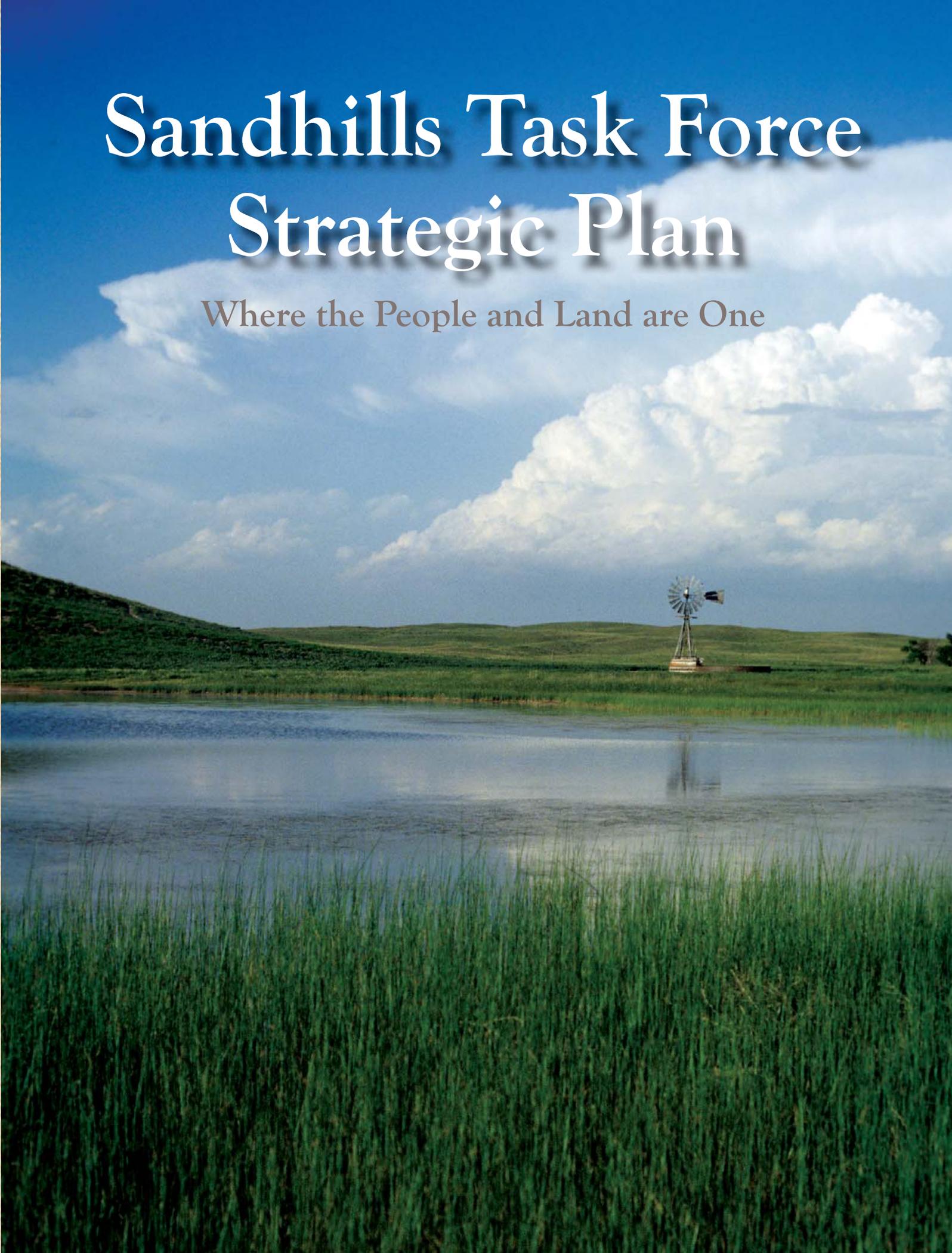


Sandhills Task Force Strategic Plan

Where the People and Land are One





Sandhills Task Force Strategic Plan

Where the People and Land are One

Table of Contents

- Executive Summary..... 5
- Introduction** 7
 - Landscape Description..... 8
 - History of the Sandhills Task Force..... 12
 - Board Organization 13
 - Guiding Principles..... 14
 - Accomplishments 15
- Vision, Mission, and Goal**..... 17
- Comprehensive Strategies** 18
 - Legislation 18
 - Education and Outreach..... 19
 - Technical Assistance..... 19
 - Research 20
- Landscape Objectives and Strategies**..... 21
 - Shorter Term Private Land Projects..... 21
 - Longer Term Voluntary Acquisition Projects..... 23
- Staffing Objectives and Strategies**..... 26
- Funding Objectives and Strategies** 27
- References** 28

Note – This *Sandhills Task Force Strategic Plan* represents a major update and revision to the Sandhills Management Plan that was published in 1993. The contents of this Plan do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of any of the agencies or organizations represented on the Sandhills Task Force (STF) Board.

Cover photo by Ted La Grange

Inside front cover photo (opposite page) by Dr. David Loope/UNL

Drawings provided by the Thedford Art Guild.

This Plan was prepared by the ad hoc Strategic Planning Committee of the Sandhills Task Force that included: Homer Buell, Kenny Dinan, Kyle Graham (USFWS), Mike Kelly, Ted LaGrange, and Jim Van Winkle (STF Coordinator). Dr. Martin Massengale (Center for Grassland Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln) facilitated a November 2012 meeting of the Sandhills Task Force Board that preceded the development of this plan, and the Board greatly appreciates the leadership he provided.

This Plan was peer reviewed by numerous individuals from our partner agencies and organizations. It was approved by the Board of the Sandhills Task Force at their October 13, 2013 meeting.

Members of the Sandhills Task Force Board and Staff (at the time of plan approval)

A.B. COX (President)	Rancher, from Mullen
HOMER BUELL (Vice President)	Rancher, from Bassett
MIKE KELLY (Secretary/Treasurer)	Rancher, from Sutherland
JACK ANDERSEN	County Commissioner/Rancher, from Lakeside
BEN BAILEY	Rancher, from Lakeside
MELODY BENJAMIN	Nebraska Cattlemen/Rancher, from Lakeside
DOUG CHRISTENSEN	Natural Resources Conservation Service, from Lincoln
BARB COOKSLEY	Rancher, from Anselmo
KENNY DINAN	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, from Grand Island
BYRON EATINGER	Rancher, from Thedford
ERIC HANSEN	Twin Platte NRD/Rancher, from North Platte
MICK KNOTT	Rancher, from Hyannis
TED LAGRANGE	Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, from Lincoln
JIM LUCHSINGER	The Nature Conservancy, from Valentine
JOHN RAVENSCROFT	Rancher, from Nenzel
JIM VAN WINKLE (Projects Coordinator)	Rancher, from Wood Lake



Executive Summary

The Sandhills comprises one of the largest contiguous tracts of grassland remaining in the United States. This landscape supports a strong ranching economy and community, and provides important habitat for a wide array of native plants and animals.

The Sandhills Task Force (STF) was formed in 1993, and is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and a Land Trust. The STF currently has 15 Board members and at least nine shall make their primary livelihood from ranching within the Sandhills. The STF tries to follow seven Guiding Principles that are described in this Plan. This has allowed the STF to be viewed in many circles as a credible organization that represents the needs and goals of the ranchers, as well as the agencies and organizations involved. As a result, since its inception, the STF has accomplished numerous projects and provided help to many ranchers.

Following are the Vision, Mission, and Goal for the Sandhills Task Force:

Sandhills Task Force's Vision of the Sandhills:

An intact rolling prairie landscape intermixed with wetlands, meadows, and streams, where diverse native plant and animal life prospers along with robust communities supported by a thriving ranching economy.

Mission of the Sandhills Task Force:

To partner with Sandhill ranchers; local communities, groups, and organizations; and local, state and federal agencies to identify, prioritize, plan, and implement mutually acceptable projects that benefit private ranching, wildlife and vegetative diversity, and associated water supplies.

Goal of the Sandhills Task Force:

To enhance the Sandhill wetland-grassland ecosystem in a way that sustains profitable private ranching, wildlife and vegetative diversity, and associated water supplies.

This Plan describes the human and natural landscape of the Sandhills and identifies six threats to this landscape. To address these threats and seek opportunities to work toward accomplishing our goal, this five-year plan identifies Comprehensive Strategies, and Landscape Objectives and Strategies. Four Comprehensive Strategies are identified that are necessary for the STF to accomplish the Landscape Objectives. The Comprehensive Strategies are: Legislation, Education and Outreach, Technical Assistance, and Research. Two major Landscape Objectives are identified and include: Shorter Term Private Land Projects, and Longer Term Voluntary Acquisition Projects. The Landscape Objectives are listed below, and the strategies to accomplish these objectives are provided in the Plan.

Landscape Objective 1

Restore/enhance 5,000 acres of wetland/wet meadows in the next five years.

Landscape Objective 2

Restore/enhance 25 miles of streams and associated riparian habitat in the next five years.

