

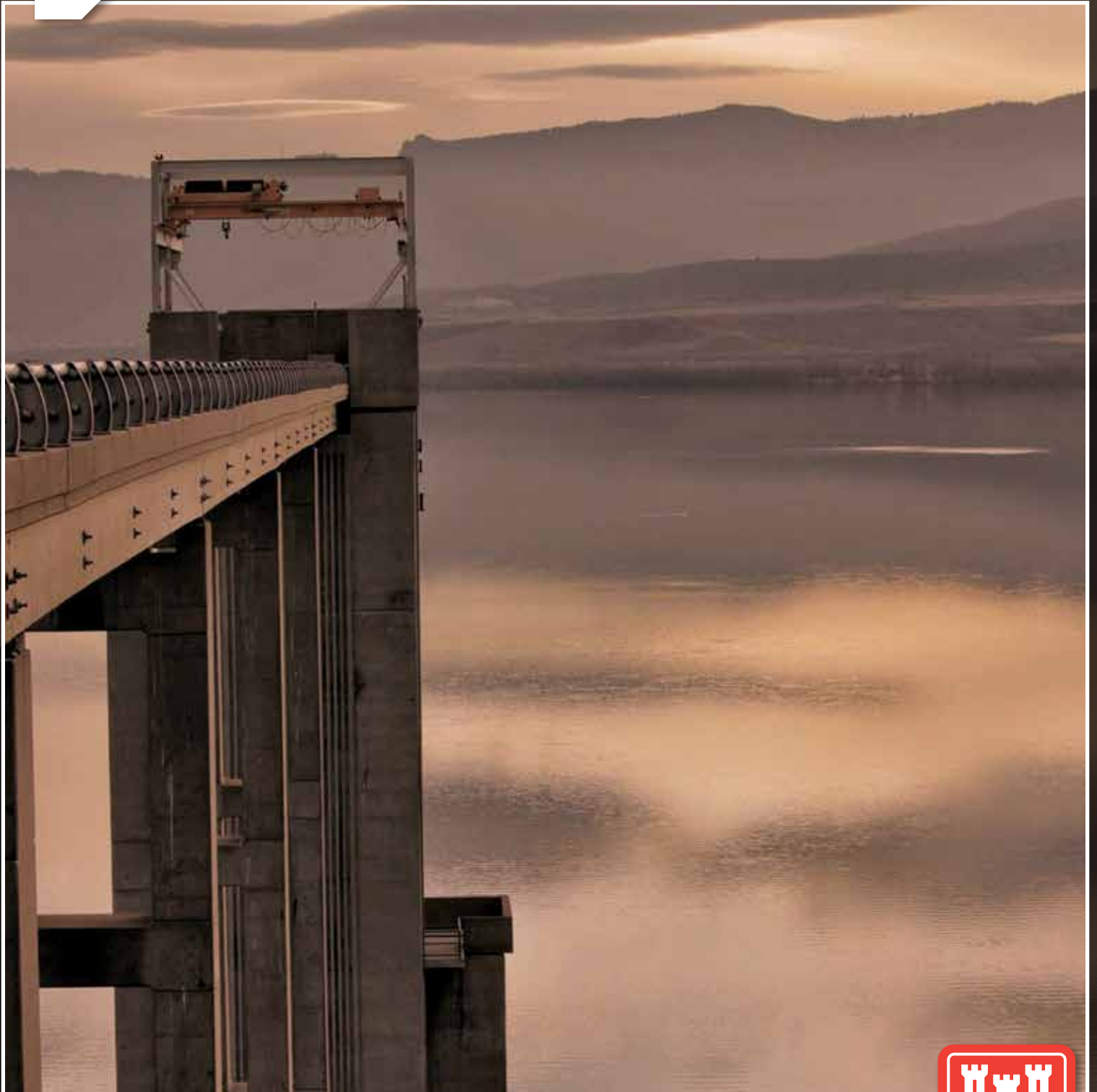
Futures in engineering
begin in middle school...
one STEM at a time

Record of Decision for the
Chatfield Reservoir Storage
Reallocation Project

Loyalty, dedication
to mission in critical
focus at all times



Omaha Outlook



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District

December 2014 – Vol. 2, Issue 4





The Omaha Standard—in all we do

Our Commander, Colonel Cross, has given us his vision for 2015 as the Omaha Standard, and I'd like to share my thoughts as I reflect on my first 6 months in this assignment. First, I feel incredibly fortunate and privileged to be part of the Omaha team that each of you help make great.

As most of you know, my intermittent mail delivery days gave me a great opportunity to travel the Zorinsky building and talk with many of you. I enjoyed the opportunity as it gave me a unique perspective of our team, both at our Headquarters, and project sites through our staff assistance visits.

How does a great organization get better? How does it survive rotations in commanders and deputy commanders every three years, not to mention a large population of retirement eligible teammates? As Col. Cross prepares to hand off the District to a new commander in 2015, how does he leave us stronger and better prepared for the challenges ahead?

