

LAKE MCCONAUGHY ENVIRONMENTAL ACCOUNT

2026 WATER YEAR ANNUAL OPERATING PLAN

October 8, 2025

SUMMARY

This document details the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) Annual Operating Plan (AOP) for releases from the Lake McConaughy Environmental Account (EA). For the upcoming Water Year (WY) 2026, the Service identifies the June-July germination suppression release as high priority. The late spring channel maintenance release and the Spring whooping crane migration release is a medium priority. Snowpack and upstream reservoir levels on the North Platte River in Wyoming will be monitored to determine if there is a risk that Lake McConaughy will fill to levels that would result in a reset of the EA. The WY2026 releases will balance benefits for the target species and their habitat with minimizing the risk of losses due to EA reset and carrying over EA water into the 2026 water year.

Currently, the Service is planning for a germination suppression release. Releases for germination suppression were made each year from 2020-2025 as a flow experiment for the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (PRRIP); 2026 would be the 7th consecutive year for the germination suppression experiment.

Additional releases to provide species benefits may be considered, especially if above average snowpack is observed and there are other indications of significantly wetter hydrologic conditions across the Platte River basin. Potential releases for the upcoming year, their priorities, and flow targets are listed in **Table 1** below.

Table 1: Priority EA target flow releases for WY2026

<i>Date</i>	<i>Target Flow (cfs)</i>			<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Priority</i>
	<i>Wet</i>	<i>Normal</i>	<i>Dry</i>		
Mar 6-Apr 29	2,400	2,400	1,700	Whooping Crane migration	Medium
May 20-June 20	3,400	3,400	800	Channel Maintenance	Medium
June 1-July 15	1,500	1,500	1,500	Germination Suppression	High

LAKE MCCONAUGHY EA ACCOUNTING

Based on an accounting analysis by the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources, the EA volume was 46,989 AF on September 30, 2025, including recent deliveries from Pathfinder Reservoir. All deliveries from the Wyoming Pathfinder and Municipal Accounts were delivered by September 22, 2025. Additional lease water is credited to the EA in October each year, and 10% of the October-April Storable Natural Inflows

(SNI) as measured at the North Platte River at Lewellen gage are credited to the EA. Estimates of EA credits and losses for WY2026 are listed in **Table 2**. Without any releases, the EA volume would be approximately 126,128 AF at the end of WY2026.

Table 2: Lake McConaughy EA carryover accounting

Source	Volume (AF)
WY2025 Carry-Over ¹	46,989
Additional Pathfinder Deliveries ²	+0
Central Platte Natural Resources District (CPNRD) Lease ³	+14,312
Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD) Lease ³	+3,306
Net Controllable Conserved Water (NCCW) ³	+314
Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District (CNPPID) Irrigator Lease ³	+847
10% SNI ⁴	+43,100
Estimated WY2026 Pathfinder Deliveries ⁵	+28,000
Evaporation & Seepage Loss ⁶	-10,740
WY2026 EA Carry-Over (without releases)	126,128

¹ Includes September 2025 deliveries from the Pathfinder Municipal Account and Pathfinder EA

² Pathfinder Municipal Account deliveries that reached Lake McConaughy on October 1-3, 2025

³ PRRIP Water Action Plan lease water credited to the Lake McConaughy EA in October 2025

⁴ Based on CNPPID/NPPD projection of 431,000 AF at Lewellen from October 2025-April 2026

⁵ Average 2012-2025

⁶ Average 2007-2024

BACKGROUND

An Environmental Account of water in Lake McConaughy in Nebraska was established on October 1, 1999, per CNPPID and Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD) (collectively, Districts) Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) licenses, for Project 1417 and Project 1835, respectively.

The EA, managed by an EA Manager appointed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was established to benefit four federally listed species and other federal trust resources. Federally listed species include the whooping crane, piping plover, pallid sturgeon, and, formerly, the interior least tern (delisted February 12, 2021). Federal trust resources (e.g. migratory birds, eagles, ESA listed spp., etc.) are listed in the District's licenses and are too numerous to describe here (see attachment 5). The interior least tern was delisted from the list of federally threatened or endangered species but continues to be managed as a federal trust resource. The EA Manager is required to develop an Annual Operating Plan (AOP) for releases from the EA in coordination with the EA Committee (a subcommittee of the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program; PRRIP) by the end of October of each year.

