

## Casper water head retires after decades managing the North Platte River

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Farmers need water for crops. Homeowners along the river worry about flooding. Fishermen prefer streams that run year-round. Everyone wants cheap power.



KERRY HULLER | Star-Tribune

Bureau of Reclamation Wyoming Area Manager John Lawson, who has worked with the bureau for nearly four decades, will retire at the end of December. He leaves after a historic year for the North Platte River system, when record snowpack led to the highest flows along the river since 1984.

As Wyoming area manager for the Bureau of Reclamation, John Lawson must balance an ever-shifting set of interests. A bad decision could swamp a neighborhood in Casper or leave irrigators in Nebraska short on water.

“Your decisions have such a major bearing on the outcome to a lot of people,” he said.

Lawson directly manages nine Wyoming reservoirs and supervises operations on about a dozen more. He’s responsible for the North Platte River system, a collection of dams and hydroelectric plants that help irrigate and power the region.

At month’s end, he’ll retire after nearly four decades with the bureau. Leaving is bittersweet, but it’s time to move on, he said.

“You get to a point where you realize, if there are other things you want to do, and you’ve been putting them off, it’s time to start thinking about it,” he said.

The bureau’s office in Billings will select his replacement. Until that happens, Lawson expects his top deputy, Lyle Myler, will serve as acting area manager.

Lawson’s exit comes after a record year for the North Platte. A historic snowpack led to the highest flows along the river since 1984.

Central Wyoming experienced only minor flooding, thanks in large part to the decision by Lawson’s office to release water months earlier than usual, said Natrona County Emergency Management Coordinator Stewart Anderson.

If Lawson hadn’t released so much water, the flooding could have been more widespread. But if he had released too much, he might have left downstream irrigators without enough water for their crops, Anderson noted.

“It’s an extremely delicate balancing act,” he said, “and an extremely heavy burden on one’s shoulders to make those decisions.”

Lawson grew up in Great Falls, Mont., a town of about 60,000 people along the Missouri River. He studied civil engineering at Montana State University and joined the bureau in 1974 as a design engineer.

He worked in construction for a short time before moving to Billings, where he planned water projects. By the time he left for Wyoming, Lawson was responsible for planning in nine states, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border.

In 1989, Lawson took responsibility for the North Platte River system. Within five years, he was overseeing the reclamation bureau's operations for all of Wyoming east of the Continental Divide, along with the North Platte Basin in western Nebraska.

It's a big responsibility, Anderson said. While some officials only have to manage one particular community, Lawson makes decisions that affect people in multiple states.

"The man knows his business," Anderson said. "He's a straight shooter and tells it how it is."

During Lawson's tenure as area manager, his office expanded to manage 20 power plants from Montana to Colorado. It's a round-the-clock operation. Workers remotely operate dams from a control center in Mills.

"It was important that not only we continued to provide the services that we were originally authorized to do, but be able to evolve ... to also provide this additional stuff," Lawson said.

The North Platte itself evolved under Lawson's watch. The bureau worked with irrigators and other interest so the river would flow year-round between Glendo and Guernsey reservoirs. Another project led to year-round flows through Fremont Canyon, southwest of Casper.

"That's a tremendous fishery that has developed there," Lawson said.

## Retirement

Combined with a couple of years of military experience, Lawson has nearly four decades of federal service.

It can be wearisome work. Last year, a series of late spring storms raised water levels along the North Platte. Lawson said he slept only a few hours a night while managing the situation.

"You say, 'Boy, I hope I'm making the right decision here.' ... You don't want to regret later that people lost possessions, lost property ... because of the wrong decision."

Lawson figures it's a good time to leave. His office got through a record-breaking water year in relatively good fashion. Now, he'd like to spend more time with his wife, Ginger, and their children and grandchildren.

He also wants to contribute to his community and possibly do some consulting or advisory work. But after a life spent plotting everything out on a schedule, he's not making too many plans.

"It's been a journey and a lot of people along the way have made it happen," he said. "I've just kind of been fortunate to be part of it."