Landscape Objective 3

Restore/enhance 40,000 acres of upland habitat in the next 5 years.

Landscape Objective 4

Preserve with conservation easements and fee title acquisition 10,000 acres of wetlands and/or associated upland habitats following the easement guidelines listed in this Plan. In addition, efforts will be made to improve groundwater management and restore and manage destroyed wetland, wet meadow, and stream/riparian habitats located on these preserved sites where technically feasible.

Accomplishing these objectives will only be possible if the STF has adequate staffing and funding. This Plan addresses objectives and strategies to allow the STF to address the challenges and opportunities in the next five years so that we can accomplish our Landscape Objectives and continue to maintain our credibility and to grow as an organization.



ARTWORK BY JENNIFER RICE

Introduction

The Sandhills is a contiguous 19,300 square-mile sand dune formation located in north-central Nebraska and comprises one of the largest contiguous tracts of grassland remaining in the United States (**figure 1**). The area consists of approximately 11 million acres of grassland (Sandhills prairie) and 1 million acres of wetlands. This landscape supports a strong ranching economy and community.

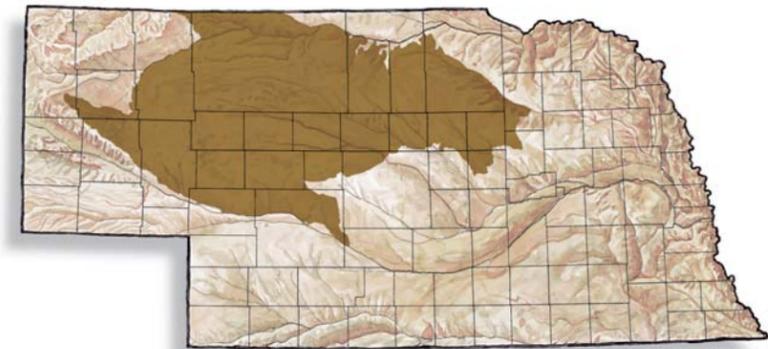


Figure 1

Sandhill ranchers, along with a diverse group of partners including organizations, and local, state, and federal agencies, are interested in the conservation of the Sandhills and share much common ground. All parties:

- *Desire to maintain a grassland/wetland ecosystem and to improve wildlife populations and the habitat that support them.*
- *Recognize the role ranching has played in maintaining the diversity and abundance of the flora and fauna of the Sandhills.*
- *Are concerned about the quantity and quality of the groundwater and the Ogallala Aquifer.*

The challenge of successfully maintaining a strong private ranching economy/ community and maintaining and enhancing the biodiversity of plants and animals depends on a cooperative, joint effort among landowners and, local groups, organizations, and federal and state agencies. This cooperative spirit helped lead to the establishment of the STF in 1993, and continues to be a cornerstone of the organization.

The STF recognizes that the future of the Sandhills relies on the actions of private landowners. The basis of this Strategic Plan for the STF is attaining a better understanding of all aspects of the Sandhills, including: the impact the hydrologic system has on ranching and wildlife; the positive and negative impacts of various types of ranching and grazing operations; the needs of the rancher to sustain a living; and the value of grassland, wetland, and wildlife diversity as a measure of the health of the ecosystem. This Strategic Plan outlines the vision, mission, goal, objectives, and actions that will help guide the STF over the next five years.

Landscape Description

The landscape, habitats, and economics of the Sandhills are connected to the sands and gravels that formed the area over the past 38 million years. Ancient meandering streams deposited hundreds of feet of sand, gravel, and some clay to create the Ogallala formation. Wind-blown sand dunes eventually covered the water-saturated deposits and the dunes became stabilized by vegetation. The formation and topography of the dunes of the Sandhills vary significantly from high, steep hills to small mounds and flats. Within the last 120 years managed grazing has reduced the amount of exposed sand.

The plant-anchored dunes of the Sandhills were once considered an irreclaimable desert. In the 1870s, cattlemen began to discover their potential as rangeland for longhorn cattle. The dunes remain fragile and depend on the grasses and forbs to keep the sands in place. Much of the vegetation, especially in the valleys and meadows, is dependent on the groundwater accumulated under the sands. The groundwater recharge and discharge associated with various dune types and their geographic locations influence the type, size, and quality of wetlands.

The diversity of the wetlands includes extremely alkaline basins, large expanses of sub-irrigated wet meadows, deeper freshwater lakes, unique fens, and spring-fed streams. About 90 percent of the stream flow (2.4 million acre-feet) comes from groundwater discharge (Bentall, 1990). Lands where the water table is about two feet below the surface produce lush stands of native plants. As the distance to the water table increases or decreases, plant community shifts toward more arid or wetland plants, respectively. Wetlands and wet meadows are significant landscape features found throughout the Sandhills. An analysis of National Wetland Inventory digital data indicated that 369,606 acres of wetland were mapped in the Sandhills (LaGrange 2005), and if wet meadows are included, the total wetland area likely exceeds 1 million acres (Rundquist 1983).

A major alteration of Sandhill wetlands occurred mainly in the early 1900's, when many ditches were dug across the wet meadows and marshes in an attempt to increase hay production. The rapid movement of groundwater (up to 500 feet per year, Bleed 1990) creates an underground continuum among the lakes, wetlands and streams. So, an alteration in one area may easily affect vegetation and wetlands over a larger landscape. These drainage activities impacted numerous wet meadows and wetlands throughout the Sandhills. Winter (1988) stated: "Drainage lowers the hydraulic head at the wetland site, initially increasing groundwater gradients, which increases groundwater discharge to the site. However, over a long period of time groundwater levels generally decline with drainage....Because the hydrologic system is a continuum, any modification of the continuum will impact contiguous parts.... One well or one landscape modification generally has only local effects, but multiple modifications or development can have extensive impacts."

The Sandhills were long considered largely unsuitable for the cultivation of crops because of the fragility of the sandy soils. Unsuccessful attempts at farming were made in the region in the late 1870s and again around 1890. The 1904 Kinkaid Act allowed homesteaders to claim 640 acres of land, rather than the 160 acres allowed by the 1862 Homestead Act. "Kinkaiders" claimed nearly nine million acres between 1910 and 1917. Another major period of grassland conversion occurred in the 1970's. Both of these attempts eventually brought financial hardships to some landowners and significant environmental problems to the Sandhills ecosystem.

In the late 1970's, cultivation in the eastern portion was encouraged by tax laws, center-pivot technology, low land values, and high grain prices. The Nebraska Natural Resource Commission (1993) reported that from 1972 to 1981, irrigated land in the Sandhills tripled from 70,550 to 215,000 acres. Crop production dropped as organic material and nutrients leached or eroded away. Loss of investment tax credits and low profit margins caused many of the fields to become idle. By 1990, irrigation had stopped on 50,000 acres; much was placed in the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program.

Restoration back to grassland, however, has been difficult and slow. Lands broken 80 years ago have not fully regained the natural plant diversity or production. Unfortunately, another major conversion of grassland to cropland appears to be happening again in 2012 and 2013. For example, data from the Farm Services Agency, indicated that more than 16,000 acres of noncropland were converted to cropland in Sandhills counties in 2012, with most of the conversions happening along the eastern fringe of the Sandhills.

The brief time, during which converted grasslands were farmed in the past, resulted in significant impacts on the local area. Water tables were lowered in some areas while others experienced flooding. Groundwater contamination by agricultural chemicals began to show up in domestic wells (Nebraska Natural Resource Commission, 1993). Wind erosion became a significant problem as soil erosion rates in cropland exploded to rates 10 times that of grassland, damaging young corn as well as covering neighboring rangeland.

Over the years, ranching has proven to be the best economic and environmental use of the Sandhills. The Sandhills are a productive cattle ranching area where livestock are raised under range conditions. More than 500,000 beef cattle roam this Sandhills prairie on grass-stabilized sand dunes. Some development of cropland agriculture in the modern era has occurred through the use of center pivot irrigation systems. When properly placed, and used correctly, this technology can be part of a well-managed Sandhills Ranch. In the semi-arid climate, managed grazing plays an important role in improving decomposition of organic matter, compacting the soft soils, and stimulating plant growth and reproduction.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

The Calamus River is one of many Nebraska streams and rivers that originate in the Sandhills. These streams and rivers are important for fish and wildlife habitat, ranching, recreation, and as a source of water for other parts of Nebraska.

Plants and Wildlife of the Sandhills

The Sandhills provide habitat for more than 700 native plant species. Plant communities range from isolated woodlands to extensive Sandhill prairies and wetlands. Plants associated with arid conditions inhabit the top dunes while lush stands of wetland plants are found in the valleys a few hundred yards away. The plant community present on any particular site is dependent on many factors, including soil type, depth to water table, and the type of ranching/grazing system implemented. Some ranching/grazing systems can cause a decline or increase in the quality and quantity of the native vegetative community present on the site. Ranching/grazing systems that use grazing and annual haying of the same sites can cause plant diversity to decline and allow introduced and/or invasive plants to increase. The types of ranching/grazing operations – cow-calf versus yearling, fall calving versus spring calving, season-long grazing versus short-duration grazing – are influenced by the size of the ranch, the ratio of dunes to meadows, and the history, philosophy, and capability of individual ranchers.

