

Sandhills Task Force

"Where People and Land Are One"

P.O. Box 1686

Kearney, NE 68848

January, 2006

Next Task Force Meeting:

The next Task Force meeting is on January 18 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

NRCS cooperative agreement

Selection of new board member(s)

Approving easement guidelines

12:00 Lunch

Sponsoring "Nebraska Legacy" public meeting

Update on Cherry County easement project

Election of Officers

Project Coordinator update

3:30 Adjourn

Work progresses on easement in Cherry County

At the last STF board meeting, the Board approved and authorized actions to acquire a conservation easement on property containing numerous small wetlands and an old center pivot. The property is about 1500 acres in size and would serve as a foundation for a beginning rancher. A young ranching family is interested in purchasing the property but cannot afford to do it at the full land price. The sale of the property was on a very short timeline and action needed to happen rather quickly.

Since our Board meeting, Jim has worked extensively with the potential buyer, the lender, and with the land appraiser. Both Jim and I have found that there are a lot of details associated with acquiring the easement.

Jim met with the buyer and inspected the property and discussed the general terms of the easement. The buyer was agreeable to all the terms and talked to all the neighboring landowners about his interest in purchasing the property. He received their support.

Jim began writing up the easement document and finding a certified appraiser to give us a value for the easement. David Malone, from Investment Property Exchange, Inc. in Kearney was hired for a fee of \$2000, with the condition the appraisal had to be done by end of December.

The buyer had discussed his plans with the seller and the seller was agreeable to the easement. He also was able to find a bank (banker) that supports the conservation easement.

Among all this activity, Jim and I finalized the easement language and sent it to the board members for their comments. Comments were received from three individuals.

The easement language was finalized and sent to the appraiser and to the lender. The appraisal showed the value of the easement to be \$50 per acre (average). That represents about 17% of the value of the property before an easement.

I contacted Nebraska Environmental Trust about the project to get their approval of the purchase. Their position is that the easement does not fit the current easement grant but they were supportive of using the existing "Sandhills Resource Fund" to purchase the easement.

Jim is currently collecting information to be included in an "Easement Documentation Report", which identifies the conditions or status of the property at the time the easement is acquired. Jim has also scheduled a meeting with the County Commissioners to obtain approval to purchase the easement. That meeting is scheduled for January 31.

Both Jim and I agree that throughout the process there were decisions that had to be made that could not wait for approval by the Board and we acted in accordance with the directions approved by the Board at our September meeting.

I would like to allocate sufficient time for the Board to discuss the actions we took to acquire the easement. I believe the discussion will help us be more efficient in future acquisitions.

Establishing easement acquisition guidelines

Back in 2001 when we were involved with developing and acquiring the easement on West Twin Lake, we drafted up guidelines that defined what types of easements our organization was interested in. During this recent easement activity, I searched our past minutes and can not find any action that was taken on that list. I have taken the liberty of finding that list of criteria and brought it up to date, and would like to have the Board review it and act on it at the upcoming meeting.

STF asked to sponsor "Nebraska Legacy Plan" public meeting

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has asked the STF and Nebraska Cattlemen to sponsor one of several Legacy Plan meetings they plan to hold throughout the state. This meeting is scheduled for Hyannis late February or early March.

I have responded to NGPC's request by stating that the Board needs to make that decision. Mark Humpert

will be attending our meeting to explain what the Legacy Plan's public meetings involve. I also requested, on behalf of the STF, that our organization be given the opportunity to explain the role and activities of the STF in the Sandhills.

We seemed to be lumped in with the Tyler Sutton group—more on that below.

Sandhills Task Force is being confused with Grassland Foundation.

At our last board meeting, discussion was held about inviting Tyler Sutton from the Grassland Foundation to attend a future meeting to give him an opportunity to explain what his agenda was. The Board decided to not extend an invitation. It was stated that by inviting him, the STF would be adding credibility to his proposal.

Since that time, I have become aware of some bad rumors going around that the Legacy Plan, Grassland Foundation and Sandhills Task Force are working together. There definitely is a connection between the Legacy Plan and the Sandhills Task Force because of Craig's and my involvement in helping to write the Sandhills section of the plan. I do not know how the rumor connected the STF with the Grassland Foundation.

This Board member's comment on the work of the STF

The false association of the STF with the Grassland Foundation has had a negative impact on the work we are able to do in the Sandhills. I regret that has happened. But we cannot control what others say. It is my opinion that the work the STF has done in the Sandhills has been totally for keeping land in private ranching. Projects we do help ranching and the Sandhills resources. Our organization is one of very few organizations that have been able to get available conservation dollars onto the land in a way that benefits the rancher.

Right now, we are approaching \$2 million dollars worth of funds that we spent. That money has come from conservation organizations and agencies. The money has been focused totally on privately owned rangeland to help ranching and wildlife. Projects have ranged from cost-sharing on fencing and livestock watering, to fixing stream problems, to funding ranch kids at the annual SRM Youth Range Camp and helping to pay the tuition fees of ranchers attending the Ranch Practicum put on by UNL. Not one dollar has been spent working with landowners who did not want our help.

But the most important thing we do is we act as a technical resource for ranchers—providing technical assistance, finding funding, and working through any permits needed to do projects. This is something we should and are proud of. Our organization needs to stay the course. I believe our actions will speak louder than any words.

NRCS modifies the cooperative agreement with the Sandhills Task Force

I and Jim Van Winkle received a letter from Steve Chick informing us that because of budget reductions in 2006, they are reducing their amount of funding that will be available to our organization. The original planned funding for 2006 was \$24,189. That amount will be reduced to \$20,917. Last fall we signed a modification to the original agreement which added \$12,550 to cover last year's remaining balance and added funds to this year's budget. A second modification will add \$9,818 to bring the amount available in 2006 to \$20,917.

In the past, the source of funding allowed STF to be reimbursed for both Farm Bill and non-Farm Bill activities. In 2006, only 8 percent of the funds are available for non-Farm Bill activities.

STF runs into snags with contractors and snow storm.

It continues to be difficult to find contractors to do construction work in the Sandhills. One contractor awarded a bid in Brown County later declined the job because he had hired on full time for a feedlot in Bassett. A second contractor was found but was stopped because of the November snowstorm.

A contractor for a job by Brownlee agreed to build a couple of water control structures but then died a week later. No new contractor has been found for that project.

Board officers need to be elected at next Board meeting.

During our fall meetings, we revisit the issue of who will serve as officers for the future year. We failed to do that at our September meeting. We will take some time to deal with that.

Al Steuter retiring from the Nature Conservancy

It was announced in the last newsletter that Al was retiring in February. This will be his last Board meeting as a Board member since the position he holds needs to be held by an individual associated with a conservation organization.

Al has been a strong advocate for private ranching and conservation. I believe I speak for the STF in saying Al has provided valuable insight and ideas and has served as a good liaison between his organization and ours. We are hoping Al will remain involved in years to come.