Standards allow our organization to maintain course, to remain stable and predictable through change. Standards allow every member of our team to know what to expect from one another. Standards make the team stronger. Given the importance of standards to any organization, what makes up Omaha's standard? I'd like to propose the following for thought and discussion;

- 1. Commitment to each other.** We can only be as strong as our weakest link. Look left and right at your peers, subordinates, and those senior to you—do not let them down. Choose selfless service.
- 2. Quality service to our clients.** They are the reasons why we exist and they rely on us to be the best of the best for our nation's engineering needs. Institutionalize best practices, learn from mistakes and train everyone to repeat success.
- 3. Mentoring.** As new teammates come aboard, mentor them to become great. People are our most valuable asset.
- 4. Army Values.** Know and live the seven Army values: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity and Personal Courage.
- 5. Prepare those who will follow.** Cross train, diversify and train subordinates to take your place. It'll make you available for continued growth and the next challenge!
- 6. Try this test.** Use the "front page" test. Would you want your action, decision, or words to be on the front page of today's newspaper?

I look forward to discussions and productive debate in the spirit of continuing the great tradition that this District has established.

Essayons!

Lt. Col. Michael Sexton

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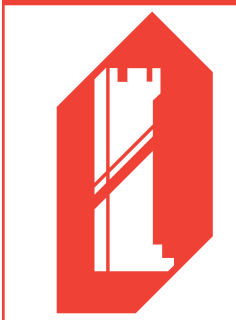
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On the cover: Looking to the southwest, the sun sets on December 6 at Chatfield Dam and Reservoir. The Chatfield Intake Tower is featured in the foreground. (U.S. Army photo by Rena Brand, Project Manager, Denver Regulatory Office)

OMAHA OUTLOOK



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Futures in engineering begin in middle school

Where would a person interested in the environment get a job working with engineers? Do girls operate dredges and tow barges? These are just a couple of the many questions asked by the 35 students from two area middle schools who toured the Missouri River Project Office in Omaha, Neb. to learn about futures in the engineering profession and the Corps.

“The Missouri River Project Office positively impacted these students,” said Curtis Smith, Omaha District Special Emphasis Program Manager and Lead Equal Employment Opportunity Specialist. Smith is also a board member for the Hispanic Employment Council (HEC) of Omaha. The Omaha District EEO office has partnered with the HEC for ten years to promote the importance of STEM sciences and vast opportunities within the Corps locally and beyond.

The HEC Role Model Project is a mentoring program for eighth-grade Hispanic students from Bryan and Norris Middle Schools. The HEC of Nebraska sponsors the students. They are recommended by their teachers. The goal of the

HEC is to get students interested in college and other opportunities available after high school. This year’s visit with Omaha District on Oct. 22 followed the month-long celebration of National Hispanic Heritage. The program links students with federal agencies and private industry to introduce them to potential careers they may aspire to achieve in the future. They participate in six to eight role model visits to colleges and businesses each year.

John Nunez, Hispanic Employment Council President and Department of Treasury employee in Omaha said the HEC has been sponsoring mentoring visits for more than 20 years in partnership with both schools.

“The trip to the Missouri River Project Office opened the eyes of the students and had the students engaged in conversation with our presenters,” Nunez said. “It was a blend of learning about the organization and the mission indoors and a walk outdoors to see some of the equipment used in river operations.”

Andrew Barry, Omaha District Civil Engineer and Angela Pletka, Omaha District Natural Resource Specialist, gave the students a presentation about the Corps, all the locations from which the Corps operates, and its missions. Students learned about some of the career options available throughout the Corps and those available at the MRPO.

“Students were taught what the Missouri River looked like in the days of Lewis and Clark and how Congress tasked us to engineer the river to allow for better navigation,” Pletka said. They also learned about levees and the flood risk reduction dams, built near Omaha and Lincoln, which the district operates and maintains.

They also talked about how these projects have impacted natural resources-particularly changing habitat and impacting species in the area, prompting the need for other scientists like biologists to help recover and manage the habitat for fish and wildlife.

Alan Schmidt, Omaha District Maintenance Supervisor, showed the students the tow boat and barges in the basin and talked about how they are used to accomplish the river work, showing them along the river how defined the navigation channel is and some of the structures that keep it that way.

“The students really enjoyed getting to see the Missouri River projects in action,” said Lisa Raszler, Bryan Middle School Librarian. “A lot of the boys would have loved to have gotten some “hands-on” time with the big machinery.” Some of that equipment included a crane, dredger, and the Missouri River Project Office’s barge.

According to Ruth Bentzinger, Omaha District Natural Resource Specialist, the tour was a chance for her to inspire students to look into an

environmental career and the broad spectrum of related career paths it provides. “I talked with them about typical duties a natural resources manager may do, the importance of the ecosystem, and also how we balance habitat restoration with recreation for the public,” she said.

