

Task Force meeting postponed

Our scheduled August 19 meeting has been postponed. As it came closer to writing this newsletter, it became apparent that there were no pressing issues that warranted the travel or the time.

Activity of the Task Force these summer months have focused around meeting landowners and working on existing and potential projects.

I contacted Byron on this matter and we both agreed Board members' time and travel are too valuable to waste. We decided it would be best to postpone the meeting until we receive the appraiser's report on a conservation easement being considered. We expect the appraisal to be done in 4 to 6 weeks.

I will contact each of you with some options for meeting dates as that time approaches.

Offer to purchase conservation easements declined by owners.

At our last Task Force board meeting the Board approved the appraised values for two conservation easements on a wetland owned by two separate landowners. Both turned down the offer because they felt the value was too low.

It is my belief the offer was fair, but the owners were comparing it to easement values paid by NRCS for similar properties. The difference in value between what the STF was willing to offer and the NRCS value is NRCS purchases all the land management rights to the property, including grazing and haying. Our easement only purchased the development rights and allowed the owner to retain rights associated with normal ranching.

Task Force hosted a grassroots partnership tour

On June 13-15, the STF hosted a rancher exchange event in the Sandhills. The event was done in conjunction with the Nature Conservancy. Participants were landowners and TNC staff and board members from Colorado, California and New Mexico. The first day involved touring the Niobrara Preserve and an evening social with Nebraska TNC board members. On Saturday, the group toured the West Twin Lake project and the Beginning Rancher project at Horse Creek Ranch. At the Horse Creek Ranch, discussion focused around the make up of the Task Force and the two Beginning Rancher projects the Task Force has been involved with. The beginning ranchers, Daniels and Kellers, were present to provide their perspective. A steak cookout was provided after the meeting. On Sunday the group continued their tour by stopping at the Birdwood Creek project. Mike Kelly hosted that tour. Discussion focused around conservation easements, using partnerships to meet the landowners and conservation groups' objectives,

and the restoration of a channelized portion of the stream. The group finished the tour with a meal at Ole's in Paxton.

First year of curlew study was completed.

A cooperative effort between UNL and Iowa State University began this spring to estimate Nebraska's population of Long-billed Curlews.

In April, 14 separate curlew surveys were conducted along 25-mile routes. A total of 180 curlews were observed. Eight chicks and one adult were captured and banded. Radio transmitters were attached to the chicks to monitor their movement over a period of days. Vegetation was sampled from those sites used by the chicks. That data, along with the next two summer's data will be analyzed. Most of the research took place on Crescent Lake NWR, but included areas in northwestern Sandhills and the Panhandle.

Nebraska Environmental Trust tours STF projects

In the middle of June, I accompanied Lisa from Nebraska Environmental Trust on an inspection of various projects the Trust help fund. This was in conjunction with the Trust closing out the 2004 grant the Task Force received. Most of our time was spent looking at stream restoration and water control structures we had installed. A couple of grazing system projects were also visited.

Jim Van Winkle accompanied us one day to look at water control structures. The timing was right because the Sandhills had just experienced some heavy rains a week or so earlier so we were able to inspect the structures for damage at the same time.

A couple of structures showed serious erosion. Those were new structures that had not had a chance to develop significant vegetative cover on the dikes.

Financial review completed by accountants

In May an accountant at Hellman, Main, Coslor, & Kathol completed our tax forms and a review of our financial activities. They reported that our financial statement fairly represents our finances and the accounting was done in conformity with accepted accounting principles.

Second plant identification workshop completed

Two of the three plant identification workshops scheduled for this summer have been completed. Both of them were organized by Kyle and had good attendance by ranchers and agency staff.

The workshops are funded by the Task Force and are designed to improve land managers'



knowledge of grassland plants as it pertains to livestock grazing. A variety of other topics have been addressed during the workshops. The most popular was about carbon sequestration.

Nebraska Environmental Trust approved the extension of our 2005 grant.

The Environmental Trust gave the STF a one year extension on a 2005 grant that was scheduled to end in June of this year. The grant was for the purchase of conservation easements. Three easements that were being negotiated would have used that money. All three resulted in no sale. The amount of the grant is \$250,000.



I believe the reason we received the extension is because we are in the early stages of negotiating a fourth easement that looks very promising.

STF begins negotiation on a conservation easement.

Jim is doing the negotiations on behalf of the Task Force. The owner was presented a copy of the easement document and information on what past easement appraisals have been in the Sandhills. The owner found both of these items acceptable and agreed to pay half of the appraisal fee if he declined the fair market value offer. In addition, the Environmental Trust was contacted to make certain this potential easement would qualify for their funding.



In late July, an appraiser was hired to do the appraisal. The appraiser selected was one both the owner and the Task Force were agreeable to.

Change in Beginning Rancher mentoring group.

At the April Board meeting, Byron, Mike, and Rob agreed to take their turn mentoring—replacing AB, Mick and Al. Their first meeting included the financial officer from the financial institution. The financial officer was invited because the group believed that financial officers should take an active part in effective ranch planning. It was a productive meeting.

Task Force declines Railroad's offer to hold conservation easement.

At the direction of the Board, a letter was written informing Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway that the STF was not interested in holding any easement they may place on a small tract of land they purchased.

Our reason was based on the small size of the property and the value they paid for it.

Fish and Wildlife staff person relocated to Ft. Niobrara NWR.

Kyle Graham, Private Lands Biologist for the Fish and Wildlife Service was relocated from his Kearney office to Ft. Niobrara NWR.

The change will make him more accessible to the Sandhills ranching community. His new phone number is 402-376-3789 ext 240.

Easement monitoring program developed.

At the direction of the Board, a form was developed for use in documenting inspection and review of easement properties.

In the near future, Jim will be contacting the landowners to make arrangements to meet with them to do easement inspections. It is our goal to include the owners in the site visits. One of Jim's jobs will be to find ways the STF can assist the owner with conservation work the owner would like to do.

North Central R, C & D coordinator being considered for STF Board position

Joel Klammer was recently hired as the new North Central R, C & D coordinator. Joel was previously a fishery biologist for Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in Bassett. He has been invited by our Board to attend our August we can get acquainted.

Joel has also been recommended to fill the R, C & D position on our board which was vacated by Gene Lehnert's retirement.

Survey equipment for sale

Several years ago the Task Force spent about \$12,000 for a total-station survey equipment which was loaned to Theford NRCS to do surveys for constructing water control structures and pipelines.

A few months ago they returned the equipment because their office received new, more modern equipment. Kyle contacted a survey company in Lincoln about selling the equipment. They recommended we have the equipment cleaned and refurbished before putting it up for sale. The reason is it would sell better if sold as refurbished. We did that at a cost of \$950. Jim has been directed to find a buyer or put it on EBay with an established minimum bid.

Jim to serve as judge for Sand County Foundation Award

Jim has again been asked to serve as one of several judges who will select the 2008 recipient of the Sand County Foundation Award.

The panel of judges will make their recommendation to the Sand County Foundation. The Foundation is solely responsible for determining who the winner is.