



WHAT IS CLEAR?

Nebraska Communities, Large and Small, Benefit from the CLEAR program

Despite what some might view as the treeless, lakeless expanse of the Great Plains, Nebraskans prize their lakes and ponds, big or small, for their fishing, recreation and family fun potential.

Communities across the state typically have a local park developed around a small pond or lake. Many of these were built in the decade of the 1930s through Depression-era programs such as the federal Works Project Administration (WPA) and became focal points for community social and recreational activities. Over time they suffered, however. Shorelines eroded, ponds “silted in” from sedimentation during flooding and were overgrown with aquatic weeds and algae. Parks often degraded right along with their pond; the declines often accelerated as they became targets for vandals and dumping grounds for discarded appliances, old tires and other refuse. The parks and ponds stopped being a social, cultural and economic asset for the communities and instead became health and safety liabilities.

By the late 1990s rebuilding and reinvigorating parks and ponds became a goal of the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality (NDEQ) as part of their responsibility to implement the state’s Nonpoint Source (NPS) Management Program.

Funded primarily through Section 319 of the federal Clean Water Act (CWA) through annual grants from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Nebraska’s

NPS management program funding increased significantly in 1999, creating opportunities for NDEQ to develop several unique sub-programs to target under-served water quality issues.

One of these was the Community Lakes Restoration Assistance (CLaRA) program. CLaRA was subsequently revised and linked with funds from the Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund (NETF) to create the Community Lakes Enhancement and Restoration (CLEAR) program. The goal was to provide dedicated funds communities could easily access to restore small community park ponds.

Primary program objectives were to restore aesthetics and improve water quality and aquatic habitat to a level that would sustain a warm water fishery. It was also expected that these projects would produce a pleasing environment where families could gather for social functions and recreation. The working model was to create opportunities for youth to ride their bikes to the park pond for an afternoon of fishing.

CLEAR program

CLEAR was developed as an efficient way to assist communities in restoring their local park ponds. A single application and review for multiple funding sources made the process easy for towns. NDEQ serves as the grant manager for both CWA Section 319 and NETF funds. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) provides fisheries expertise, fish for post-project stocking and, for some projects, funding to build

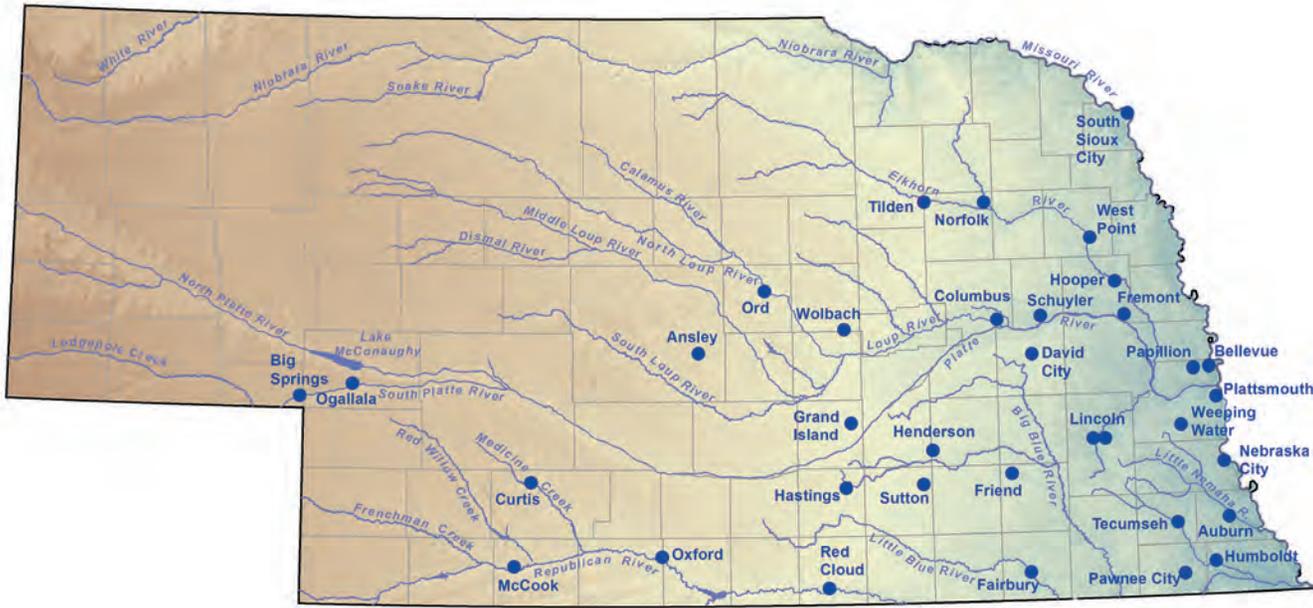


The community turns out in force for dedication of their restored lake at Ord.

handicap fishing access. University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension (UNL) provides expertise in local outreach to promote the projects and coordinate school-based volunteer monitoring programs to engage students in conducting pre- and post-project water quality monitoring. Collectively, the three agencies (CLEAR team) receive and evaluate project applications, assist in design modifications and recommend projects for funding. NDEQ’s director makes the final

approval with concurrence from the EPA’s Region VII office.

