Water–even stormwater–is taking center stage in Nebraska.

Subsequently, thanks to a grant awarded to University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension, Nebraska's lakes, rivers and ponds soon may get a little cleaner.

Extension received a $544,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture to increase education and research ways to protect the state's waterways from urban stormwater runoff carrying sediment, fertilizers, automotive fluids and other substances, said UNL Extension Educator Kelly Feehan, based in Columbus.

"It's all about water," Feehan said. "Water quality and quantity is a major focus in the state of Nebraska, and with urban areas growing there is increased focus on reducing the volume of urban stormwater and pollutants in stormwater."

The grant, awarded last year and extending through August 2012, focuses on extension education, classroom instruction and research.

The goal is to conserve water and improve water quality through an integrated approach to stormwater management and greenspace use in 10 Nebraska cities with populations of 10,000 to 50,000, Feehan said. The cities are Scottsbluff, North Platte, Lexington, Kearney, Grand Island, Hastings, Columbus, Norfolk, Fremont and Beatrice.

An extension educator will focus on developing informational materials and conducting educational outreach for community leaders, citizens, Master Gardener volunteers, 4-H youth and others.

The grant also will support a new curriculum on stormwater management for use in UNL's landscape architecture and design classes, and research on installed rain gardens. Graduate teaching and research assistants will be hired to help, Feehan said.

Working with Feehan are David Shelton, extension agricultural engineer at the Haskell Ag Lab in Concord; Thomas Franti, surface water management specialist in Lincoln; Steve Rodie, landscape horticulture specialist in Omaha; and others.

Progress already is being made in the 10 cities, with some storm drains having markers that read “No dumping. Drains to waterways.”

“This is increasing awareness of stormwater issues and the need for education to address stormwater management with viable cost-effective solutions,” Feehan said.