The Sandhills provide habitat for more than 300 species of birds, 55 species of mammals, 75 species of fish, and 27 species of reptiles and amphibians. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan lists the Sandhills



Blowout penstemon is a plant unique to the Sandhills.

as a habitat area of major concern in North America (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Canadian Wildlife Service, and Mexican Environment and Natural Resources 2012). The Sandhills are the most important waterfowl production area in Nebraska and are considered to be the best duck production area south of the Prairie Pothole Region (Bellrose 1980). The most common species of nesting waterfowl include mallards, blue-winged teal, gadwalls, northern shovelers, northern pintails, redheads, and ruddy ducks (Vrtiska and Oldenburger 2002). The Sandhills are considered to be an important breeding site for many other nesting birds, including sharp-tailed grouse, greater prairie chicken, long-billed curlew, upland sandpiper, vesper sparrow, western meadowlark, American avocet, trumpeter swan, black tern, and ferruginous hawk.

The quality habitat of the Sandhills supports the state and/or federally listed threatened or endangered species mentioned below. The migration corridor of the whooping crane encompasses most of the Sandhills and the American burying beetle can also be found throughout portions of the Sandhills. Some of the Sandhills' rivers and streams support the northern river otter, piping plover, and interior least tern. Sandhills streams and their associated wetlands also provide habitat for the northern redbelly dace, finescale dace, blacknose shiner, and Topeka Shiner. Wet meadows provide habitat for the western prairie fringed orchid and the small white lady's-slipper. Active blowouts provide habitat for blowout penstemon. In addition, the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project State Wildlife Action Plan (Schneider et al. 2011) identifies all or parts of eight Biologically Unique Landscapes (BULs) within the Sandhills. The Legacy Plan lists seven tier 1 at-risk plant species, and 30 tier 1 at-risk animal species within these BULs.

Most of the lakes and wetlands in the Sandhills are too shallow or too alkaline to support game fish populations. However, some freshwater lakes, and their associated wetlands, have adequate water depth to over-winter fish and support an exceptional warm-water fishery. McCarraher (1977) estimated that of the 1,500 lakes in the Sandhills, about half were able to support fish. The most common sport fish species are northern pike, yellow perch, largemouth bass, bluegill, and crappie.

Threats and Stressors

Potential foreseeable threats and stressors to profitable private ranching, wildlife and vegetative diversity, associated water supplies, and the Sandhills wetland/grassland ecosystem include the following. Note that these are not listed in priority order.

- **Changes in Land Use and Landscape Fragmentation:** High crop prices coupled with increasing land values have resulted in the accelerated conversion of native grasslands to row crop agriculture. As cropping technology improves, more marginal soils are vulnerable to row cropping. Land uses that are unsustainable for ranching and/or natural resources pose a threat.



A male greater prairie chicken "dancing" on a lek. The Sandhills sustain one of the largest populations of greater prairie chickens in the world. These birds are important both as a game bird, and to provide viewing opportunities.

- **Disruption of Disturbance Regimes:** Decades of fire suppression has altered the native prairie community and resulted in a widespread invasion of eastern red cedar trees. Some grazing systems have also caused a shift in native plant composition. The interseeding of exotic grasses and legumes into wet meadows and annual haying of these meadows has highly degraded the native plant composition and wildlife habitat values of most wet meadows in the Sandhills. Some rivers and streams have also been altered, changing the timing and frequency of natural flooding.
 - **Energy Development:** Poorly sited large scale energy development, and similar large scale developments can negatively affect large tracts of continuous grasslands.
 - **Invasive Species:** The Sandhills' grassland and wetland areas remain vulnerable to invasive species including leafy spurge, Canada thistle, purple loosestrife, narrow-leaf and hybrid cattail, reed canary grass, common reed, smooth brome, eastern red cedar, and Russian olive. Eastern red cedars have dramatically increased throughout the grasslands in much of the eastern and central Sandhills.
 - **Water Quantity and Quality:** Historic ditching and drainage of wetlands coupled with increased irrigation has negatively impacted groundwater resources. Down-cutting (channel incision) on first and second order streams has resulted in reduced forage production and overall decreased biological diversity. Water quality of many lakes has been negatively affected by a widespread invasion of common carp, and this has an impact on native fish, waterfowl and other wildlife. The large-scale withdrawal of groundwater is also a potential threat to the entire ecosystem and to the ranching economy and community.
 - **Wetland Loss:** While quantifiable data are not available for the Sandhills, estimates of wetland acres drained range from 15 percent (McMurtrey et al. 1972) to 46 percent (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1986). Sandhills wetlands were given a priority 1 ranking (due to very extensive past losses) in the Nebraska Wetlands Priority Plan (Gersib 1991).
- Each of these threats and stressors has the potential to contribute to the decline of the Sandhills ecosystem and the ranching economy and community. Prioritizing and

dealing with these threats and stressors is an important part of the mission of the STF and will be addressed by implementing the strategies outlined in this Plan.

Despite the threats and stressors mentioned above, it is important to note that the overall health of the Sandhills ecosystem is very good. Large expanses of native prairie, interspersed with wetlands and streams, remain intact. The ranchers of the Sandhills have worked tirelessly to be good stewards of this fragile environment and are interested in maintaining the health of this ecosystem.

History of the Sandhills Task Force

Historically, ranchers and the broader conservation community had limited interaction with each other and that often created misunderstandings, and at times mistrust. The interactions that did occur were not always optimal. Occasionally conflicts arose due to what, at times, were differing visions, goals, and approaches on how to best use and manage the land. Each viewed the situation from their unique perspective.

To address these conflicts and the broader needs of the Sandhills, a group of far-sighted leaders began discussions in the early 1990s about a new way to move communication and conservation forward. The initiative to begin these discussions arose out of an excellent working

relationship that had developed between Gene Mack of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Dean Settje of Nebraska Cattlemen. They recognized that other ranchers, agencies, and organizations needed to be brought into the early discussions. These included Marianne Beel (Rancher), Byron Eater (Rancher/Nebraska Cattlemen), Dick Gersib (Nebraska Game and Parks Commission), Richard Lackaff (Rancher), Gene Lehnert (North Central Nebraska RC&D), Dan Manning (Rancher/ Upper Loup Natural Resources District), Matt Miles (Rancher), Loren Paul (Nebraska Association of County Officials), Rob Ravenscroft (Rancher/Nebraska Cattlemen), Milt Suthers (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), and William Tumblin (Protect Our Water Resources). These people served as the first Board members of the STF.

The initial STF meetings provided an opportunity to discuss issues and concerns from a variety of perspectives. Through this process, the group developed a Sandhills Management Plan (Mack 1993) that described an approach aimed at building partnerships among landowners, agencies, organizations, and the public to work toward a common goal. The Sandhills Management Plan addressed education, technical assistance, acquisition, legislation, financial support, and lease agreements. The strategies were not all equal in need or value, but did give a full complement of tools to accomplish specific tasks. The Sandhills Management Plan was signed by the 13 Board members in 1993.

The Board continued to meet, and in 1994 approved a set of by-laws that have, as amended, provided for the operation of the STF from that point forward. In 1999 the Board signed Articles of Incorporation and was formally recognized as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. In 2000, the STF became a Land Trust that allowed it to hold title to property and to hold conservation easements.

A major step forward was taken by the Board when they hired a full-time Projects Coordinator in 2000. The Projects Coordinator position is held by Nebraska Cattleman and is funded by the STF and its partners. Cherry County rancher Jim Van Winkle was hired as the first Projects Coordinator, and served in this roll until 2014.

A primary source of initial funding for the STF was the "Sandhills Resource Conservation Fund". This fund was established through a leadership role taken by The Nature Conservancy and by the cooperation and collaboration among many other partners within the conservation and ranching community. Following completion of the Jumbo/Pullman Valley Fen Restoration Project and subsequent sale of the properties (with all aspects clearly defined in a grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust), the land sale proceeds were deposited in the Sandhills Resource Conservation Fund. The Sandhills Resource Conservation Fund has been used for the benefit of private lands conservation projects throughout the Sandhills. The Board has administered these funds according to the terms of the original agreement and for the benefit of conservation projects located throughout the Sandhills.

Strategic planning has positioned the Board to address and adapt to changes. One major planning effort was initiated in 2003 when a committee was assigned by the Board to engage in an Efrogmson Planning process sponsored by The Nature Conservancy. Committee members included: A.B. Cox, Ted LaGrange, Rob Ravenscroft and Jim Van Winkle. Jayne Jonas and Jim Luchsinger of The Nature Conservancy served as technical support staff and advisors to the committee. The Board approved a series of action items from the planning process in April 2004. Much of the output of that planning process has been incorporated into this Strategic Plan. The following landscape components were identified as being high priorities for the STF as a result of the Efrogmson process: a) Wetlands/Streams, b) Rivers, c) Upland Grasslands, d) Profitable Family Ranches, and e) Towns and Communities. Adequately addressing these components should meet the needs of both the wildlife and the ranching community.

