yes. You know, with all the over the  
8 period of time and the various legislation that's taken  
9 place and how the Nebraska Groundwater Management Protection  
10 Act was amended several times by, I understand, 1975. We  
11 have grown too, and our staff has enlarged in our office.  
12 We're up to nine individuals. At one time, we were at 10.  
13 Then we have two field office staff. It's just incredible,  
14 I think, as a smaller district, to grow the way we did. I  
15 give a lot of credit, like we were talking about a little  
16 bit ago with Ron Bishop, Ron Fleecs, Wayne Heathers, a lot  
17 of those that came along with the program I'd say. Ron  
18 Cacek would be another one, and their assistance to me as a  
19 younger manager, a new manager, sort of with open arms and  
20 helping out. You know, because we had a smaller staff. We  
21 were just trying to understand the technical aspect of it,  
22 that's an area that I'm definitely very limited on anyway.  
23 But, with their assistance and help with their staff, it  
24 really helped us grow. Not only that, the technology, I  
25 remember we didn't even have a computer when I first came

1 on. I know, when I just graduated from UNL, that would have  
2 been 1980, I realized -- you know, we were working with  
3 punch cards programming. And, yeah, there are some  
4 computers coming online, and then, our copier, for example,  
5 just a single side copier with a flexible lid. You know,  
6 today, we duplex and color and print from our computers and  
7 everything else. But it just -- that has just been crazy  
8 trying to keep up with some of that technology. As a  
9 smaller district, we've had to work with some of the larger  
10 districts for the engineering aspects or modeling. Of  
11 course, now we're doing a lot of things with consultants,  
12 you know, to help us better manage the resource. And the  
13 dollars even we're involved with in leveraging for research  
14 and studies to better understand our groundwater. That's  
15 basically what our district is about is groundwater with a  
16 little bit of surface water.

17 MS. BLEED: So, groundwater now is your big issue,  
18 I would guess.

19 MR. HORN: It's a very big issue, but we're still  
20 involved with, obviously, the 962 issues and over  
21 appropriated, fully, and -- but it's, you know, leveraging  
22 water dollars with 319, water quality, and the Environmental  
23 Trust Fund dollars to provide us a substantial database to  
24 help us manage that better in looking at modeling. You  
25 know, shoot, over 10 years ago, it was very new to us, the

1 South Platte NRD, and to begin with, I think the foresight  
2 of -- in working with the State also, the Department of  
3 Natural Resources now and DEQ and various agencies with the  
4 University. We're just at mach speed, it seems like, trying  
5 to get the best data that science -- that we can get the  
6 model to answer those natural resources questions and manage  
7 that resource, I think. With the droughts in 2002, for  
8 example, and 2012, opened a lot of eyes that this resource  
9 is not -- it is finite and we need to try to manage it the  
10 best to our abilities. And I think, with all the meetings  
11 that you were -- obviously, that you were involved with us  
12 out there in helping educate the public, was very  
13 instrumental with where we're at today, because 10-12 years  
14 ago, we had big targets on our back. You just didn't hear  
15 of moratoriums. We were like a sucking sound for Colorado  
16 and Wyoming that, well, they can -- producers or those  
17 interested in land holdings can come into Nebraska and buy  
18 ground and irrigate it. I mean, there were just very  
19 limited laws at that time. And so, we've come a long ways.  
20 And again, I don't think we could have done it if we didn't  
21 all work together starting with the NRD system. You know,  
22 the local control, but also guidance with the State agencies  
23 and other experts in the field.

24 MS. BLEED: So, as a small NRD, you have found it  
25 helpful and I assume not a problem to work with the larger,

1 more wealthier NRDs. Is that a fair statement?

2 MR. HORN: Yeah, I think that's a very fair  
3 statement. I feel that that needs to be mentioned, because  
4 there was that guidance in helping some of us smaller  
5 districts, pulling us along. Hopefully, we weren't too much  
6 of a drag, but -- and then, individually having to work with  
7 our boards, elected officials. I think I really need to  
8 compliment our board because of where they've come through.  
9 When I first came on, we were at 13 and there was some  
10 difficulty in filling the vacancies out there, so we  
11 actually -- when I first became manager, we actually reduced  
12 that number. And we had six sub-districts, we increased it  
13 to seven, and we reduced from 13 directors down to seven, so  
14 it's one director nominated and elected per sub-district, so  
15 we moved into a one-person-one-vote concept. And out of  
16 that group, for the most part, mostly producers, but they  
17 wear many hats. Right now we have, out of the -- four of  
18 those seven involved in irrigation in some way. One's a dry  
19 land farmer, but also electrician. One's a retired Bureau of  
20 Land Management person that grew up in this area, and is  
21 retired, but involved in the community, but also a little  
22 bit of irrigation, dry land. And so there's a whole mixed  
23 bag there. And I'm real proud of them, because I know the  
24 irrigators get -- or the NRDs system, I know in the past,  
25 and even today you'll hear it, that the irrigators on the



