

# **Sandhills Task Force**

*"Where People and Land Are One"*

**P.O. Box 1686**

**Kearney, NE 68848**

**August, 2005**

## **Next Task Force Meeting:**

The next Task Force meeting is on September 2 at Stub's Restaurant in Thedford. The meeting begins at 9:30 a.m.

### Agenda Items:

9:30 Meeting called to order

Introductions

Approval of minutes

Financial report (Gene Mack)

Updates:

Beginning Rancher Program

Mallard research project

NRCS cooperative agreement

Approval of new board members

Running Water Ranching Coalition

Presentation of Africa trip (Mike Kelly)

12:30 Lunch

NET grants for capacity building

Grassland Foundation

Potential land acquisition

Partnership presentation to FWS

Project Coordinator update

3:30 Adjourn

## **Al Steuter announces his resignation from the Nature Conservancy**

Al surprised many of his peers and friends by announcing his resignation from the Nature Conservancy. His effective date is February, 2006. Al has been a tremendous asset to the Sandhills and the Task Force. Maybe he will tell his future plans at our next meeting.

## **Running Water Ranching Coalition**

Rod and Laura Grey, from Harrison, are key people in forming a rancher coalition in northwest Nebraska. Members of our board have met with them and other ranching members to give them some advice on forming an organization similar to the Task Force. Rod and Laura have decided to attend our September meeting to see first hand how the Task Force Board operates.

## **Mike Kelly shares his African trip with Nebraska Cattlemen and Fish and Wildlife Service**

In June, Mike returned from his three week trip to Kenya, Africa. The trip was sponsored by the Sand County Foundation—a non-profit conservation organization located in Wisconsin. Mike has given a presentation at Nebraska Cattlemen's "Riding the Range for Profitability" workshop and to the Fish and Wildlife Service in Denver.

The NCA meeting in Hershey drew about 60 people and involved a morning of presentations and an afternoon tour of Mike's ranch. Part of the ranch tour was showing participants the Birdwood Creek project in which the STF is involved in. It was a great opportunity to explain what the Task Force is all about.

## **Mike Kelly and Craig Utter tell the value of partnerships to Fish and Wildlife Service**

In early August, Mike and Craig joined up with Kyle to be part of a daylong workshop about partnerships, held in Denver. The audience was FWS staff that has limited exposure with agriculture, especially ranching. Those attending included the Regional Director, Chief of Refuges, and a Deputy Director from Washington. I have heard nothing but positive comments about their presentation and the success of the Sandhills Task Force. The day prior to the workshop, Mike, Craig and Kyle spent about 90 minutes with the Chief of Refuges, Rick Coleman. Rick now wants to spend some time on a ranch during his trip through the Sandhills in September.

## **Mary Harding given tour of Sandhill Projects**

I had the opportunity to give Mary Harding a three day tour of projects the Sandhills Task Force has completed or are currently involved in. One of the projects we toured has raised a little controversy among the neighbors. We invited Craig Utter along to meet with the two neighbors to discuss their concerns.

## **FWS gives STF \$30,000**

The Fish and Wildlife Service expanded the existing cooperative agreement with the Sandhills Task Force for an additional \$30,000. We are required to have this money spent by September of 2006.

## **Family selected for Beginning Rancher Project**

Kristi and Shane Daniels were selected by the Beginning Rancher committee to be offered a five-year lease with the option to buy the Horse Creek Fen property. The Daniels are from Mullen and have four little girls. Needless to say, they are very excited as are those who have worked hard to make this happen.

The final intense week of the process began immediately after our last board meeting. Mick, A.B., Al, Byron, and Jim joined Jim Luchsinger in reviewing the five applications they had received. Each of the five were then interviewed on Saturday and Sunday in Thedford. Each of the candidates had the potential to be successful, making the selection difficult.

On the following Wednesday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, the Daniels were invited to Valentine to discuss requirements and a series of recommendations. These included clarification of the candidate's financial proposals and cash flow discussions. They have tentatively fulfilled the majority of the committee's requirements and were officially

offered the opportunity to exercise a five-year lease with an option to buy.

This option is subject to several caveats, the completion of several banking and cash flow actions and the signature process which will take some time.

### **Project Highlight**

Below are two photos of same site. Both were taken about the same time of year. The top one was during the driest year and before a water control structure was installed to check water draining from the large valley. The bottom one was taken this year.



### **Mallard study finishing its pilot study.**

As the summer comes to an end, mallards are fledging and the mallard study is coming to an end. From the researchers' perspective, the summer's study was a success. From the ducks' perspective, it was pretty bleak.

Thirty-two hen mallards and one hen gadwall were radio-tagged. The cold, late April weather kept them from reaching their goal of 40. Only one of the mallard hens disappeared after it was trapped and tagged. Most of the remaining hens nested. Some were lost during the nesting season. Twenty-eight (28) nests were initiated. Three hens made a second attempt at nesting and one tried a third time.

The researchers were surprised that 25 nests failed. Seventeen were destroyed by predators (one was stepped on by a cow). Eight of them were abandoned—most of that was attributed to the influence of the researchers.

Nest success was estimated to be just three percent. It takes at least 15 percent success to maintain a population.

The wet May-June weather caused many of the hens to begin nesting later than normal. The broods that did hatch and make it to water were difficult to re-sight because the hens were wary and sent their ducklings into cover if anything appeared wrong.

While trapping hens, they also banded 234 drake mallards. This is the first time ducks have been banded in the Sandhills in quite a few years. It will be interesting to see where they found in the future years. They have plans to continue the study again next year.

### **STF will consider new board members.**

Barb is going to contact Eric Hansen from North Platte to invite him to our September meeting. If selected, he would fill the vacancy left by Ron Dobbins. Candidates for the vacancy left by Dean Funk will also be discussed. Richard is contacting commissioners in Rock County to find out their interest in serving on the Board.

### **Scholarship recipients express appreciation**

The Task Force has received letters of thanks from the two UNL scholarship recipients for the coming school year. Chris Skrdla will be a junior and ranches on the family's cow-calf operation south of Stuart. Nicholas J. Easterly will be a sophomore and farms near Sidney. Both are majors in Grazing Lands Systems.

### **Grassland Foundation receiving attention**

At the last Task Force meeting, Barb gave us a short briefing on the Grassland Foundation that has formed and is spearheaded by Tyler Sutton from Lincoln. Last month, I received a pretty impressive booklet outlining the goals of the organization.

I passed the booklet on to Mike Kelly and have asked him to inform the group and lead discussion at our September meeting.

### **Mary Harding to discuss grant possibilities with Board**

Mary Harding requested an opportunity to speak to the Board about providing grants to help organizations build capacity. Mary is looking for input for our board members about identifying tools and resources that are needed by a group to become organized and effective. She is hoping for a better answer than just "money".

I would guess NET gets a few grants asking for money to hire someone without any kind of assurance it will make the group effective. Mary is hoping the years of experience by our group will provide her with insight on what the key factors are in making an organization successful.