“The students were great,” said Pletka. “They knew that engineers build bridges and roads, but they didn’t know that we build dams and maintain navigation channels.” Pletka said none of them knew that the Papio lakes were due to our flood risk reduction efforts. “It was a great opportunity to partner with HEC and the students,” she said. “We were able to show them who we are, what we do, and hopefully inspire some of them into STEM programs.”

Matt Krajewski, Operations Project Manager at the Missouri River Project said, “The mentoring visit was very successful. The MRPO staff did an outstanding job informing these young folks about futures in the engineering profession and the Corps.”

“What a great visit to the Missouri River Project Office,” said Nunez. The feedback from Bryan and Norris middle schools was very positive he said. “We hope to partner again with the Missouri River Project Office in the future.”

More than 35 eighth graders spend an afternoon with Corps members Angela Pletka, Andrew Barry and Ruth Bentzinger as they learn how to engage in careers in engineering, science and technology. (Photo by Curtis Smith, Special Emphasis Program Manager, Omaha District)

Son is his lifelong inspiration

Sexton: Loyalty, dedication to mission in critical focus at all times



So here's this great big engineering organization with billion-dollar programs six or seven years running and it had a Lieutenant Colonel delivering office mail...What the? Talk about doing it all... covering all the bases.

"Actually that's a bad characteristic of mine that I need to work on," says Lt. Col. Michael Sexton, Omaha District Deputy Commander. "I try to tackle everything myself." He saw a personnel shortage and he acted.

His superb mail delivering skills notwithstanding, he actually has far greater fish to fry. "Actually, I delivered mail just so I could get out and about and talk to the workforce, cubicle by cubicle," he said. "It's important to talk to the workforce and I kind of like 'management-by-wandering-about.' You can learn a lot..."

His sense of humor and smile are the first things you notice about this tall, stout uniformed soldier and servant. But he's deadly serious when he says "Loyalty and dedication to mission are where my focus lies."

And what he sees in the Omaha District is pleasing. "I see a very dedicated, family-oriented, long-term committed workforce. I was in the private sector for a long time and most employees roll in for two or three years. Here, the two-three year employees are the exception. People are in it for the long haul and super dedicated to the mission. The institutional knowledge of this workforce is phenomenal," he said. "The selfless service I have seen in the Omaha District really impresses me."

Sexton doesn't shy away from the tough issues—like the workforce's feedback on the Command Climate Survey. Some of the issues identified include:

- Lack of understanding of work processes at CDR/DPM level, resulting in non-value added "make-work".

- Poor communication within the district.
- A lack of trust and accountability.
- The lack of true recognition for hard work.
- The feeling that leadership only cares about execution, not people.
- People are overworked and morale is low.
- Leaders are failing to lead by example and adhere to Army values.
- Pockets of resistance where harassment and hostile environments are allowed to continue.
- Perceived existence of a "Good Ol' Boy" System.
- Reverse discrimination—managers are afraid to hold people accountable.

"Well it certainly told us things we need to know and laid bare what we need to deal with. The way I see it, it outlines opportunities for leaders and the workforce to make things better."

The man who has served in Central America, South America, South Korea, Afghanistan, Iraq and Qatar during his 28-year Army career, has been under intense fire before.

"I like to think that I am able to calmly solve problems. My job is to analyze and solve problems and we are focusing on the areas in which we must show improvement. As the Commander said in his letter to the workforce, our employees deserve the best work environment possible. So we need to communicate better and ensure that opportunities are open to all. We need to be fair, honest and open."

Sexton's positive demeanor begs the question "Who inspired you most in your life?"

"My son Sean," he says without hesitation. "We lost him to leukemia last year. I watched him for two years as he battled his disease and fight that fight. He will be my inspiration for the rest of my life."

He points to a picture on his desk—it is his son, in the hospital, pinning on his Dad's medals when he got promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. "Col. Ruch (former district commander) made that moment possible and it meant so much to me."



Lt. Col. Sexton has bigger fish to fry—but this isn't one of them. Befriending a pallid sturgeon on the river can be enlightening. (Photo courtesy of Omaha District)



Lt. Col. Sexton seeks to balance himself on a fence he intends to repair. (Photo by Tom O'Hara, Omaha District)

Q & A with Lt. Col. Sexton

Q: What is your management philosophy?

A: I believe in open door policy, and I want people to come in and talk. I like to talk. As I delivered mail, people told me they needed more help or they'd like to see a policy change...it's important to be informed and open. I want to know what is on the worker's mind. And I want to solve problems. Lt. Col. Mark Martinez was working on a lot of good things when he left here—I plan to keep those projects and efforts rolling.

Q: Who is your favorite author?

A: Right now, it's Bill O'Reilly. His Killing Lincoln, Killing Kennedy, Killing Patton, books are so interesting. I have read them all.

Q: Where is your favorite place to visit?

A: Las Vegas, but not for all the reasons people think. I don't gamble. No casinos for me. As a young Nebraskan I went to UNLV. I met my wife, my son was born there, and generally we had great times in the mountains surrounding the city.

Q: What is the biggest challenge you have faced?

