

Drought in the Red River Basin?

Drought in the Red River Basin? “No big deal here,” is likely our first response, “we’re more about flooding.”

Yes, but hasn’t drought has been approaching the Basin for some years now – just to the west and moving closer? Didn’t parts of Manitoba experience extended drought from 1999 to 2004/05 – and didn’t the dry year of 1988 come painfully close to the definition of “drought” for many of the Basin’s farmers? And haven’t most of us heard the stories – and perhaps even seen pictures – of the Red River run dry in the 1930s?

“But if drought did come,” we might respond again, “we surely are prepared here in the Basin.”

Well, hardly. A recent drought study commissioned by the Red River Basin Commission reminds us that the Basin is a “semi-arid watershed with limited and sporadic precipitation” and that we possess only limited surface and ground water resources.

The study concludes that not only is drought, like flooding, a “reality” for the Basin, but that the economic impact of a drought lasting for months or years would be a “catastrophe far surpassing any flood.”

And responding to a drought in the Basin would likely be more complex than responding to a flood. Manitoba, Minnesota and North Dakota, the three jurisdictions that make up the Basin, each have their own water rights laws and practices – and these laws and practices differ significantly. Those differences in the laws of the two states and one province draw into question just how possible it would be to coordinate actions among the three jurisdictions should a drought occur. And this isn’t even taking into account the international boundary involved, or the individual drought plans of major cities. Though cities may be separated only by the Red River from one another, they are governed by different jurisdictions.

After considering these factors in some detail, the study’s conclusion is that a coordinated approach to drought preparedness is “of utmost importance” to the Basin.

To begin this work, the study recommends bringing together a wide range of water users from throughout the Basin in order to develop strategies for reducing the susceptibility of the Basin to the potentially severe impact of drought. The work would include evaluating what would happen if a drought happened right now under existing laws and practices, determining areas where joint drought policies could be developed, exploring strategies for water conservation, and modeling and evaluating what would happen under cooperative-action practices.

The process recommended by the report would be implemented in three phases and take up to two years. Will the cost be too high to complete this work; or might the price to the Basin of being caught unprepared for a drought make the study's proposed costs seem inconsequential in comparison?

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.