Board Organization

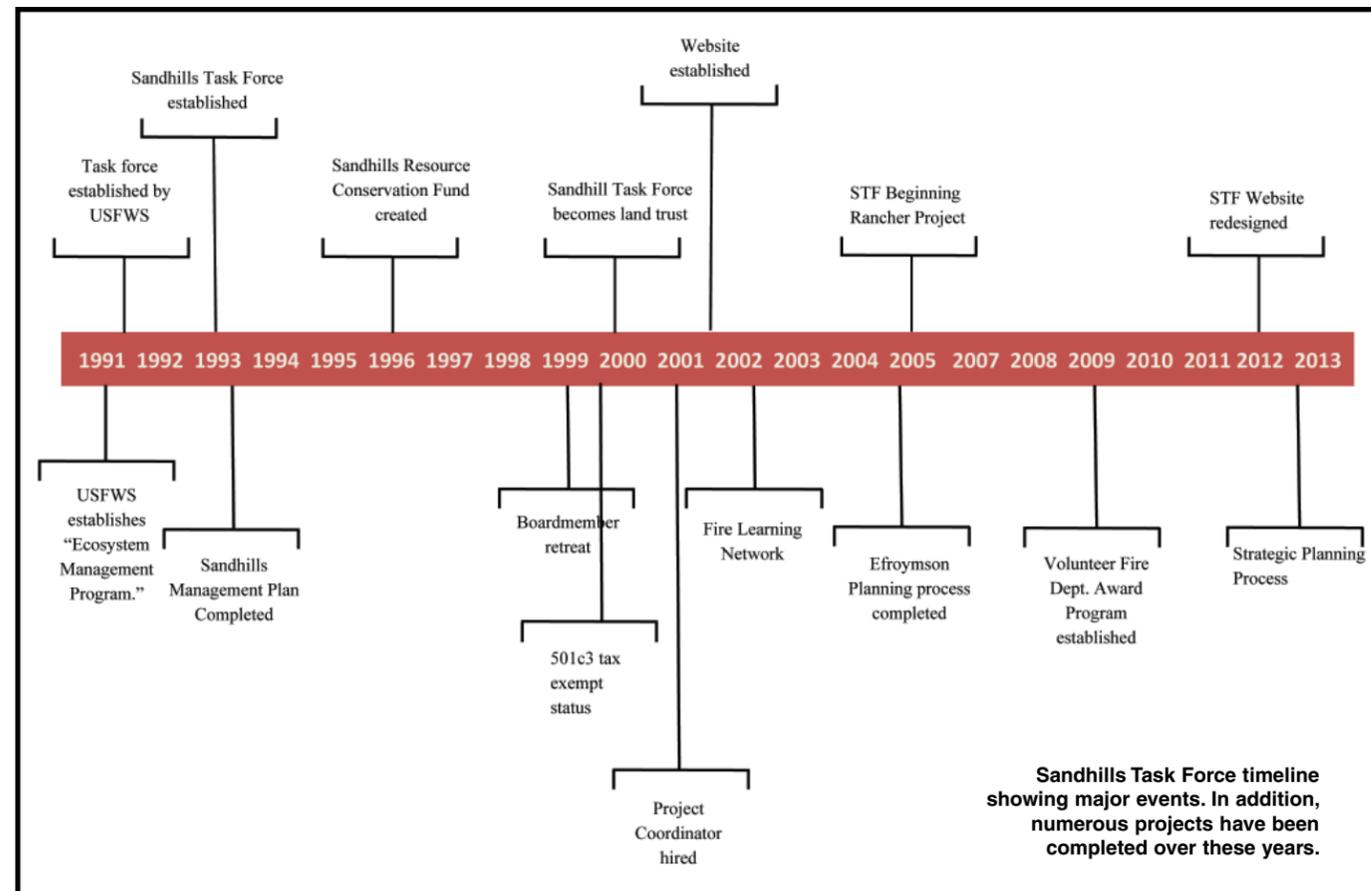
The STF is governed by Articles of Incorporation and a set of by-laws that are updated as needed and approved by a vote of the Board. The Articles of Incorporation and the by-laws are available at http://www.sandhillstaskforce.org/dfs/organization_documents.pdf.

There are 16 Board members (Directors), including a

President, Vice President, and a Secretary/Treasurer. An important feature of the by-laws is that "at least nine Directors shall make their primary livelihood from ranching within the Sandhills, or shall be retired from ranching, in each case hereinafter referred to as Ranchers." And for voting, "a quorum for the purpose of conducting business shall consist of eight Directors, and five must be Ranchers." In addition to the rancher Board members, the following groups and/or organization have representation on the Board: County Commissioner, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Natural Resources Districts, Nebraska Cattlemen, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, The Nature Conservancy, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Past Board Members and Staff

- Marianne Beel** – Valentine, Rancher
- Troy Bredekamp** – Lincoln, Nebraska Cattlemen
- Ron Dobbins** – Tryon, Rancher and NRD Board
- Dean Funk** – Atkinson, Rancher and County Board member
- Dick Gersib** – Lincoln, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
- Gus Hughbanks** – Lincoln, NRCS
- Jana Jensen** – Bingham, Nebraska Cattlemen
- Joel Klammer** – Bassett, RC&D
- Richard Lackaff** – Bassett, Rancher
- Dana Larsen** – North Platte/Brewster, NRCS
- Gene Lehnert** – Bassett, RC&D
- Gene Mack** – Kearney, USFWS
- Dan Manning** – Hyannis, Rancher
- Matt Miles** – Brownlee, Rancher
- Ken Noonan** – Lincoln, NRCS
- Loren Paul** – Lincoln, Nebraska Association of County Officials
- Rob Ravenscroft** – Valentine/Lincoln, Rancher
- Jim Schoenberg** – Bassett, Rancher and County Board member
- Dean Settje** – Lincoln, Nebraska Cattlemen
- Al Steuter** – Ainsworth, The Nature Conservancy
- Kim Stine** – North Platte, NRCS
- Milt Suthers** – Denver, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Bill Tumblin** – Protect Our Waters
- Craig Utter** – Ainsworth, Rancher
- Britt Weiser** – Lincoln, NRCS
- Doug Whisenhunt** – North Platte, The Nature Conservancy
- Jim Van Winkle** – (Projects Coordinator) Wood Lake, Rancher



Guiding Principles

The STF has accomplished much during the past 20 years and must continue to adhere to the following guiding principles:

- **Credibility and Transparency** – The STF strives to say what it plans to do and do what it says it will.
- **Partnerships** – The collaborative working relationships and trust that have developed among ranchers, agencies, and organizations has been instrumental to the success of the STF.
- **Resource Focused** – Projects have stayed focused on the needs of the resource (grasslands, wetlands, streams and rivers).
- **Patience and Project Flexibility** – This is critical to address complex issues on private lands.
- **Tenacity** – The STF has been a tireless advocate for Sandhills ranchers and the Sandhill's wetland-grassland ecosystem.
- **Ethics, Honesty, and Respect** – These are essential to the long-term success of any organization.
- **Leadership** – This has provided for long-term success and has made the STF into a sound conservation model that other organizations have strived to emulate. The Board has affirmed that it wants the organization to remain focused on its historic mission

and goal while becoming more strategic and proactive in the identification and prioritization of projects.

A major strategy of the STF has been to focus on delivering conservation projects that benefit both ranchers and the Sandhills grassland-wetland ecosystem. This has been done by maintaining flexibility and being able to fill gaps that other agencies and organizations are not able to. All projects are conducted with willing participants on a voluntary basis. If a project has impacts beyond the boundary of the landowner, then neighbors are made aware of the project and brought into the planning. This requires patience, and an open and balanced approach. The use of Geographic Information System (GIS) data and other decision support tools should allow the STF to become more proactive and strategic in developing future projects, while continuing to adhere to the guiding principles outlined in this Plan.

Most STF projects are 10 years in duration and require a commitment of landowner funds in addition to funding derived from our partners. Projects that are more beneficial to a ranch operation's bottom line generally require more rancher-contributed funding (as a percentage) than projects that are less beneficial to a ranch operation's bottom line.

