



By Jan Schultz

The Imperial Republican

In a full year since the last rating of the year's top stories, two major ones again dominated the news in Imperial and Chase County for 2012.

Weather, from a year of unusually low moisture and record-breaking high temperatures, is the top story and dominated much of the news the past year. It was also a factor in other top stories of the year.

Ranked closely behind as the No. 2 story was the NRD efforts to expand augmentation projects in Dundy County and Lincoln County to keep up with the state's responsibility on the Republican River Compact.

The top two stories somewhat mirror the 2011 top selections. Weather, specifically the hailstorms, was No. 1 last year, while the No. 2 story was initial purchase of ground for augmentation in Dundy County, just south of Chase County.

No. 1 Drought, temps

Drought from a year of unusually low moisture and record-breaking high temperatures was a major discussion topic much of the year.

In mid-January, there were already two record high temperatures, when 73 was recorded on Jan. 5 and 69 on Jan. 15. That was the case for several other days in summer when 22 days recorded 100 degrees or better. Added to the fact only 12 and a half inches of moisture fell in 2012, a drought was inevitable.

Chase County fell into the U.S. Drought Monitor's "severe" category in July, went to "extreme" drought in August and was moved to "exceptional" drought—the worst condition—in September and remains there.

The drought severely affected dryland crops, but irrigated corn had yields in the 200-plus bushel range in some areas, and crop prices were also affected positively with \$8.15 bu. corn in late July. Crops were harvested several weeks ahead of normal due to the weather conditions.

No. 2 Expanded NRD augmentation efforts

The Upper Republican NRD voted to expand its augmentation project in Dundy County the past year, and in ground-breaking action in October, joined three other NRDs in the purchase of 19,000 acres in Lincoln County for a stream augmentation effort. The goal of both efforts is to further support Nebraska's Republican River Compact obligations. The most recent Lincoln Co. land deal was for \$83 million, the cost to be divided equally by the four NRDs.

No. 3 Increased land values

Land values in Chase County and statewide shot up dramatically in 2012. In February, a sale of irrigated ground in Chase County topped \$5,000 an acre; in March, a UNL report confirmed what most knew—land values were up considerably statewide, with a 34 percent average

increase for all land types in southwest Nebraska land; and in the fall, the first \$1 million-plus price was paid in Chase County for an irrigated quarter of ground.

No. 4 (tie) Imperial rental housing efforts

Rental housing efforts in Imperial had a big push the past year. A chamber of commerce-initiated group, Prime Inc., made strong efforts to move a four-plex rental unit to town, but the structure was sold elsewhere. However, the city council voted late in the year to sell seven lots in the city's Cornerstone property for \$1 to Dana Point Development Corp., which hopes to build 10 rental units also using other grant funding. A duplex is being added for rentals, while several individuals in Imperial are also remodeling houses for potential rentals.

No. 4 (tie) Fires

Fires kept the Imperial Volunteer Fire Department very busy at the height of the summer when drought and lightning strikes started several fires, the biggest in the area being near Enders Lake in September. The Labor Day fire burned 150 acres and called back the IVFD seven times for flare-ups. The IVFD also responded to several mutual aid calls, including the Wauneta district in April for a 700-acre fire, a 10,000 acre fire in Keith and Perkins Counties in October and another major one in July in north-central Nebraska that burned upwards of 72,000 acres.

No. 5 Hospital staff issues

Chase County Community Hospital had a year of changes, including the suspension of Dr. Jeff Kasselmann's state license in June affecting his service here, dismissal of Dr. Jose Garcia in October for not meeting some of his contract requirements and dismissal of Administrator Lola Jones in November. The hospital board is currently interviewing for an interim administrator to replace Jones. The staffing issues occurred as the hospital board made plans for a major renovation/addition project.

Here are the other stories that round out the Top 10:

- No. 6—It was another election year. Former State Senator Deb Fischer of Valentine, who visited Imperial twice during the campaign, was elected to the U.S. Senate to replace retiring Ben Nelson. Barack Obama was re-elected President for a second term. There was only one local race, for city council, in which two new members were elected, J.R. Reeder and Dan Thompson.

- No. 7— After a vote establishing the Chase County Hospital District in 2010, voters in May 2012 voted to dissolve it by a 4 to 1 margin. After the election, the hospital district board voted to dissolve the district, making it official.

- No. 8—New administration at Chase County Schools came on board the past year, including the superintendent and activities director, representing a 50 percent change in administration. Hired were Supt. Brad Schoeppey and A.D. Troy Hauxwell, replacing Matt Fisher and Marc Mroczek. Also, five teachers left the system opening up several positions for 2012-13.

- No. 9—The city of Imperial gained statewide recognition several times during 2012, including its inclusion in an eight-page feature story in Nebraska Life magazine in March, its selection (the only one in 2012) as the Governor's Showcase Community and, in July, was recognized as the state's 35th Economic Development Certified Community, said to strengthen its readiness for economic development efforts.

- No. 10—Lamar was the place to be July 15 when the small community west of Imperial

celebrated its 125th birthday. A special 150-page history book was printed and sold out at the event, requiring a second printing. Events included a potluck meal, historical review, the return of several people who grew up in the community and much reminiscing. The old bell at the Lamar Christian Church was rung the last time and was scheduled for a move to the county museum.

Other news stories considered for the top 10 included the school's HVAC project, conviction and sentencing of Stuart Gordon for the July 2010 stabbing of Marie Sieperda, the city's freight container ordinance and a 66-member kindergarten class requiring an expansion to four sections.

All 10 staff members at The Imperial Republican voted on choices for the top stories from a list compiled by the news staff. News stories were ranked from one to 15, with a marking of one being the story with the most impact to the area.