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**TITLE:** Community group helps Niobrara prepare for next natural disaster

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**ATTACHED:** 838A2149 E.jpg, “With Niobara, Neb. in the distance, the Mormon Canal Bridge spans the Niobrara River at the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri rivers. The bridge was washed out during the 2019 flood, separating Niobrara residents from many of their neighboring communities.” Photo by Russell Shaffer

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Residents of Niobrara, Nebraska, are well acquainted with severe weather. At the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri rivers, on the border of Nebraska and South Dakota, Niobrara has experienced floods, ice deluges, hail, wind and bridge collapses. The city has also been relocated twice. The most recent flood in March 2019 washed out the Mormon Canal Bridge along Highway 12, disconnecting Niobrara from many neighboring communities until a permenant replacement was constructed in September 2020.

While Niobrarans know they cannot prevent the next natural disaster, they also know there is something they can do to be better prepared to face it. Enter the formation of the Community Organization Active Disaster (COAD) group.

“In the 2019 flood we had, it really was a lot of people pulling together, but there was no set organization at that time,” said Cody Barta, an environmental specialist for the Ponca Tribe and member of the COAD. “So we did get through it, but the idea with the COAD is the next time we have an issue, you know, with power being out or a road being out or [being without] drinking water, that we actually have a system with surrounding communities that would be able to respond.”

The COAD idea was born out of conversations held by a community steering committee to prepare for the next time extreme weather impacts the area. These conversations took place as part of a grant from the National Science Foundation and the Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research. Through this grant, educators from Rural Prosperity Nebraska; the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication; and the School of Natural Resources teamed up with researchers from Oklahoma State and Louisiana State universities to study rural community resilience during natural disasters.

Niobrara was selected as Nebraska’s representative community due to its history of severe weather and climate struggles, as well as current issues with increased sedimentation from the Niobrara River. Approximately 50% of the sediment that flows through the Missouri River comes from the Niobrara. As sediment builds up, the risk of flooding, rising water tables, and the destruction of both farm land and tourism areas (a major source of income for the county) becomes increasingly problematic.

One example is the boat dock where Niobrarans access the river, said Rasmussen. Where the old boat dock used to be is now in the middle of the river. This shows how rural areas change and how focusing on rural resilience helps residents navigate these changes.

To compile information for the COAD, the steering committee worked with Mary Emery, director of Rural Prosperity Nebraska, and Raquel Taylor, a postdoctoral research associate in the ALEC department, and two college-age residents from Niobrara. Together they created and distributed a survey that recorded individuals’ potential needs, and the resources and/or skills they might have available to aid with disaster relief.

In addition, Soni Cochran, Nebraska Extension's disaster education coordinator, shared the [EDEN COAD manual](https://extensiondisaster.net/resource-dashboard/2023-eden-coad-manual/) with the committee and connected them with the emergency manager in Scotts Bluff County, who walked them through how to continue to engage a COAD group when not navigating disaster event.

“Using these resources, along with a community survey developed by RPN in collaboration with the village, Niobrara has started to create the foundation of a COAD that works for this community of 363,” said Rasmussen. “It may not look like what was outlined in the official COAD manual or the plan developed in Scotts Bluff County, but they now have a better, more resilient place to start from when the next extreme event occurs.”

Essentially the COAD has a two-part structure:

First is a database of resources that can be utilized when extreme weather or a natural disaster impacts the local area. These resources range from equipment availability to skillset availability.

Mona Weatherwax, Niobrara’s village clerk, said, “We put together community assets as to what different people may have as talents or skills. Could you operate heavy equipment? Do you own a chainsaw? Could you come in and help with tree cleanup? Are you able to come and check on your elderly neighbors. So it’s all of Niobrara.”

Weatherwax recalled that during the 2019 flood, the water pressure dropped so low that water was not reaching the water tower, limiting clean water to Niobrarans. Two locals drove around the county collecting firehoses, attached the hoses together for a quarter of a mile between the main well and the water tower, and flushed system back online, providing clean water throughout the town.

Knowing who knows how to handle what kinds of situations can make a big difference in how devastatingly disasters could impact the locals and access to basic necessities.

The second piece of the database includes a contact check-in system for Niobrarans who may need extra help during disasters.

“With these resources in place, they know that, say, Betty is 94 years old and lives alone at 123 Main St., and she’s going to need assistance to get out of her house, so they’ll need to check on her,” said Jordan Rasmussen, Rural Prosperity Nebraska’s program leader, and one of the university representatives who has been working with Niobrara on rural resilience. “This makes sure every resident is accounted for and cared for every time.”

While Niobrara’s COAD won’t stop the next extreme weather event or natural disaster from happening, it will help Niobrarans “weather the storm” more readily, making sure they can not only continue to work together as a community, but remain together as a community. And that is a sentiment felt by both Barta and Weatherwax.

“It’s a really kind of unique community where everyone is very connected,” said Barta. “If something happens, people want to take care of each other. So I think we’re building our resilience based on strong community and past knowledge.”

“Everybody kind of works together, and that’s the idea of this COAD,” said Weatherwax. “By having that information, you can sort of hit the ground running and get your people in place more quickly. It’s been really helpful, and maybe it’s a model others could use where they are, too.”

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