A unique project approval process has been adopted by our Board. All 10-year agreements developed by staff are signed by the landowner and then reviewed and approved by: the nearest STF rancher Board member; and then the



ARTWORK BY JENNIFER RICE

STF Projects Funding Sources

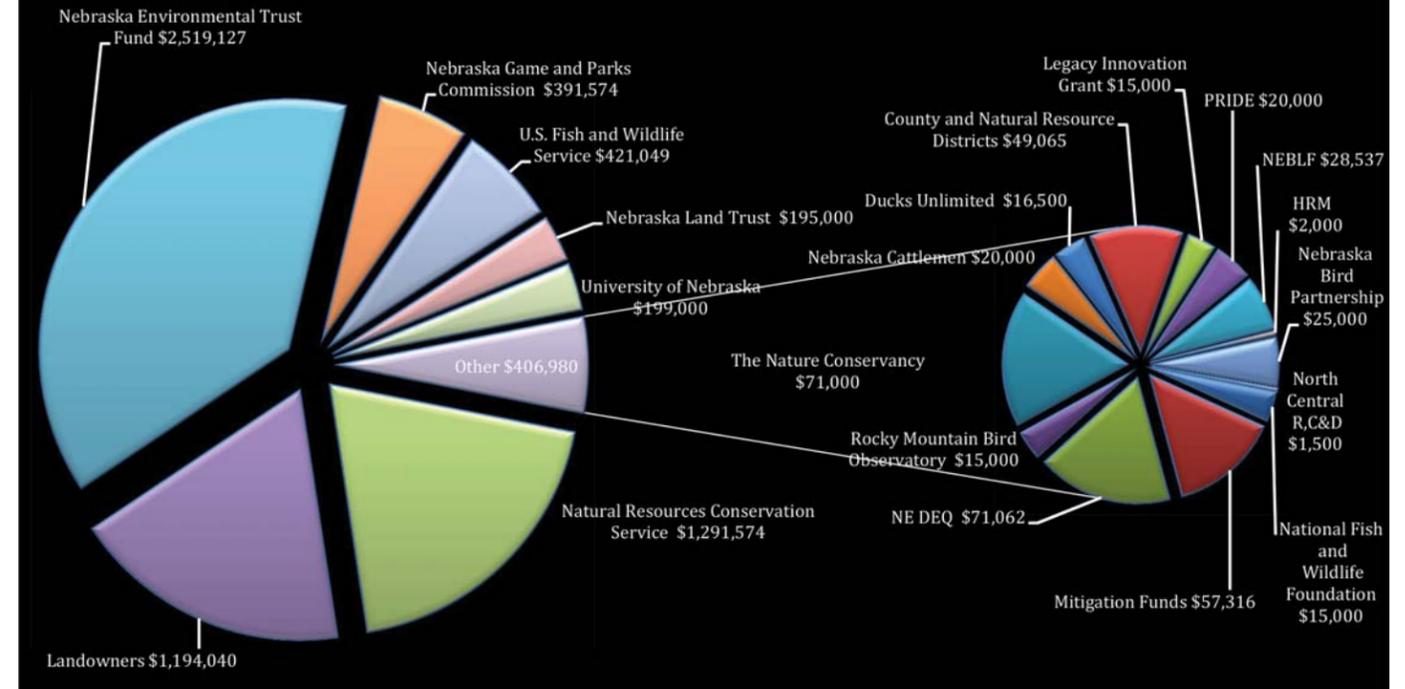


Figure 2. This chart represents the approximate distribution of funding sources through 2012. This distribution will likely change in the future.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service Board members. If all of these Board members approve of spending STF funds on the project, the agreement is then sent to the STF President for signature. If a member does not approve, the project is sent to the entire Board to be discussed further. This approval process keeps Board members aware of ongoing projects and keeps them focused on the priorities established by the STF Board.

Accomplishments

Since its inception, the STF has remained focused on its original purpose of working with private landowners to assure strong land stewardship and environmental diversity. This has resulted in six to 12 completed projects each year. Funding for the projects has come from the Sandhills Resource Conservation Fund, grants, and contributions from other funding partners (figure 2). All accomplishments presented are for a period that ends in December 2012.

Projects that control stream down-cutting address complex issues that often impact neighbors and the overall water quality of a stream and its watershed. These complexities have led the STF to focus on the upper

reaches of many Sandhill streams and watersheds, while providing long term benefits for both the landowner and the resource.

Working with landowners to develop grazing plans that promote vigor and diversity in plant communities and help landowners enhance their sustainability has been a way for the STF to make a difference. Projects are often focused on priority areas that can be enhanced by specific grazing rotations. Certain grazing systems maximize nesting opportunities or provide high quality winter cover for some bird species. These same grazing systems can provide early grass for livestock the following year.

The STF currently holds six conservation easements totaling 30,849 acres. The Board's standards for consideration of action have resulted in high quality projects and recognition from partners. It is the sincere desire of the STF to provide leadership within the ranching and conservation community by determining when an easement is the appropriate tool for a landowner's particular goal.

The STF has worked with landowners to develop innovative methods to control and remove invasive species. Mechanical cedar and Russian olive control projects have involved multiple dimensions, and often multiple landowners, who strive for sustainability

Vision, Mission, and Goal

Sandhills Task Force's Vision of the Sandhills

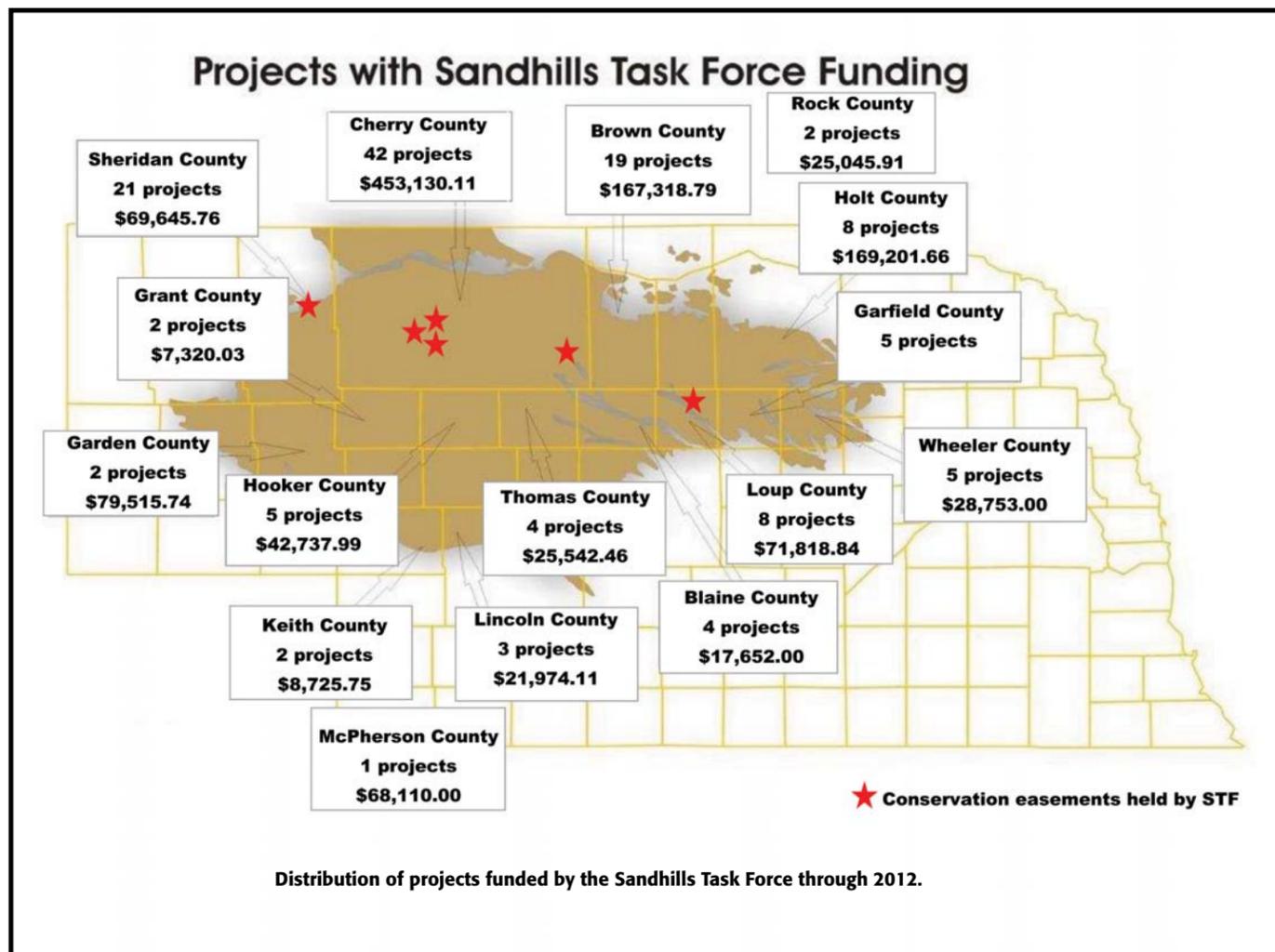
An intact rolling prairie landscape intermixed with wetlands, meadows, and streams, where diverse native plant and animal life prospers along with robust communities supported by a thriving ranching economy.

Mission of the Sandhills Task Force

To partner with Sandhill ranchers; local communities, groups, and organizations; and local, state and federal agencies to identify, prioritize, plan, and implement mutually acceptable projects that benefit private ranching, wildlife and vegetative diversity, and associated water supplies.