A: Trying to recover from the loss of my son. He waged a

two-year fight—everything was easy up until then.

Q: What is your favorite music?

A: Country music. I like all the country songs. I also like classic 80's rock. You never forget the music you grew up with.

Q: What are your hobbies?

A: Home improvement projects. Anything around the house. I put a new roof on and someday I will build my own house.

Q: Favorite sports?

A: I liked watching my kids in sports (Amanda is now a 25-year old teacher and 16-year old Jennifer is at Millard West.) But I guess I'd say football—the usual answer for guys.

Q: Greatest achievement?

A: My Army career. I spent 15 years in the private sector before joining the reserves in 1986. I never expected to be in this position. Every time I got promoted I said "That's as far as I'll go."

Q: So you never expected to be delivering mail?

A: *Laughter*

Telling the Cache la Poudre Story at the Civil Works Review Board

Getting to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Civil Works Review Board is no quick, easy task – just ask Steve Rothe, USACE Project Manager for a proposed environmental restoration project along the Cache la Poudre River in Greeley, Colo. According to Rothe, “It has taken several years and a lot of hard work by the project team and the previous project manager to get the Cache la Poudre feasibility study completed and a report ready for the Civil Works Review Board.”

The Civil Works Review Board (CWRB), formerly called the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors, was created by Congress in 1902 to provide corporate-level review of all large-scale, complex USACE water resource projects that require congressional authorization for construction. The unbiased, six-member board reviews all aspects of a project, using a uniform set of criteria, and recommends whether or not the project moves forward to the Chief of Engineers, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and ultimately Congress. These criteria were established to ensure all localities and projects receive equal and fair consideration.

The road to the CWRB can be long, as is the case with the proposed Cache la Poudre project. Following a major flood along the Cache la Poudre River in Greeley, Colo. in 1999, the city developed the Cache la Poudre Floodway Improvement Plan to outline strategies for reducing flood risk along the river; restoring the riparian and stream corridor; improving water quality; and providing recreation opportunities along the new channel. The city also contacted the Omaha District for assistance.

The Omaha District responded by conducting a General Investigations reconnaissance study in the affected area to examine water resources problems and opportunities. The reconnaissance study developed preliminary costs, benefits, and environmental impacts of some conceptual solutions, and concluded that there was sufficient federal interest in conducting a follow-on feasibility study.

Feasibility Study

Based on the results of the reconnaissance study, the feasibility study was initiated in 2005 with the city of Greeley serving as the cost-share sponsor. A feasibility study is more complex than a reconnaissance study in that problems and solutions are analyzed in greater detail and an actual project begins to take shape.

In the feasibility phase, ecosystem restoration became an important study subject and project objective, along with addressing flood risk management needs. Throughout the feasibility process, USACE team members from many different fields of expertise gathered data to develop solutions for reducing flood risk and restoring the ecosystem along a 17-mile reach of the Cache la Poudre from the confluence with the South Platte River upstream to just west of Greeley.

Some of the work done during the feasibility study included: hydraulic engineers running models to determine how high water would likely rise in the floodplain during future flood events; geotechnical engineers looking at soil conditions of existing berms and river banks, many of which are degraded by trees, rubble, asphalt and invasive species; and environmental resource specialists creating fish, wildlife and vegetation inventories and conducting wetland surveys. Once different solutions were developed, economists used specialized software to determine which ones were the most feasible (for ecosystem restoration this means the ones that provide the most benefit and cost the least for the federal government and the city of Greeley; for flood risk management this means the ones that provide the most net benefits).

Project Solutions

A flood risk management alternative comprised of several measures (elevating several houses, a buyout, dry flood proofing a few commercial structures, and a floodwall surrounding some public buildings) was found to be economically feasible; however, because the total cost of this solution was small enough to fit within an existing Continuing Authority program



Cache la Poudre study area with the proposed ecosystem restoration project spanning the middle eight miles of the study reach (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District Public Affairs graphic)

and would not require specific congressional authorization, that flood risk management plan was withdrawn from the final study proposal to be pursued under separate authority in the future. With that determination, this left the focus of the project on the proposed ecosystem restoration plan, with related recreation opportunities.

The proposed ecosystem restoration project would involve excavating and re-grading degraded areas along the Cache la Poudre floodplain and adding native wetland plants, shrubs and trees such as Colorado rush, chokeberry, Plains cottonwood and peachleaf willow. Environmental habitats restored would include riparian forest increasing from 80 acres to 198 acres and wetlands increasing from 11 acres to 179 acres. All told, a total of 446 acres in eight areas along an eight-mile reach of the Cache la Poudre River would be restored.

Recreation related to the ecosystem restoration would also be included in the project. Recreation features would be built at five of the eight restoration areas and would include roughly seven miles of trails; 0.5 miles of wetland boardwalks; and two trailheads with parking lots, shelters, and interpretive signage.