1 board manipulate and drive policy. And speaking for the  
2 South Platte NRD, that's totally inaccurate, is that these  
3 individuals have placed more burdens on themselves, more  
4 rules and regulations on themselves locally. It is a  
5 situation where they go to church with their neighbor, or  
6 they grocery shop with them. You run into them. The  
7 children are growing up. That becomes very difficult. All  
8 of a sudden now, you can place some regulations on somebody,  
9 your neighbor. And it's -- the last 10-12 years has been  
10 very difficult. However, they worked through that because  
11 of the water problems that we've had.

12 MS. BLEED: Well, and your board was one of the  
13 first people to get your integrated management plan finished  
14 and approved. So, that was a real accomplishment, I think.

15 MR. HORN: You know, I think it's a credit, again,  
16 to a number of people, but for them to try to take care of  
17 and resolve the problems locally instead of having it  
18 dictated in some other fashion. You know, I think a number  
19 of steps like that. I know that Central Platte pretty much  
20 provided the lead as far as (indiscernible) water quality.  
21 I think we're right up there, you know, second or third in  
22 establishing sub areas. And it's interesting. I've been  
23 with the system long enough to see, for example, the Big  
24 Springs area in Deuel County in the '90s, we were just  
25 seeing an explosion of nitrate nitrogen levels, in

1 implementing some rules and regulations that was not readily  
2 acceptable, but I think in working with the local producers  
3 there on the problem. And then just last year, we went into  
4 a Phase Two, which is quite a bit more regulation, that it's  
5 soil sampling, if manure's applied, accounting that, the  
6 nitrate that's in the water, required to fill out a  
7 reporting form. Realizing the bottom line is just a  
8 recommendation what you put on the crop. But, a lot of  
9 those producers in the Big Springs area, for example, were  
10 hurting themselves a lot of times by just tightening things  
11 down. And then the day, last year, because three  
12 consecutive years, they hit below our second phase level,  
13 eight parts per million. And through Groundwater Advisory  
14 Committee and their recommendation and the board's  
15 acceptance is that the board then reduced it to a Phase One.  
16 And this was over, you might say, over a generation.

17 MS. BLEED: That's wonderful.

18 MR. HORN: That here's a very successful story  
19 locally. And it hasn't been without cause and effect kind  
20 of things, as well, because early on, just looking at those  
21 producers and pretty much telling them that this is the  
22 direction we're going. There's going to be some regulations  
23 applied locally. And some of those first steps weren't real  
24 pleasant. But I think they can see there's that dialog  
25 locally and here's a success story. And probably in a short

1 time, even though you talk about a generation, 20 years or  
2 so, that it's -- those nitrates are being reduced. And I'd  
3 like to think it's all what we imposed, but I think there  
4 are other things, too. Precision ag could be some of that  
5 cost, maybe commodities through that period of time were  
6 low, cost of fertilizer. But I think working together like  
7 that and to see that shift has been very rewarding, I think.

8 MS. BLEED: Yeah, that's quite a story. It really  
9 is quite a story.

10 So, then you got into a little bit of the water  
11 quality with the integrated management planning. And I know  
12 you've had surface water users who've lost their water  
13 supply. How is that going now?

14 MR. HORN: I think it's working out real well. At  
15 least, we're very proactive now. You know, we're about 12  
16 years, I think. Initially, with some of our water quantity  
17 side, and then -- I'm sorry, yeah, quantity. And then with  
18 integrated management planning, looking at, you know, like  
19 they indicated 11-12 years ago, had the moratorium in place  
20 or at least -- what was it, 2002 probably? We initially  
21 started Lodgepole Creek, and then, you know, you sort of  
22 morph into that LB962 where we had integrated management  
23 planning and stuff like that. And I think people are seeing  
24 now some of the results that we have a system in place that  
25 we're all trying to work together. But we instituted a

1 moratorium again, which was not -- unheard of 12-13 years  
2 ago, talk about that now. Moratorium on large capacity  
3 wells, expansion of use. And then administering meters and  
4 allocations, because we're one of the districts that sees  
5 that as a positive tool. That's not received with open arms  
6 with all districts, but in ours, through groundwater  
7 advisory groups and with the NRD board and other things,  
8 that that's the direction we went. And it's very  
9 interesting that hearing in various meetings that maybe were  
10 mentioned that we're measuring. And because of that  
11 measuring, we're able to manage. And that's from our  
12 perspective as far as our authorities within the NRD law and  
13 that kind of thing. And, you know, seeing acceptance of  
14 that now, and that you would demonstrate, "Hey, we're trying  
15 to protect all the water users out there." You know,  
16 there's quite a bit of backlash initially because this is  
17 their water. We shouldn't have to be told how much. But  
18 what we're trying to do is protect those that have developed  
19 a resource, but also trying to remind them, too, that it may  
20 not mean that they get what they have had all the time, that  
21 it's maybe reduced. And so, I think those allocation  
22 numbers initially were probably high, just a matter of  
23 getting and moving this process forward. But now we have a  
24 system in place and a couple allocation period -- three  
25 allocation -- well, we have three year allocation periods,