Guidelines and operating rules for the EA are described in the FERC licenses and in Attachment 5, *An Environmental Account for Storage Reservoirs on the Platte River System in Nebraska*, of the *Platte River Recovery Implementation Program*. Release priorities for the EA are based on the 1994 Service document titled: *"Instream flow recommendations for the Central Platte River, Nebraska (Instream Flow document)"* and the 2019 document titled: *"Water Management through the First Increment Extension of the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program."*

WATER YEAR 2026 RELEASE PRIORITIES

The high priority release for the upcoming water year is the germination suppression release targeting 1,500 cfs at Grand Island between June 1 and July 15. The early spring (March 6-April 29) whooping crane release is a medium priority release in WY2026. The late spring (May 20 to June 20) channel maintenance release is a medium priority but also has considerable temporal overlap with the planned germination suppression release. Information, listed in chronological order about all the potential priority releases, is summarized below.

March 6 to April 29 (Whooping Crane migration) Release
Priority – Medium

Purpose – This release provides in-channel habitat for the whooping crane.

Good Neighbor Conflicts and Other Conflicts – This medium priority release would not require bypass at the CNPPID or NPPD diversions. Flow releases would maintain ramp rates at safe levels for the NPPD Sutherland Canal and the North Platte River. The release would not require the retiming of water at Lake Maloney, Jeffrey Reservoir, or Johnson Lake.

Estimate of EA water required – In the spring of 2024, a condensed, targeted whooping crane release of 35,700 was successfully coordinated and conducted during a 3-week period. The release employed a novel approach where CNPPID collaborated with USFWS to reduce the magnitude of fluctuations within the multi-day hydrocycle pattern (consistent with CNPPID FERC Hydrocycling BO). No flow, and low flow releases from J2 return were eliminated and EA water was used to fill in gaps, allowing CNPPID to maintain J2 releases within the range of highly suitable whooping crane habitat. The condensed release was timed during peak whooping crane migration using information from the USFWS whooping crane public sightings tracking database. The timing and magnitude of spring whooping crane releases have tended to be highly variable in the past depending on both hydrology and the duration of whooping crane presence in the central Platte River corridor. Other recent spring whooping crane releases included about 52,300 AF from March 19-April 30, 2018, and 12,500 AF from March 30-April 13, 2021. There were no spring whooping crane releases in 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023 or 2025. If conducted in 2026, we would anticipate using a similar strategy as was done in 2024.

May 20 to June 20 (Channel Maintenance) Release
Priority – Medium

Purpose – Referencing the Service's 1994 Instream Target Flow document, the target pulse flow from May 20 to June 20 is intended to: a) maintain and enhance the physical structure of wide, open, unvegetated, and braided river channel, b) maintain and rehabilitate aquatic characteristics of large river habitats in the lower Platte River for animals such as the endangered pallid sturgeon; c) maintain and enhance the occurrence of soil moisture and pooled water for lower trophic levels of the food chain in lowland grasslands; and d) maintain and rehabilitate backwaters and side channels as spawning and nursery habitats for the aquatic community

Good Neighbor Conflicts and Other Conflicts – This medium priority release would not require bypass at the CNPPID or NPPD diversions. Flow releases would maintain ramp rates at safe levels for the NPPD Sutherland Canal and the North Platte River. The release would not require the retiming of water at Lake Maloney, Jeffrey Reservoir, or Johnson Lake.

Conversations with NPPD and the Central Platte Natural Resources District (CPNRD) in 2019 indicated

that their sand dam diversion structures would require flows of 5,000 cfs or greater before damage begins to occur. The table below lists the sand dams and the maximum amount of flow they can safely withstand.

Table 3: Sand dams and estimated flow to begin damage

Source	Volume (acre feet)
Gothenburg/Thirty Mile	18,000
Dawson County	5,000
Cozad	10,000 to 15,000
Orchard-Alfalfa	~5,000

Estimate of EA water required – In 2017, the late-spring release ran from May 13 to June 12 and used approximately 50,600 AF of EA water. The most recent channel maintenance release ran between April 29 and June 2, 2020, with a total release volume of about 50,900 AF.