Next Steps

Now that the feasibility study is complete, Rothe and Omaha District leadership are busy preparing to present the Cache la Poudre project to the CWRB in November. This will be the first Omaha District project presented to the board since the headquarters-level review process was revamped in 2005. “This project is important not only to the

sponsor, but also to the Nation,” said Rothe. “When we get up in front of the board in November, we have to tell that story.”

Besides the Omaha District, the city of Greeley will also present its support for the project at CWRB. Ecosystem restoration is important to Greeley – the city has invested considerable time and money into the development of the Cache la Poudre Floodway Improvement Plan and educating the public on the value of

ecosystem and recreation opportunities. As a cost-share sponsor, Greeley has also invested over one million dollars into the feasibility study.

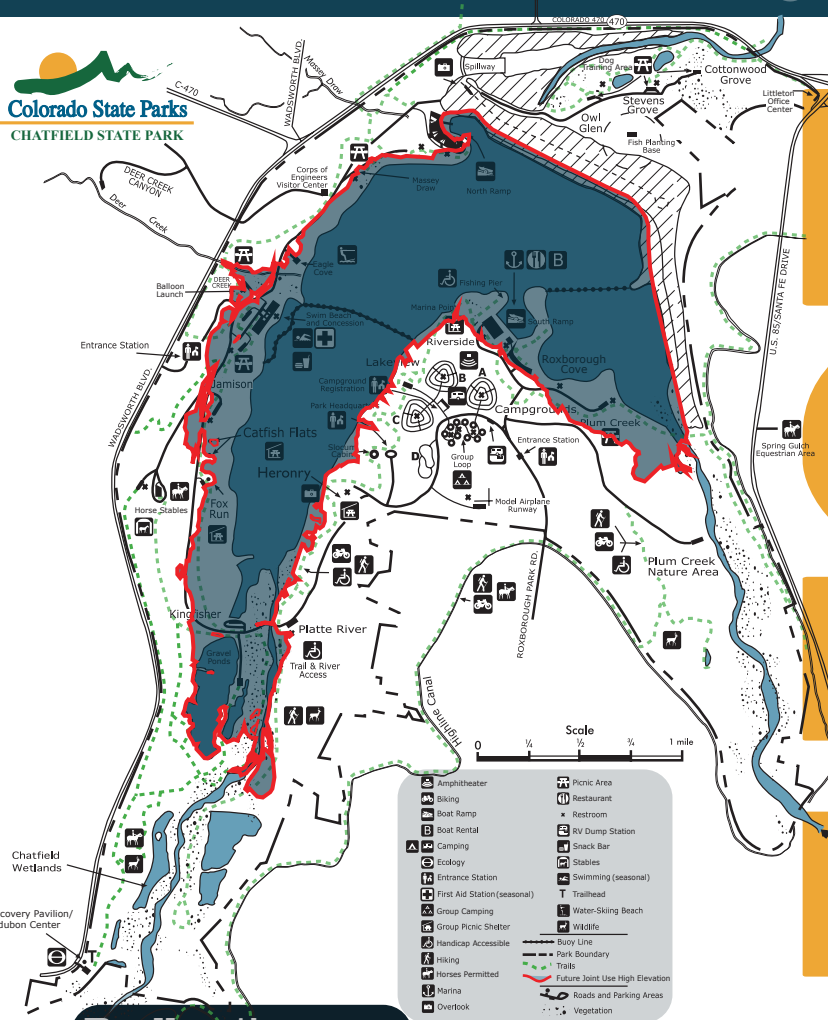
The project is equally important to the Nation because the Cache la Poudre is a critical habitat link for international migratory birds, which fall under protection of the Migratory Bird treaty Act. These riparian habitats, which are becoming increasingly scarce, provide birds and other native species with opportunities to migrate, breed, and rear their young. The Colorado office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Colorado Department of Parks and Wildlife have also offered to speak on behalf of the project during the CWRB.

If approved by the board, the report will be sent out for final review at the national level by federal agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and by state agencies such as the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. The report would then go to the Chief of Engineers, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, OMB and finally Congress for possible authorization in a future Water Resources Development Act.

As required by the 2014 Water Resources Reform and Development Act, studies like the Cache la Poudre study will no longer take up to 10 years. Studies now must be completed through the Chief's report within three years, except in rare instances; that means districts must complete their role in such studies within about two years. So, it may not be so long before Omaha District is again preparing for its next CWRB.

Chatfield Dam & Reservoir

Civil War Lieutenant Isaac W. Chatfield bought 720 acres of Colorado land in 1870 where the South Platte River and Plum Creek meet. Chatfield farmed and lived on the land until 1879 when he moved. The reservoir and dam were named after him.



Reallocation Discussion Begins

In 1994, the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers meet to discuss conducting a formal study to determine the feasibility of reallocating some of the storage space in Chatfield Reservoir from flood control to joint flood control and conservation purposes.

1995
Denver & Aurora Metro Area Population 1.86 million

1996
In 1996, CWCB initiates a study to explore water supply solutions for growing CO population

1999
In 1999, a Feasibility Cost Share Agreement allows water supply study to begin

Study Faces Challenges

Most studies don't take 20 years to complete. This one was faced with challenges related to federal funding, policy changes and contract negotiations, which led to a schedule that was much longer than originally anticipated.



