

What a difference a year makes.

The top Nebraska news story of 2012, as voted by Nebraska members of The Associated Press, was drought, a natural disaster that left farmers, ranchers and a few city dwellers high and dry in an agricultural state that relies on bounty from the heavens.

A summer of historic flooding along the Missouri River was the top story in 2011, according to the survey of the state's AP newspaper and broadcast members.

The drought showed up in many ways. Cattle producers scrambled for feed, and some had to sell their animals at a loss.

Scores of dryland farmers chopped fields of corn stunted by the relentless sun and lack of rain to salvage some silage. Lincoln and some other cities imposed restrictions on watering.

The U.S. Drought Monitor map and statistics produced by the National Drought Mitigation Center shows more than 77 percent of Nebraska remained under exceptional drought conditions well into December.

Another extreme of nature—wildfire—finished second in the AP member survey for 2012.

Human- and lightning-caused fires blackened hundreds of square miles, mostly in north-central and northwest Nebraska this summer. Remarkably, no deaths and only minor injuries were reported by the firefighters, many of them volunteers, who spent long days battling the wind-driven flames in temperatures that routinely exceeded 100 degrees.

Political winds blew just as fiercely in 2012 and accounted for several spots in the Nebraska survey.

Finishing third in the AP survey was state Sen. Deb Fischer's overwhelming defeat of former Sen. and Gov. Bob Kerrey in their race to replace Ben Nelson, who decided not to seek a third term.

With Fischer's win, Nebraska lost its only Democrat in the state's delegation to Washington and the Republican Party gained another vote in the U.S. Senate.

Politics—local and national—played a role in the No. 4 Nebraska story, the Keystone XL oil pipeline.

Officials unveiled a new, preferred route for the Nebraska portion of the pipeline that would carry tar sands oil through Nebraska on its way from Alberta, Canada, to the Gulf Coast in Texas. The new pathway was designed to avoid the environmentally sensitive Sandhills region.

Gov. Dave Heineman has supported the project but opposed TransCanada's original proposed route. He'll be making Nebraska's final decision, which will go to the U.S. State Department for its review before leaving the final federal decision to President Barack Obama.

A former politician and full-time Nebraska football hero made more news in 2012 and finished No. 5 in the AP survey. Legendary Nebraska football coach Tom Osborne announced this year that he will retire Jan. 1 after five years on the job as Nebraska's athletic director.

Osborne served three terms for Nebraska in the U.S. House after he retired from coaching the Huskers to their third national title under his leadership.

Fischer's stunning defeat of two better-known, better-financed rivals—Nebraska Treasurer Don Stenberg and Nebraska Attorney General Jon Bruning—in the May GOP primary finished No. 6 among AP voters.

Kerrey's entry into the race for the Democrats finished No. 7. He'd said only three weeks earlier that he wouldn't return from New York City for another Nebraska campaign.

The Alliance drugstore hostage drama came in No. 8. Andres Gonzalez, 27, took a pharmacist

hostage during a botched drug robbery and wounded three officers and the pharmacist during the daylong standoff that ended with Gonzalez's death. During the standoff, Gonzalez admitted killing his father, 62-year-old Larry Gonzalez, just before the standoff began and killing 38-year-old Josh Bullock several months earlier.

Finishing No. 9 in the AP survey was the override of Heineman's veto of a bill that restored prenatal care coverage to the children of illegal immigrants and other low-income women. The issue was among the most contentious in a session that frequently pitted the governor against state lawmakers.

The news that erupted over so-called "pink slime" made by Beef Products Inc. in South Sioux City and other plants finished No. 10 in the survey.

Nebraska Lt. Gov. Rick Sheehy joined the governors of Texas, Kansas and Iowa in dining on hamburgers made with the processed beef during a tour of the plant in March. BPI sued ABC News in September for defamation over its coverage of a meat product that BPI calls lean, finely textured beef.