June 1 to July 15 (Germination Suppression) Release

Priority – High

Purpose – The germination suppression release was developed through coordination with the PRRIP and is not an instream flow developed by the Service in our 1994 document. This is a prioritized test release that differs in magnitude from the Service’s instream flow for this time period. It is hypothesized that flows of 1,500 cfs during the period from June 1 to July 15 should be adequate to inundate approximately 95 percent of the stream channel and leave a minimal area of sandbars exposed. The water inundation, for 30 days within the June 1 to July 15 period, should suppress plant growth by reducing transpiration and/or preventing the establishment of vegetation. The timing and duration of the germination suppression flow regime is currently under evaluation with tweaks being considered in future years pending the outcome of future PRRIP research activities (EBQ 1 and 2).

Good Neighbor Conflicts and Other Conflicts – The flow release will maintain ramp rates at safe levels for the NPPD Sutherland Canal and the North Platte River. The release will not require the retiming of water at Lake Maloney, Jeffrey Reservoir, or Johnson Lake. The release will not require intentional bypass at the CNPPID or NPPD diversions, except as limited by the canal capacities.

Consistent with protocols employed during the 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025 germination suppression releases, it is anticipated that planning and coordination meetings will be held twice weekly during the 2026 release period. Participants in these meetings include the Service’s EA Manager and staff, PRRIP staff, operations personnel from CNPPID and NPPD, and water administration personnel from the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources. The purpose of these meetings is to review weather forecasts, irrigation demands, and other factors that may require planning for adjustments to the EA release.

Estimate of EA water required – The June 1-July 15 period reflects the dates between which EA water is desired to be present at the Grand Island gage during the germination suppression release. Travel time through the Platte River system is such that water released from the Lake McConaughy EA on day 1 reaches Grand Island on day 8. In order for the germination suppression flow to reach Grand Island on June 1, the EA release needs to begin no later than May 25. If the flow at Grand Island is to be maximized on June 1, the EA release may need to start a few days earlier to accommodate ramp rates in the NPPD Sutherland Canal and/or the North Platte River channel.

Release volumes for germination suppression were 29,036 AF in 2020 (June 11-July 12), 57,880 AF in 2021 (May 24, June 2-July 2), 79,359 AF in 2022 (May 25-June 24), and 49,870 AF in 2023 (May 24-June 14), 77,950 AF in 2024 (May 22-June 23) and 98,509 AF in 2025. With the exception of 2023, each year from 2020-2025 was progressively drier and thus required more EA water to augment natural flow to achieve the 1,500 cfs germination suppression flow target at Grand Island.

In 2022, high release rates were possible for the first half of the germination suppression EA release, with average daily releases of 1,600 cfs or greater for nearly two weeks in late May and early June. Rapid increases in irrigation demand and the corresponding loss of available carriage capacity in the North Platte River channel around the 3rd weekend in June resulted in sharp curtailment of the EA release. EA release rates were drawn down much quicker than planned during the final week. A similar pattern would be anticipated if dry conditions return in 2026.

In 2023, extensive precipitation, particularly along the Front Range of Colorado, resulted in an extended period of high flows on the South Platte River and Platte River in June-July 2023 and reduced the amount of EA water that needed to be released. Streamflow at Grand Island remained above 1,500 cfs from May 31- July 20.

In 2024, hydrologic conditions were normal and frequent widespread local rain events occurred throughout the months of May and June. Their unpredictable nature and far less contribution to river (compared to South Platte peaks, etc.) beyond local, daily spikes resulted in steady releases throughout the release period. While similar in volume to the total release in 2022 (which primarily occurred over a shortened 3-week period), local rain events were effective in preventing high irrigation demands, allowing for a lower magnitude but longer duration EA release throughout the month-long germination suppression period.

In 2025, hydrologic conditions were dry at the onset. The USGS gauge at Grand Island was as low as 1.26 cfs on May 18th. However, operations for germination suppression began to ramp up at Kingsley on May 22nd and 1850 cfs was hit on May 25th. Then, over Memorial Day weekend rain began to fall across the basin. Wetter conditions persisted throughout the entire month of June. A 4.2" precipitation event at Maxwell on June 2nd and a 8" event at Grand Island on June 26th yielded peaks of 3,830 cfs and 4,440 cfs at the Grand Island gauge on June 7th and June 27th respectively. The environmental account flows were ceased at Kingsley on June 21st. Nevertheless, wetter conditions persisted well after the released ceased with flows staying above 1500 cfs until July 4th. Due to the dry conditions at the onset, significant losses contributed to the most volume of water being used from the account than in any of the previous five years.