2004
Public meetings help communicate project goals and identify environmental issues and public concerns

2006

In 2006, studies confirm Chatfield Reservoir can safely store additional water with no changes to the dam or spillway



2012

2012 Draft Environmental Impact Statement

- USACE collected information on recreational use and facilities, environmental concerns, potentially impacted culturally significant areas and socioeconomic data – including population growth and projected growth
- Draft Feasibility Report / Environmental Impact Statement (FR/EIS) released for public comment
- Public review of Draft FR/EIS concludes September 2012

2013

Denver & Aurora Metro Area Population 2.6 million

Draft Final Feasibility Report released with input and collaboration from the public and multiple public and private agencies released in August 2013

Significant Flooding in Colorado

- From early to mid-1900s, Chatfield area where the South Platte River joins Plum Creek becomes notorious for floods
- Floods repeatedly devastate the area in 1933, 1935, 1942, and 1965
- 1965 flooding kills 21 people, destroys 2,500 homes and 750 businesses
- 1950 Flood Control Act and 1974 Water Resources Development Act authorize building and operating Chatfield Dam

1967



Construction began in 1967 and completed in 1975.

1979



March 1979 US and CO enter contract regarding Chatfield operation

1975

1979 Denver Water Agreement

- Signed April 1979
- Allows Denver to store and use water between 15,849 acre-feet (elevation 5,423 ft) and 26,634 acre-feet (elevation 5,432 ft)
- Sets reservoir operations to allow water storage at 20,000 acre-feet (elevation 5,426.94 ft) between May 1 and Aug. 31 each year for recreation
- Best efforts will be made to keep storage below 20,000 acre-feet to support recreation between May 1 and Aug. 31



1986

1986 Water Resources Development Act [Section 808] authorizes study

1980

1980 Chatfield Reservoir fills for first time during a wet year



May 29, 2014

Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, Jo-Ellen Darcy, approves and sends signed Record of Decision for the Chatfield Reservoir Storage Reallocation Project to the Omaha District.

The Omaha District recommended approval following a public comment period that closed September 2013.

September 30, 2014

Darcy sent a signed and approved Chatfield Reservoir Water Storage Agreement to the Omaha District.

Darcy also delegated execution authority to the Omaha District Commander.

The Water Storage Agreement confirms a storage milestone schedule for mitigation and reservoir elevations.

Mitigation Milestone Schedule

By 2017, the following must be complete before using storage:

- On-site mitigation
- Critical habitat mitigation along the South Platte Arm in Pike National Forest and Plum Creek
- All on-site recreation modifications

Modifications will address impacts at the following recreation areas:

- North Boat Ramp
- Massey Draw
- Swim Beach Area
- Catfish Flats/Fox Run Group Use Areas
- Kingfisher/Gravel Ponds/Platte River Trailhead Areas
- Marina Area
- Plum Creek Area

5,521.6 feet maximum surcharge/spillway design flood pool

5,500 feet flood control pool

5,444 feet base flood control pool

5,442 feet joint flood control pool

5,432 feet multipurpose pool

5,385 feet inactive sediment pool

5,377 feet base elevation mean sea level

2017

All on-site environmental mitigation and recreation modifications and off-site critical habitat mitigation must be complete before storage up to 5,442 feet becomes accessible.

Storage elevations between 5,442 feet and 5,444 feet cannot exceed 30 days a calendar year until the Compensatory Mitigation Plan is fully implemented.

If the Compensatory Mitigation Plan is impacted, storage becomes available following an alternate schedule.

Graphic by Eileen L. Williamson, Omaha District Public Affairs

Passion for giving, hard work help make the world a better place

Her days can be hectic, but Melissa Head's passion for service compels her to work as Assistant District Counsel for the Omaha District by day and as a City Council woman for Council Bluffs, Iowa by night—and any other time she's needed.

She also serves on the boards of the Council Bluffs YMCA, Preserve Council Bluffs, Mid America Center Arena Commission and as President of Impact CB, among a few other commitments.

The Council Bluffs native graduated from Buena Vista University in Iowa and earned her law degree at Creighton University. "I've learned to balance my time well, but sometimes I find myself wishing I had a little more time to get to this meeting or that event," she said. "Time constraints can sometimes cause a problem."

Both jobs allow her to serve people and work hard, two things for which she has great passion.

"My mother influenced me greatly by serving the community as a volunteer when I was growing up. She was always stepping up to help people – she had a true sense of giving and caring," said Head, who has been a member of the Iowa Bar Association since 2004.



"My Dad was an engineer who owned his own business, and he taught me what hard work was all about. He was also a great influence on me."

Serving three civilian tours of duty for the Corps in Kuwait and Iraq profoundly affected her. "When I returned, I had new thoughts about what it was to serve the nation and my community. I realized how lucky I was and wanted to give back something special."