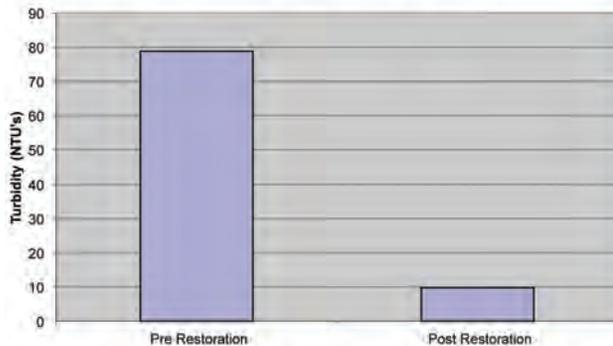
Eligibility criteria and prescribed practices were developed for CLEAR to assure NETF and EPA those funds would be appropriately expended. This allowed the team maximum flexibility in allocating NETF and CWA Section 319 funds to individual projects without cumbersome individual reviews by the separate funding sources.



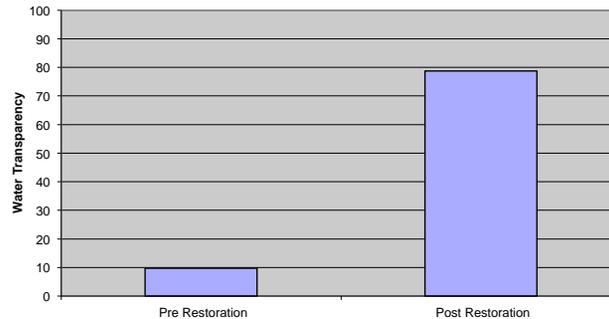
Criteria for CLEAR projects:

1. Pond must be publicly owned and have public access.
2. Pond must be less than 20 acres in size (target is under five acres).
3. Pond must be within or directly adjacent to the community to facilitate pedestrian travel to the site.
4. Cost for NETF and CWA Section 319 funds may not exceed \$300,000 with a community match not less than 15 percent (at least 5 percent in cash).
5. Projects must include an outreach component.
6. Pond must be capable of sustaining a warm water fishery to be stocked by NGPC at completion of the project.

CLEAR Projects reduction in Turbidity



CLEAR projects increase in Water Clarity



Prescribed Practices

Generally limited to:

1. Sediment removal
2. Shoreline stabilization
3. Improving inlet and outlet structures
4. Installing aeration systems
5. Reducing significant pollution source (watershed treatment)*

6. Monitoring supplies for educational programs*
7. Handicap fishing access**
8. Development costs (engineering and design)
9. Educational tools and materials, including signage

* These activities are reviewed and approved on a case-by-case basis.

** Dedicated handicap fishing decks/piers are reviewed and approved separately. These structures are funded through NGPC Urban Fisheries Program.

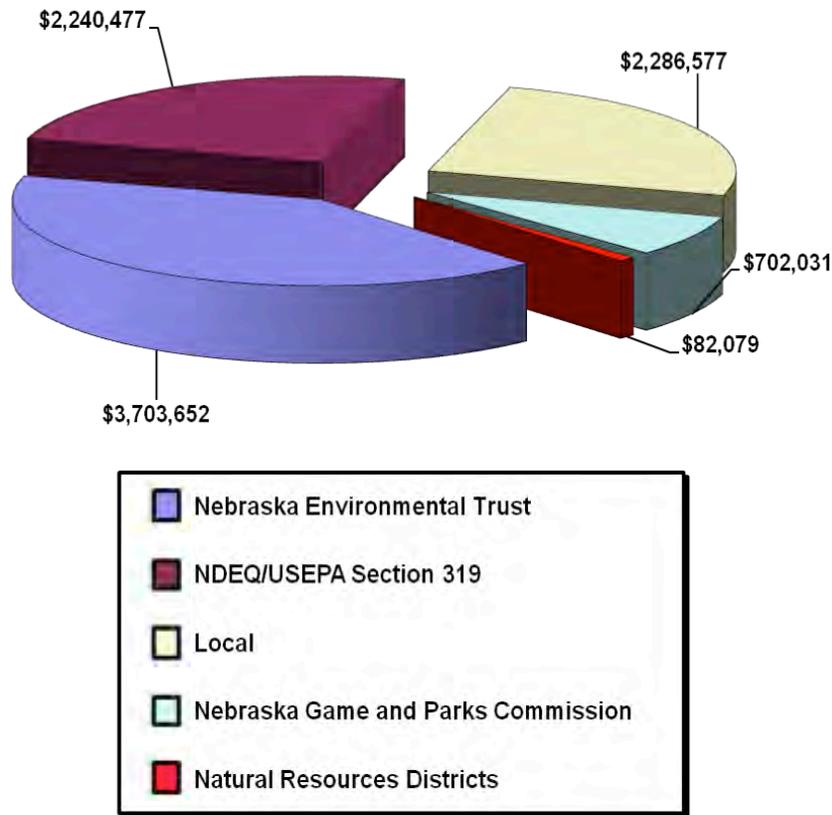
CLEAR allows a single entry point into the application process through any member of the CLEAR team. Following initial contact, the CLEAR team visits the site and discusses project needs and the requirements with community leaders. If the pond meets program criteria, communities are invited to submit a pre-proposal with a general scope of the proposed project. The team evaluates these pre-proposals and determines if the project is likely to be accepted for funding. Communities are given non-binding “pre-approval” if the proposal is acceptable and funds are temporarily earmarked pending receipt of a final plan.