Goal of the Sandhills Task Force

To enhance the Sandhill wetland-grassland ecosystem in a way that sustains profitable private ranching, wildlife and vegetative diversity, and associated water supplies.



and to limit re-infestation using timely grazing, and follow-up treatments. A program to support volunteer fire departments aids landowners who want to use prescribed fire to help control invasive woody species encroachment and maintain the native grassland. A recent multi-landowner private/public partnership has resulted in the renovation of a Sandhills lake that had become unproductive for waterfowl due to invasion by non-native carp.

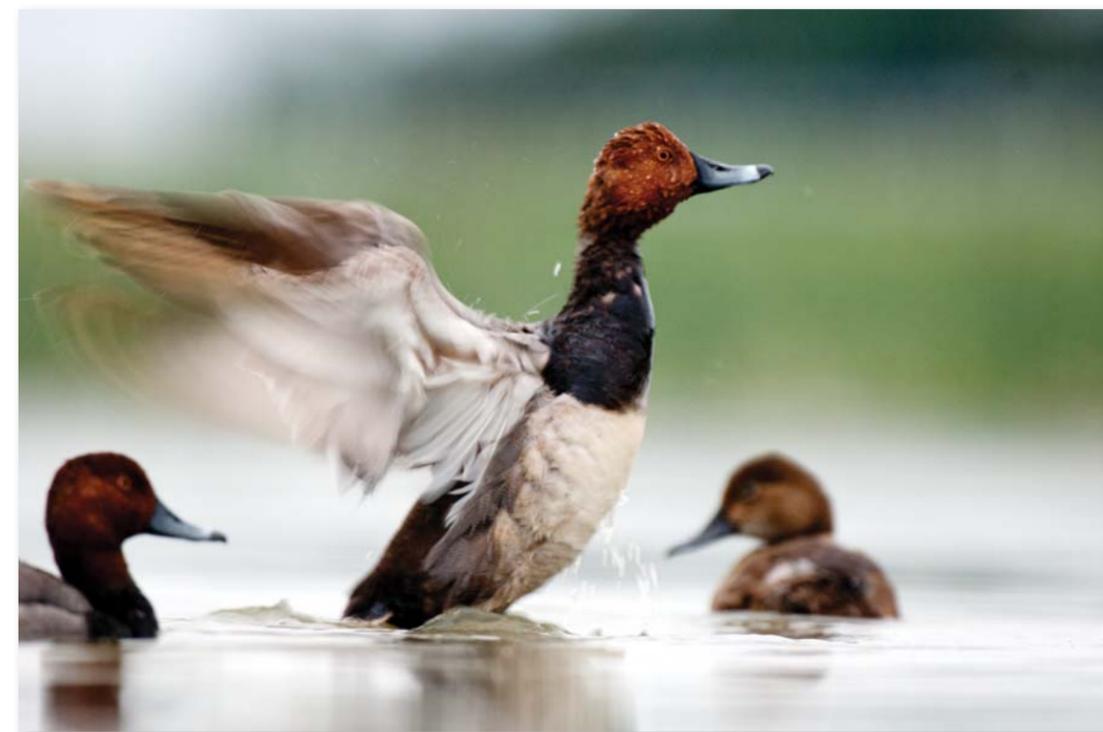
The STF Board dedicates a portion of its budget to educating landowners on the opportunities available to them and supporting research that results in better projects. In addition to supporting beginning rancher and education activities, efforts are always underway to showcase the complimentary relationship between Sandhills ranching and the abundant natural resources of the area.

Perhaps the most important accomplishment of the STF, and one that is hardest to measure, is that the STF is viewed in many circles as a credible organization that represents the needs and goals of the ranchers as well as the agencies and organizations involved. The intangible outcomes from this recognition include: being emulated by other organizations, acting as a "sounding board"

for groups wanting to do work in the Sandhills, helping ranchers to recognize and appreciate the good stewardship of their neighbors, and instilling an appreciation of the Sandhills in a broader audience.

Examples of other conservation planning efforts that have drawn upon the credibility and success of the STF include Nebraska's State Wildlife Action Plan (Legacy Plan), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, Mountain-Prairie Region Strategic Plan 2012-2016, and the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture's Implementation Plan.

As we move forward, we need to learn from the past and position our organization to be able to address future needs and opportunities. The STF recognizes the need to look to the future, think strategically about our capacity, and find new ways to positively maintain and improve the landscape. This Plan will provide specific, measurable objectives and strategies to help guide the STF. To expand upon our past success, the Board will need to frequently revisit this Plan and use it to guide our annual operations and decision making process. Adhering to our guiding principles and implementing this Plan will allow the STF to move forward into the future and help us achieve our mission and accomplish our vision.



Redheads are one of the many waterfowl species that use lakes and wetlands in the Sandhills, the most important waterfowl production area in Nebraska.

Comprehensive Strategies

The following Comprehensive Strategies are broader in scope and necessary for the STF to accomplish the Landscape Objectives identified in this Plan.

Legislation Strategies

Justification

The Articles of Incorporation allow for the STF to “review and comment on proposals of importance in an effort to coordinate local, regional, state, and federal programs.” Although the strength of the STF is in its grassroots/partnership approach, legislation cannot be denied as a possible comprehensive strategy. For example, as the demand for water in agricultural and populated areas increases, it may take legislation to control the impact of water transfers on the Sandhills. No other strategy would have the ability to so fully ensure the integrity of the Ogallala Aquifer and the Sandhills grassland-wetland ecosystem.

Application

Legislation as a strategy has some strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths include:

- Encompassing a broad geographic region or natural resource.
- Legislation as being good for the general public.
- Cost per benefit can be quite low.

Its weaknesses include:

- Broad regulations may not be the best solution for a specific area's situations.
- Forced regulations may undermine property rights and create “individual versus government” conflicts.
- Restricting management alternatives.

Beneficial legislation that could be supported by the STF would:

- Not undermine private property rights
- Consider the impact to ranchers and the local people
- Support the vision, mission and goal of the STF
- Be flexible enough to fit unique situations

Beneficial legislation to consider could include:

- State and/or federal legislation that controlled groundwater mining and transfer.
- State and/or federal legislative appropriations providing support and funding for the STF.



Jim Van Winkle, STF Projects Coordinator works with an AmeriCorps crew. The crew learned about the history and ecology of the Sandhills while helping to establish native plants along the Niobrara River.

Education and Outreach Strategies

Justification

Education and outreach have always been an essential component in achieving the mission of the STF. STF education and outreach activities will help foster an understanding and appreciation of the ecology of the Sandhills and the ranching culture. Through education and outreach, residents and nonresidents will be more aware of the Sandhills' importance to Nebraska. The STF must carefully increase its education and outreach efforts in a manner that recognizes the privacy needs of landowners. The audience for these education and outreach efforts includes: neighbors to projects we implement, ranchers, small communities, and the public throughout the state and nation who benefit from the numerous services provided by the Sandhills, especially a supply of abundant and clean water. The STF will hopefully be recognized throughout the Sandhills as a source of information, assistance, and guidance.

Benefits of an education and outreach program include:

- A holistic understanding of the grassland-wetland ecosystem.
- Improvement of relationships among ranchers and conservation agencies and organizations.
- Long-term, positive changes in land and water management.
- An improved understanding by the general public about the value of the Sandhills.

Application

Education and Outreach strategies would:

- Provide information (both one-on-one and group meetings) about the interrelationships among grasslands, wetlands, livestock, and wildlife in maintaining a healthy ecosystem.
- Provide up-to-date information on programs, regulations, and technology that would affect ranching and wildlife management.
- Distribute information about the STF plan, annual operations, accomplishments, etc. to the ranching community and public as a whole in order to build and maintain support.
- Promote seminars, workshops, and training courses which improve management of natural resources.
- Organize programs which give schools and the public an interaction with ranching and wildlife. Programs would include tours, demonstrations, and field days.
- Encourage and develop educational films, literature, and public service announcements about various aspects of the Sandhill ecosystem.
- Build and promote small community management/support groups.

- Identify and encourage outside support which adheres to the guiding principles, mission, and goal of the STF.
- Assist landowners and the public in understanding the benefits that wetlands provide to ranching, wildlife, and the public.
- Support efforts to develop and implement a school outreach program to help educators include the Sandhills in their lessons. This includes, but is not limited to curriculum and materials development.
- Develop and implement a program to publicly showcase and reward practices that “sustain profitable private ranching, wildlife and vegetative diversity and associated water supplies.”
- Recognize the good stewardship of ranchers by supporting the Leopold Award and other recognition programs.

Technical Assistance Strategies

Justification

Providing technical assistance to landowners is a cost-effective way to improve ranching and wildlife habitat. The Sandhills is approximately 95 percent privately owned, and large tracts of sparsely populated land are being managed by individual ranchers.

Benefits of technical assistance include:

- Partnership approach to management options.
- Management designed for specific problems.
- Affecting management of large tracts of land by individual families.
- Long-term, positive changes in land and water management.