Her commitment and effectiveness have earned her the respect of co-workers at the Corps and in her Council Bluffs Community.

Omaha District Chief Counsel Richard Totten said "As the sole attorney responsible for legal matters affecting the Real Estate Division, she has earned their respect and appreciation for her prompt and courteous assistance. She has ramped up to help in other areas of the law since we've been down two attorneys for most of the year. Melissa is a dedicated federal employee with a pleasant personality that allows her to help individuals and project development teams in an effective and cooperative manner."

Tom Hanafan, popular Council Bluffs Mayor under whom she served for several years, has much to say about Head. "Melissa is highly respected in the Council Bluffs community. She won handily both times she ran and is known as a community advocate with a passion for making the world a better place to live," Hanafan said.

"She's young, highly motivated and her key focus is on bringing improvements to her city and bringing young people back into Council Bluffs. She's been on missions to foreign countries and always comes back with renewed energy to move forward boldly into the future," said Hanafan.

When told he was listed as one of Head's three most important influences, Hanafan replied "That is an honor. She comes from a great family that puts family first. I mentored her when she returned from Kuwait and watched her prepare herself to lead."

Melissa Head is at ease with the public and is dedicated to serving others. (Photo courtesy Council Bluffs Nonpareil)

"She's not afraid to ask tough questions of herself and others and she believes she's going to make things happen for the betterment of Council Bluffs, now and in the future," said Hanafan. "She keeps her eye to the future and her passion will result in continued success."

Head lists her strengths as her passion to serve others, her people skills and "I can multitask pretty well," she laughs. She has areas to work on, however—"I need to learn to say 'No' on occasions when I just can't do something. Also, sometimes when it's really busy at work and with the Council, I realize I need to slow down just a bit and really stop and listen. It's important to understand people's concerns, so I try to avoid rushing so much because I need to hear others."

In addition to her Corps work duties, she is deeply involved in Corps social events.

"Melissa has been a key volunteer and organizer for our district anniversary events, both the 75th and 80th anniversaries. She helped bring back the annual dinner social as a district tradition. She also led the Office of Counsel when they hosted the 2013 Corps Day Award Ceremony," said Omaha District Executive Officer Tom O'Hara.

Linda Burke, her co-worker in Office of Counsel, says Melissa "always volunteers to help organize the different social functions the district supports for our employees. She has great organizational skills and is willing to help wherever needed."

Does Melissa's job experience of 13 years with the Corps help out with her community efforts?

"It does," she said. "My knowledge of the Missouri River helped the city during the Flood of 2011, and also during other years where we have been concerned with high water. And knowing how the federal government procured goods and services has been beneficial in suggesting ways the city can improve its own processes. My legal background helps me solve problems."

An avid runner, Melissa has done lots of charity runs. She likes gardening, sewing and attending Creighton sports events and Kansas City Chiefs football games.

To get away from it all she can go to her family's farm in Nebraska or the family home on Vieques Island in Puerto Rico. She likes concerts, country western music and has participated in mission trips through her church.

And in her spare time...

SPOTLIGHT ONLINE



Lt. Gen. Thomas P. Bostick, U. S. Army Chief of Engineers and Commanding General of the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, presents coins to four members of the Omaha District during a Town Hall in November. Receiving recognition...Teresa Reinig, Matt Krajewski, Tim Brennan and Tim Gouger. Not shown Gwyn Jarrett. (Photo by Cheryl A. Moore, Public Affairs Specialist, Omaha District)

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USACE Payroll Program Manager concludes her career with the end of fiscal year fourteen

Customer service at its finest was the role for lead Customer Service Representative Annette L. Epperson, who retired from the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers workforce Oct. 3 completing more than 37 years of dedicated federal service.

A headquarters asset, working for the Finance Center at Millington, Tenn., but located at the Omaha District, Epperson served as Payroll Program Manager for all of USACE, every district, every division, each and every person. “She is very meticulous, hard-working, and thorough when it comes to helping employees with their pay issues,” said Margaret Cassel, Omaha District Accounting Officer. “Annette is very knowledgeable on Corps and Defense Finance and Accounting Service regulations

pertaining to pay and leave entitlements. Her retirement leaves a tremendous void in the Corps.”

Epperson, a native of Council Bluffs, Iowa began her federal career in 1977, just two months after graduation from Thomas Jefferson High School. Her first job was as Clerk Steno in the Public Affairs Office for the Missouri River Division. She then worked in the USACE centralized payroll office, followed by military accounting. In 1992 she began working as the USACE Payroll Program Manager at the former Missouri River Division, now known as Northwestern Division. In 2010 the position was assigned to the Finance Center.

“I get to resolve anything that can’t be resolved locally,” said Epperson who worked with pay problems, programming, accounting, and checks that weren’t received. During the beginning of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Epperson became the “go to” battle buddy for pay issues facing civilian employees. “When we first went to Iraq, the quantity of pay problems was huge,” remembered Epperson. “DFAS didn’t understand all the pay laws, we didn’t understand them, and it took quite a few meetings and quite a bit of research to figure it out. Then it all had to be programmed.”