After pre-approval, the community is asked to submit a formal application with detailed construction plans. Communities are encouraged, and sometimes required, to contract professional engineering services if significant structural work is part of the project. Some communities use staff engineers where structural work is minor.



Nebraska Game and Parks Commission stock fish after a CLEAR restoration project is completed.

Funding Sources for Small Lake Projects



Formal applications are received and reviewed by the CLEAR team to assure all program and project requirements are met. Completed applications are then forwarded to EPA for concurrence on the Section 319 funds. Accepted applications are recommended to NDEQ’s director for final approval. Upon approval, a cooperative agreement is signed between the community and NDEQ authorizing CLEAR funding for the project.

Funds are disbursed to communities as reimbursement for completed work. This sometimes poses hardships on small communities that lack sufficient cash reserves to make large payments to contractors before reimbursement is received from NDEQ. This is resolved by allowing communities to establish a line of credit for short-term loans with a local bank and to claim the interest payments as part of their cash match. Though

not often used, this has proven to be effective for some communities.

CLEAR was further revised in 2008 to improve allocation of pooled NETF and CWA Section 319 funds. The CLEAR team no longer requests a master grant of uncommitted funds from NETF. The current approach is to continue soliciting eligible projects and assist in initial planning and design of individual projects. The CLEAR team then submits a grant request to NETF for specific projects where the community has completed the planning process sufficiently to be pre-approved as a CLEAR project.

Community Lakes Programs Evolve

The initial Community Lakes Restoration Assistance (CLaRA) program was developed in 1999 by NDEQ as a sub-program of the state nonpoint source management program. CLaRA provided grants up to \$75,000 to help communities rehabilitate aging and impaired park ponds. If necessary, the communities had to separately solicit additional financial support from other sources. Six communities participated in the CLaRA program. These were Auburn, David City, Humboldt, Nebraska City, Plattsmouth and Wolbach. These projects were limited to sediment removal, shoreline stabilization, aquatic habitat enhancement, aeration, inlet/outlet control and outreach. Local Natural Resources Districts, NDEQ, NGPC and UNL helped design many of these projects.

CLaRA inspired an inter-agency team from NDEQ, NGPC and UNL to create a second-generation program renamed Community Lakes Enhancement and Restoration (CLEAR) in 2000. The revised program provided more funding and a streamlined selection, funding and implementation process.

CLEAR secured a master grant of \$1.85 million in 2001 from NETF to pool with up to \$800,000 dedicated Section 319 funds through NDEQ to support restoration of other community park ponds. An additional 17 communities participated in CLEAR I. These communities were Pawnee City, Fairbury, Sutton, Ord, Tilden, Ansley, West Point, Grand Island, Lincoln, Weeping Water, Henderson, Fremont, McCook, Bellevue, South Sioux City, Red Cloud and Norfolk.

In 2005, CLEAR got a second NETF grant of \$1.05 million to pool with up to \$850,000 Section 319 funds to extend the program again. Nine more communities participated in CLEAR II: These were Tecumseh, Schuyler, Papillion, Ogallala, Friend, Curtis, Hastings, Columbus and Hooper. Combined investment in these nine projects was nearly \$2.4 million. Most of these communities invested money to renovate other park amenities.

A third NETF grant (CLEAR III) supported projects in Oxford and Big Springs. That grant was awarded in 2009.

Conclusion

Communities participating in each of these projects reported significant environmental, social and economic benefits. Park use increased dramatically after restoration efforts and family reunions, community social functions, recreational activities and special events returned to their parks. At the same time, vandalism and illegal dumping virtually disappeared. Ponds were again heavily used by area youth for fishing, and many schools that participated in volunteer monitoring during the project continued this and other activities as part of an outdoor curriculum. All projects reached water quality standards by project end.

By nearly any measure, CLEAR has been an unqualified success. More than 30 Nebraska communities now have restored ponds and renovated park facilities for renewed use and interest. These parks have returned to being the center of community and family social, cultural and recreational activities they once were and were originally intended to be.

CLEAR was recognized by the Environmental Council of States (ECOS) and the North American Lake Management Society (NALMS) as an outstanding example of innovative state programs to address environmental problems. It has been well

received by EPA and presented to other states as an example of how Section 319 funds can be leveraged with other funds and other programs to help communities with local environmental problems.

The combined investment in these projects was nearly \$6.5 million. Other communities continue seeking CLEAR assistance in considering restoration projects for their own park ponds.

Acknowledgements

The CLEAR Team members listed below were instrumental in assisting communities in implementing successful projects. Their contributions, along with many other colleagues and community leaders with the vision and endurance to make their projects successful, are greatly appreciated.

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