Application

Technical assistance will focus on specific voluntary range and groundwater management projects. Activities would:

- Identify limiting factors or stressors to wildlife, such as lack of permanent water, overgrazing, poor survival, and lowered water table. Identify management options that would benefit wildlife and ranching operations.
- Help develop grazing systems. This would include training, follow-up support, information on costs, financial assistance, contacts of individuals and organizations who can provide additional information, and benefits expected from the project.
- Help develop water management plans that allow sustainable ranching and improve groundwater levels and wildlife.
- Provide information about how to control invasive species.

Landscape Objectives and Strategies

- Provide guidance on what appropriate steps (legal and planning) must be taken to complete a project.
- Provide guidance on the cost/benefit associated with projects, such as planned grazing, management for warm-season versus cool-season plants, fall calving versus spring calving, and recreational enterprises.
- Develop and provide a resource directory of agencies and expertise to contact about various questions and concerns.
- Help landowners with financially or technically difficult projects by providing the needed funds and expertise.
- Build a team/partnership attitude in all parties to promote good grassland/wetland management.
- Develop a plan to identify species of concern, educational needs, and management recommendations for invasive species control.

Research Strategies

The factors and interactions that influence the health of the Sandhills' grassland, wetland, and water resources are complex, and we still lack adequate knowledge on many of these. The human interactions are also complicated, and better information is needed on various aspects of human dimensions.

The STF and its diverse group of partners have supported: numerous research projects, development of habitat/species models, and development of decision-support tools used to better understand the use of different habitats by priority wildlife species.

This information is being used to aid in the prioritization of habitat restoration projects throughout the Sandhills. Below are examples of a few of the research projects that the STF was involved in:

- Trumpeter Swan Study and Landscape-Level Habitat Use Model for the Sandhills.
- Prairie Grouse Studies and Habitat Use Models.
- American Burying Beetle Studies and Habitat Use Model – Sandhills.
- Long Billed Curlew Study/Habitat Suitability Model.
- Cooperative Whooping Crane Tracking Project GIS.
- Sandhills Wetland Complex Model.
- Wet Meadow/Grassland GIS Land Coverage Databases.
- Eastern Red Cedar GIS Land Coverage Database.
- Nebraska Bird Partnership HABS Model/Databases.
- Sandhills Mallard Study.
- Enders Lake Hydrology Study.
- Fen Restoration Study.
- Bird response to various grazing systems

There is a need to summarize past research projects and to identify and work toward prioritizing and obtaining research studies that would help guide future management. These could include, but not be limited to, groundwater movement, contamination, wildlife diversity and production success, economics of various management practices, and inventory of plant and animal populations and distributions.



The STF works with landowners on a variety of conservation projects, and also helps with research projects to better understand the ecology of the Sandhills, including the effects of various grazing systems.

Much of the Sandhills is relatively intact and under good land stewardship. For that reason, the bulk of STF projects have occurred on a relatively small scale, focusing on single landowner and low risk projects. This method has worked well and continues to be the basic philosophy of the STF. It appears future conservation opportunities will be more complex and require a more proactive approach to address threats such as changes in landuse and landscape fragmentation, energy development and invasive species. It is likely that future projects will require broader partnerships, diversified funding, geo-spatial technology, working with a greater diversity of landowners, and an overall longer time frame to develop and implement.

Emphasis on landscape-level projects

The STF is uniquely positioned as an organization to provide a leadership role to find innovative solutions to complex ecological concerns. Traditionally, restoration or enhancement projects were completed when an individual landowner approached a government agency or an organization such as the STF. Because project designs were often limited by ownership, the ability to address the true source was not always feasible. Comprehensive solutions require building consensus among adjoining landowners, community leaders, and governments. As a landowner driven organization, the STF has credibility among landowners who might be reluctant to build a partnership with a government agency. In addition, the STF Board members and Projects Coordinator are well connected to key local constituents necessary to achieve long term success. Using this model, the STF will be able to proactively address existing resource threats and stressors by striving to accomplish the following landscape objectives over the next five years.

The landscape objectives are five-year targets for high-priority habitats located throughout the Sandhills. For each landscape objective, sub-strategies are identified to assist in meeting the objective. The two overarching landscape-level strategies include the use of shorter term private landowner agreements, such as private landowner agreements and wildlife extension agreements, and longer term voluntary acquisitions, such as conservation easements and fee title acquisition.

Shorter Term Private Land Projects

Private land projects often are done under an agreement through one of the STF partners, often for a term of 10 years. However, the STF has the flexibility to offer agreements of different lengths, including shorter-term agreements. The STF also could enter into lease agreements when appropriate. Landowner agreements allow much flexibility in developing individual habitat projects and make it possible to conduct projects on private lands that benefit both wildlife and the landowner.

Landscape Objectives:

1. Restore/enhance 5,000 acres of wetland/wet meadows in the next five years.
2. Restore/enhance 25 miles of streams and associated riparian habitat in the next five years.
3. Restore/enhance 40,000 acres of upland habitat in the next five years.

Wetlands and Wet Meadows

Sandhills wetlands and wet (subirrigated) meadows are the heart of the economy and ecology of the region. They also help to maintain the purity of the water that flows from the Sandhills to benefit all Nebraskans. To uphold and preserve the integrity of this resource, we will work with partners to improve or restore the hydrology of the Sandhills' wetlands and wet meadows.

Significant hydrology modifications occurred early (1900s) in the settlement of region. Headwater wetlands and seasonal streams were often drained, ditched and planted to non-native species in order to facilitate additional haying acres. Over a period of time, many streams have become entrenched and disconnected from the historic floodplain.

Restoration of wetlands and seasonal streams typically involves a multi-disciplinary team, along with significant management considerations from the landowner. The process and complexity of stream and wetland restoration has evolved greatly in the last 20 years.

In the future, the STF will continue to work with several partners to improve or restore the hydrology of the Sandhills' wetlands and wet meadows. It also is important to work to improve the native plant species composition of these meadows.

Landscape Objective 1: Restore/enhance 5,000 acres of wetland and wet meadow habitat for the benefit of wildlife and ranching.

Strategy 1a: Work with an average of six operators a year on wetlands and wet meadow hydrology projects that benefit wildlife and ranch profitability.

Strategy 1b: Use existing habitat/species models and decision support tools to identify and prioritize wetland and wet meadow habitat projects throughout the Sandhills where the greatest potential exists for restoration.

Action 1b1: Refine the site selection process to optimize wetland, native plant composition, wildlife, and forage benefit per dollar expended. STF Board set priorities for project emphasis including:

- Education and outreach value.
- Scope of rancher's overall ranch plan and how projects fit in it.
- Leverage of money, labor and other resources

in achieving wildlife and profit objectives.

- Needs of the larger landscape

Strategy 1c: Identify and prioritize wetland/lakes that have been infested with common carp and determine the feasibility to restore sites.

Strategy 1d: Provide better opportunities for landowners to use prescribed management, such as fire, chemical and grazing, to control, manage, and/or eradicate invasive species.

Streams and Riparian Areas

Significant hydrology modifications occurred early (1900's) in the settlement of region. Headwater wetlands and seasonal streams often were drained, ditched and planted to non-native species to facilitate additional haying acres. Over a period of time, many streams have become entrenched (down-cut) and disconnected from the historic floodplain.

Restoration of seasonal streams typically involves a multi-disciplinary team along with significant management considerations from the landowner. The process and complexity of stream and wetland restoration has evolved greatly in the last 20 years.

In the future, the STF will continue to work with several partners to improve or restore the hydrology of the Sandhills' streams and riparian areas.

Landscape Objective 2: Restore/enhance 25 miles of streams and associated riparian areas.

Strategy 2a: Work with an average of six operators a year on stream/riparian restoration projects that benefit native fish and wildlife and ranch profitability.

Strategy 2b: Use existing habitat/species models and decision support tools to identify and prioritize

watersheds where the greatest potential exists for watershed /water quality restoration.

Strategy 2c: Develop and use cost-effective structures that allow the movement of fish.

Action 2c1: Identify and work with partners and other resources to assist in development, manufacture and installation of cost effective fish friendly structures.

Strategy 2d: Work with county road departments to install appropriately designed control structures on road crossings.

Action 2d1: Provide structures at reduced or no cost to the counties.

Action 2d2: Inform County Commissioners of the program and the advantages.

Strategy 2e: Provide better opportunities for landowners to use prescribed management, such as fire, chemical and grazing, to control, manage, and/or eradicate invasive species along streams and riparian corridors. These species could include Russian olive and eastern red cedar trees.

Upland Grasslands

Botanists and ecologists recognize the Sandhills' grasslands to be uniquely different from the tall, mixed, and shortgrass prairie that surrounds it and consider it to be Sandhills Prairie. The Sandhills supports one of the largest intact grassland systems remaining in North America and supports a diversity of native plant species, insects and wildlife and is a gem among prairies and well worthy of conservation.