Epperson experienced many changes in the payroll system during her career. In 1996, as a staff accountant, she was in charge of the conversion from the Corps payroll office to DFAS. She recalled that things ran very smooth when the Corps had their own payroll office. “There was no gap. If we identified something, we could fix it,” she said. She said the process takes much longer now due to required coordination.

Coordination is something Epperson understands. She earned her master’s degree in Public Administration by coordinating a schedule between work and family that allowed her to complete her college milestones in the evenings. “I do things by milestones,” said Epperson. “First was completing 24 hours of accounting, and then getting my associates. From there I earned my Bachelor of Arts degree, and also my MPA. I tease the husband that I’m going for a law degree now.”



Above: Annette Epperson holds up her Bronze de Fleury medal she received for her more than 37 years of dedicated service to the United States Army Corps of Engineers. (Photo by Cheryl A. Moore, Public Affairs Specialist, Omaha District)

Opposite page: Sixty-nine challenge coins were given to USACE Program Manager Annette Epperson at a CSR conference held in Millington, Tenn. Epperson completed a 37-year career with USACE. (Photo by Harry Weddington, Visual Information Specialist, Omaha District)



Not even a law degree would’ve helped Epperson as she recounted a pay problem in 1996 that took two years to resolve because the Corps was the only government agency paid by DFAS with power plants so the issue didn’t get top priority. “That’s the frustration, you can’t get things fixed as fast,” she said. “You don’t have a pay tech that you can call to easily explain the issue. We all now have to do everything in writing.”

Epperson traveled to most of the Corps districts and trained all the timekeepers. Working with timekeepers on a day-to-day basis and working with people was her great joys of her job, but it was also challenging dealing with upset employees. “Having to explain the debt is the hardest,” she said.

Epperson worked with employees throughout all of USACE. From the Senior Executive Staff members to the lower pay grades on the payroll, she helped them individually with their payroll issues when the answer wasn’t readily available in their districts.

Some of the more prevalent issues continuing to surface are pay entitlements, and home leave. When civilians were being deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan the payroll system was programmed to automatically show a 360-hour leave ceiling if you got home leave. “That wasn’t true, Epperson said softly. She said the increased ceiling is only given with a Temporary Change of Station. She said it’s very hard to go back and tell somebody, “You have an extra 120 hours that you’re really not entitled to. I could only tell them sorry you can’t take these hours with you into retirement.”

Epperson also mentored many Customer Service Representatives in the districts. “I’ve known Annette for about 30 years. She was my supervisor from 1988 through 1992. She was a great supervisor always

willing to share her accounting knowledge,” said Maureen Smith, Program Analyst for Environmental and Munitions Center of Expertise, Huntsville Engineering and Support Center. Omaha District was known Corps-wide for military accounting expertise because Epperson taught her employees how to read and understand the databases behind the accounting system screens, Smith added.

Epperson was a team leader for the CSRs in the Omaha District and served as Chief of Military Accounting. She and the accounting staff of 10 to 12 people were part of the centralized finance center serving both the Omaha and Kansas City districts.

During a Customer Service Representative conference Epperson received a shadow box full of Commander’s Challenge Coins. It showed the CSR’s appreciation for Epperson and all that she has provided over the many years. “It’s just amazing,” she said. Adding to her previous collection of 18 coins, Epperson received 69 coins and added number 70 and 71, with two more in the mail.

Even more overwhelming was the presentation of the Bronze de Fleury Medal. Epperson was in Millington, Tenn. doing her last bit of turnover with her replacement. Her supervisor Lee Autry, asked her to come to his office, but instead led her into the conference room where about 15 staff members were already assembled. She was being presented with one of the highest medals for a civilian employee. “It is unbelievable,” she said. “And I had to take a picture and send it to my husband immediately, only to realize when I left the building that afternoon that it hadn’t gone through the send cycle,” she chuckled. But as Epperson walked out of the building, three hours later her phone sent the photo and she shared this amazing conclusion to her career with family.

It’s family that Epperson will focus on now. “I have sisters that mean the world to me and time with them is paramount now,” she said. Epperson also described the moments she looks forward to in spending with her two sons and five grandchildren.

As the praise for Epperson continues to ring among her co-workers, “I’m dancing out the door,” she giggled. “But I’ll be back.”

In the spring she is returning to teach a class for emergency management on timekeeping, saying it’s a headquarters class and plans are still in the works.

So as another fiscal year came to a close, so did the career of the USACE Payroll Program Manager.



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Creativity is putting your imagination to work, and it's produced the most extraordinary results in human culture. – Ken Robinson

The staff of the Omaha District Public Affairs office recognizes and thanks Jennyann Noack for her talented work as a graphic artist/designer during the past four years. Her efforts and inspiration greatly enhanced the professionalism of our printed products, including the district calendar and the Omaha Outlook magazine, on which she placed her definitive signature. Godspeed and farewell.