1 but we're on a couple of those now in discussion. And those  
2 have come down. The modeling aspect has ramped up quite a  
3 bit and improved over time. And that's where, again, as a  
4 smaller district -- it was a larger district, for example,  
5 Central Platte taking initiative, one of the districts to  
6 pull everybody together and start that modeling process,  
7 which is, you know, just very new to a lot of us. Now it's  
8 just everyday language. And we have a consultant to help us  
9 with this, and continue studies and leverage our dollars  
10 with Environmental Trust Fund dollars, 319, to get the best  
11 out of the science that we can, implement into that. So,  
12 it's -- once it's peer reviewed and recalibrated over and  
13 over again, I guess modeling just never ends, but at least  
14 it's a tool now that could help us try to manage that  
15 resource and justify why we may do certain things to those  
16 out there in the field. But at least we're at a point now  
17 that, you know, trying to really protect all the water users  
18 out there, you know, the irrigators, the dry land,  
19 livestock, domestic, environmental, and wildlife,  
20 municipalities, on and on.

21 MS. BLEED: Is there anything else you would like  
22 to add?

23 MR. HORN: I guess I just feel very fortunate to  
24 be part of this NRD concept in Nebraska. It's very unique  
25 to Nebraska and the working relationships that we have. As

1       you know, there are a lot of times we may have to agree to  
2       disagree. At least that conversation is out there. And I  
3       think I've really grown as an individual over this period of  
4       time. Very fortunate to be part of this -- the natural  
5       resources system and all the people I've gotten to know over  
6       time. But, you know, we just keep trying to move forward  
7       and manage the resources the best we can at the local level.

8               MS. BLEED: Do you think what you have seen and  
9       what you've done in your district would have been done if we  
10      had simply State oversight and control and management?

11             MR. HORN: Oh, I think that crystal ball is pretty  
12      murky. But I can't help but say that -- and maybe this is  
13      biased and maybe its selfish position, but I think it  
14      probably could have been -- it may have been a lot slower.  
15      I think it's -- the districts have really grown up and taken  
16      care of -- by no means are we perfect, but I think we've  
17      really grown into adulthood as an NRD system from the very  
18      beginning in exposure and the confidence, hopefully, that  
19      the State has, and from legislators on down, administrators.  
20      And I think the local people see that somewhat. That's not  
21      to say that it couldn't have been done from the State.  
22      Whether it could have been financed that way or not, I don't  
23      know, but I think doing on that local level in little bits  
24      across the state, that probably helps accelerate it. I  
25      don't know. What're your thoughts on that?

1 MS. BLEED: I would agree with you. I don't think  
2 a lot of what's being done now by all the local districts  
3 would have ever been even attempted by the State. Some  
4 things would be, but it would have been from the top down  
5 and without the acceptance. So, I think very definitely  
6 that -- I don't want to get that on the interview, anything  
7 else?

8 MR. HORN: You know, it really is truly the  
9 grassroots level, but, you know, and credit to you, Ann, is  
10 that when you were the Director of the Department of Natural  
11 Resources, too, and Roger Patterson, and Brian Dunnigan  
12 today and previous administrators, and even, you know, Mike  
13 Linder over in NDEQ, and the various, you know, with the  
14 University and other agencies, that's helped us along the  
15 way. And I think we'd be fooling ourselves if we didn't say  
16 that. I think a lot of the guidance and expertise there,  
17 you know, I mentioned within the NRD system, with those that  
18 are still out there and have gone before me or us, you know,  
19 I think there needs to be adulations, I guess, or to  
20 commend, like yourself and others to help us along as well.  
21 I think it'd be a false notion if that wasn't mentioned.

22 MS. BLEED: What is the State's role, do you  
23 think? You mentioned technical help and expertise.  
24 Obviously, funding is important.

25 MR. HORN: Oh, yeah. You know, I think maybe as

1 a, you know, from a State perspective, State planning,  
2 because we're all in it together. You know, each district  
3 gets tied together some way to others. And so, I think the  
4 State is important from a broad perspective and State  
5 planning. But as part of that, though, you have the local  
6 input and those kinds of things, as well.

7 MS. BLEED: That's good. Well, thank you very  
8 much, Rod. I really appreciate it. And I will get you a  
9 copy of this when it gets transcribed.

10 MR. HORN: Thank you.

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