Located geographically in the middle of the Central Flyway for migratory birds, the Sandhills provide resting, feeding, and nesting areas for waterfowl, shorebirds, Neotropical migrants, and other grassland species. As much of the nation's tall and mixed-grass prairie continues



PHOTO BY KYLE GRAHAM, USFWS

Working with private landowners to restore and enhance upland (grassland) is an important objective of the STF.

to be converted to cropland, the Sandhills remains more vital than any time before.

Before settlement, the Sandhills region was grazed by large, traveling herds of bison and elk. Current grazing practices are influenced by economics and tradition. The STF has historically financially supported landowners who are willing to develop a planned grazing system that involves a moderate graze, followed by long periods of rest. This fundamental shift in management typically requires infrastructure, such as fencing or pipeline, resulting in significant costs. Government programs, such as the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Programs (EQIP), provide cost share to offset the capital improvement costs.

The STF has worked closely with the NRCS and its diverse group of partners on a wide range of grazing projects that result in considerable gain in wildlife habitat, and hopefully will be able to continue to do so into the future.

Landscape Objective 3: Restore/enhance 40,000 acres of uplands.

Strategy 3a: Work with an average of six operators a year to develop and implement upland projects that benefit Sandhills prairie, wildlife and ranch profitability.

Strategy 3b: Use existing habitat/species models and decision support tools to identify and prioritize upland habitat projects throughout the Sandhills, where the greatest potential exists for enhancement and/or restoration.

Action 3b1: Refine the site selection process to optimize native plant, wildlife, and forage benefit per dollar expended. STF Board set priorities for project emphasis including:

- Education and outreach value.
- Scope of rancher's overall ranch plan and how projects fit in it.
- Leverage of money, labor and other resources in achieving wildlife and profit objectives.
- Needs of the larger landscape.

Strategy 3c: Provide better opportunities for landowners to use prescribed management, such as fire, chemical, grazing or mechanical to control, manage, and/or eradicate invasive species, such as eastern red cedars or Russian olive.

Strategy 3d: Develop, design and implement grazing management plans to enhance the wetland-grassland ecosystem in a way that supports profitable private ranching and floral and faunal diversity.

Action 3d1: Work with or through existing government programs to provide cost share for a wide range of grazing projects that result in considerable gain in wildlife habitat.

Action 3d2: Have more interaction with USDA Farm Bill Programs and better use NRCS funds for grassland projects.

Action 3d3: Participate in local committees and work with NRCS to modify programs to provide longer duration of benefits that supports profitable private ranching and floral and faunal diversity of Sandhills grasslands.



PHOTO BY KYLE GRAHAM, USFWS

One of the landscape objectives of the STF is to restore and enhance wetlands, such as is being done by this project.

Longer Term Voluntary Acquisition Projects

Two types of longer term voluntary acquisition could be used to preserve, enhance, and restore wetland and grassland habitats in the Sandhills:

- Conservation easement
- Fee title

The role of an acquisition program is to purchase the minimum amount of interest in lands necessary to preserve a specific resource need.

Using the above information a realistic five-year objective would include the following Longer Term Landscape Objectives:

Landscape Objective 4: Preserve with conservation

easements and fee title acquisition 10,000 acres of wetlands and/or associated upland habitats following the easement guidelines listed below. In addition efforts will be made to improve groundwater management and restore and manage destroyed wetland, wet meadow, and stream/riparian habitats located on these preserved sites where technically feasible.

Strategy 4a: Conservation easements would monetarily compensate the landowner for specific rights purchased, such as the right to drain or fill wetlands and convert grassland to cropland. All other rights, such as grazing, haying, hunting and control of trespassing, would be retained by the landowner. The easement would not impact, but rather ensure existing ranching operations.

Under certain circumstances, a conservation easement may be an effective tool to help the STF reach its goal — “to enhance the sandhill wetland-grassland ecosystem in a way that sustains profitable private ranching, wildlife and vegetative diversity, and associated water supplies.”

Acquiring conservation easements is not a prominent activity or purpose of the STF. Its use will be limited and in accordance with the guidelines that were approved by the Board. The guidelines are not absolutes, but reflect the principles under which this organization operates.

Conservation easements will focus on keeping areas from land use changes which significantly affect open space, private ranching, and wildlife at a landscape level. Priority areas would include prominent lakes and streams; areas containing high densities of wetlands or wet meadows; and small parcels that could encourage subdivision, but are large enough to support a small ranch.

Easement Acquisition Guidelines:

- Easements will be voluntary. No easements will be taken or accepted from an unwilling seller.
- Easements will reflect the wishes of the landowner and immediate family. Those that appear to place

family members at odds will be avoided.

- Easements will not be taken when associated with circumventing legal and political matters.
- Easements will reflect the goal and management strategy of the STF. That is, easements will protect the natural resources of the Sandhills in a manner that is compatible with ranching and rural communities. They would include: grassland (open space), wetland and riparian areas.
- An easement maintenance fund will be established for easements and is expected to be approximately 10 percent of easement value.
- An easement documentation report will be done on each easement.
- No farming or cultivation will be allowed, unless it already exists.
- No replacement of native grassland and wetland plants.
- Grazing or haying allowed. Some easements may be restrictive on amount, intensity, or time of grazing or haying.
- Existing conditions, including ranch buildings, road, and trails are allowed to remain. Additional new home sites would be decided on a case by case basis.
- Access to property will be controlled by landowner.
- No drainage or lowering of existing or natural water-holding capacity of wetlands. Partially drained wetlands may be allowed to remain partially drained. For example, a ditch through a wet meadow may lower the water level enough to allow haying of a portion. That ditch would be allowed to remain. No additional ditching or improvement would be allowed.
- No artificial filling of wetlands.
- No straightening, narrowing, widening, or deepening of stream or ditch channel.
- No impoundments will be constructed, unless it is for the protection, such as erosion control, of the stream and riparian habitat.

Strategy 4b: Fee title acquisition would be a limited part of the STF program. Its use would be a last alternative to ensure that unique ecosystems will remain. Any land owned by the STF would require ongoing management responsibilities and costs. Management considerations can usually be accomplished without purchasing interest in the land, such as developing some type of cooperative agreement with the owner.

The focus of any fee-title acquisitions would be on unique areas containing rare flora and fauna, high concentrations of migratory birds, or lands necessary to protect neighboring areas. Examples of areas that may be considered for acquisition would be fens containing a diversity of fen-specific plants and invertebrates, large lake/wetland complexes which sustain traditionally large numbers of migratory waterbirds, and isolated areas containing endangered or threatened species that cannot be adequately protected by any other manner.



Staffing Objectives and Strategies

Currently the STF depends heavily on the STF Projects Coordinator, who was hired in 2000, along with voluntary assistance from STF Board members and support staff provide by the partners.

Strategy 1: The STF needs to have staff in place to accomplish our landscape objectives, and implement the comprehensive strategies. This will be accomplished

by maintaining existing staff, and securing adequate funding. Evaluate the need for additional staff as resources and opportunities warrant.

- Action a: The STF Board need to put together an annual plan of operations and conduct a performance review of their staff positions each year.



PHOTO BY TED LA GRANGE

A lake, wetland, and associated grassland in the Sandhills. Conserving such treasures are a major focus of this Plan and will require adequate staffing and funding in the future.

Funding Objectives and Strategies

Funding is a vital part of sustaining the STF. The future success of the organization will depend on partnerships, cost-share programs, grants, and very likely fundraising.

The intent of a financial support strategy is to build a coalition of people and agencies who support the STF and its mission and goal. It will help match conservation needs with available people and financial resources.

Support would be in the form of money, human capital and land resources. It could include single landowner habitat projects, organization of educational programs, two or three ranchers partnering to protect an upper portion of a watershed, or multiagency/landowners joining money and resources together to restore local water table or stream habitat.

In order to achieve our mission and goal, we must have the capacity to be effective, now and in the future.

Essential to this is adequate funding for staff and other core operating needs. We will secure sufficient funding to ensure the long-term continuity of STF program delivery.

Strategy 1: Develop and implement a plan for funding STF core programs and operations.

- Action a: Annually establish an overall budget, with emphasis on flexibility allowing response to opportunities.
- Action b: Obtain dedicated funding from partners (NRCS, NGPC, USFWS, etc.) for core operations.
- Action c: Seek grants to fund the remaining balance of the overall budget.
- Action d: Consider establishing membership dues for the STF.
- Action e: Explore the establishment of a foundation to assist with fundraising.
- Action f: Establish an endowment to provide long-term project and operational funding.



ARTWORK BY MARY EATINGER

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The long-billed curlew is one of the iconic bird species that nest in the Sandhills.



PHOTO BY BOB GRIER

The goal of the Sandhills Task Force is to enhance the Sandhill wetland grassland ecosystem in a way that sustains profitable private ranching, wildlife and vegetative diversity, and associated water supplies.



PHOTO BY KEN BOLIC

The Sandhills of Nebraska provide important habitat for a wide variety of wildlife, including this ornate box turtle.

The Sandhills Task Force Strategic Plan is also available online at <http://www.SandhillsTaskForce.org>
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