

Annual Report 2009

Sandhills Task Force



Where the land

and people are one.



2009 Board Members

Byron Eatinger
Rancher, Thedford

Richard Lackaff
Rancher, Bassett

Ted LaGrange
NGPC, Lincoln

Mike Kelly
Rancher, Sutherland

Ben Baily
Rancher, Lakeside

Jack Anderson
County Commissioner, Lakeside

Barb Cooksley
Rancher, Anselmo

Eric Hanson
Rancher/NRD, North Platte

Melody Benjamin
Rancher/NE Cattleman, Lakeside

A.B. Cox
Rancher, Mullen

Gene Mack
USFWS, Kearney

Mick Knott
Rancher, Hyannis

Jim Luchsinger
TNC, Valentine

Rob Ravenscroft
Member at Large, Lincoln

Joel Klammer
North Central R,C & D

Our Mission

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

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



Byron Eatinger is the current president and one of the original board members of the Sandhills Task Force.

In the early 1990's, ranchers felt very threatened by what was perceived to be an attack on private property rights. At that time, several environmental organizations believed that wildlife would benefit if the "rancher" was removed from the land. We felt like we had something to prove, we believed that ranchers were not doing that bad of a job managing the Sandhills. We knew that ranchers enjoy wildlife and are interested in having more wildlife. As our group became more organized we realized that we needed "action," in the form of working with ranch-

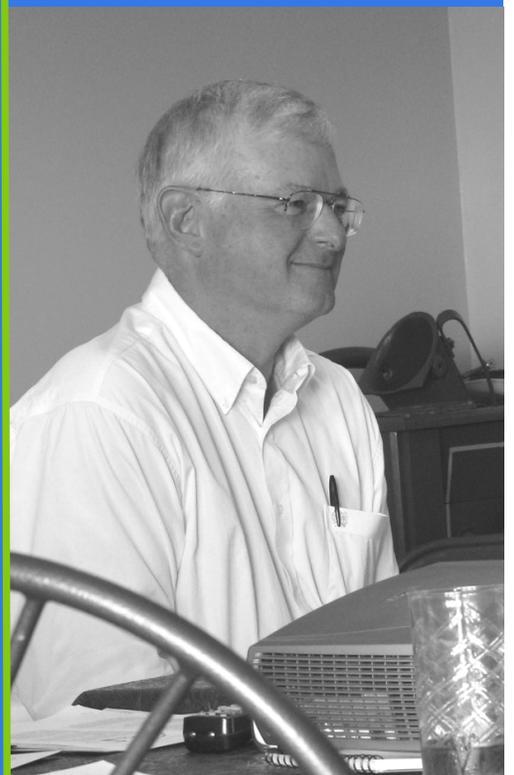
ers to solve resource problems such as downcutting streams, and overgrazing. We needed to prove that the best form of conservation happens when ranch families are profitable on the land. Since that time, nearly 17 years ago, our goals have not changed very much. We have continued to break down the barriers that prevent ranchers from sitting down with government agencies and wildlife organizations. I remember going to meetings prior to the formation of the STF where the ranchers would sit on one side and the government agency people would sit on another. There was very little to no communication between the two groups. The STF has made the Sandhills a better place for both wildlife and the people that live here. We have found that good management is very contagious and that is why we continue to have success.

STAFF PROFILE - Jim Van Winkle , Project Coordinator

A lifelong conservationist with a deep passion for what makes the Sandhills a special place to live. Jim's leadership on numerous local boards, councils, and committees has had a lasting effect on wildlife and resource conservation throughout the Sandhills region. Van Winkle's background in ranching and knowledge of the Sandhills ecosystem allows him to challenge both ranchers and wildlife professionals to work together and develop partnerships that benefit the resource.

Jim became a full time employee for the STF in 2001 and continues to operate out of his ranch near Wood Lake. His reputation as true "Sandhillier," has helped the Sandhills Task Force (STF) to foster and facilitate lasting partnerships between private landowners, agencies and communities. Jim is the sole spokesman, liaison, and coordinator for complex projects ranging from conservation easements to developing whole ranch plans.

VanWinkle was born and raised in Cherry County where he became interested in Sandhills ecology through trapping, hunting, ranching, and pursuing his dream to become a pilot. Jim and his wife Myki have two grown children and two dogs.





A.B. Cox speaking at the Private Lands Day 2009 in Denver, Colorado.



2009 Highlights Education and Outreach

Long - Billed Curlew Study

In the second year of the three year study researchers deployed satellite transmitters on two adult female Long – billed Curlews. Both birds left Nebraska by late June and are currently wintering in northeast Mexico. The transmitters will provide information regarding the movement patterns of Long - billed Curlew that nest in western Nebraska. The STF provided \$2,500 for the purchase of the satellite transmitter.

Leopold Conservation Award

Acting on a request from the Sand County Foundation, the STF board made a decision to financially support the award program in Nebraska. The award recognized landowners “actively committed to living Aldo Leopold’s legacy.” Each year, one landowner from Nebraska is awarded a \$10,000 cash award based off of an application process.

Partners for Conservation

Board member A.B. Cox attended a conference in Denver this fall consisting of conservation minded landowners from across the western U.S. Landowners discussed the challenges and opportunities facing private lands conservation. Several themes emerged, such as the pressure of land conversion, value of working landscapes, and communication strategies. The group reached consensus and agreed to begin the formation an organization (Partners for Conservation) that will bring people together to effect change on a national scale. The organization will refine their strategy as they continue to meet and discuss their goals.

VFD Award Program

The STF adopted a new program in 2009 which will reward Volunteer Fire Departments (VFD) that choose to take an active role in assisting landowners with prescribed fire efforts. The STF will recognize the department based on the number of acres burned. It is expected that several VFD’s will take advantage of this program in the spring of 2010.

Researcher with young Long - billed Curlew.



Projects

Binger Project

An important waterfowl stopover location for waterfowl and shorebirds in Sheridan County was the focus of the Binger wetland enhancement project. Recently, the man made dike built in the 1920's failed numerous times due to seepage and an inadequate water control structure. In the late fall of 2008 the STF and the landowner funded a project consisting of tree removal, rebuilding the dike, and installing a variable water control structure. The landowner intends to fluctuate the water elevation to control aquatic vegetation and provide higher quality waterfowl habitat.

Gracie Creek Ranch

Initiated in 2007, the STF, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC), completed the second phase of the stream restoration project in 2009. The second phase consisted of installing two water control structures along Gracie Creek, which will prevent further down-cutting activity. As a result of the entire project, three miles of Gracie Creek and approximately eleven acres of wetlands and surrounding wet meadows will benefit by a renewed groundwater table and higher quality wildlife habitat.

Greer Project

This project includes restoring a small, spring fed stream and removing eastern red cedar trees from a riparian/slough unit adjacent to the North Loup River. After decades of virtually no disturbance, the riparian unit had become stagnant and infested with exotic species including eastern red cedar trees. A hard ground freeze in the winter of 2008/09 allowed contractors to access the trees and complete the project. An unusually wet summer prevented the construction of the stream restoration project until October of 2009. Once completed, the addition of two variable water control structures will provide the landowner the ability to manage the wetland vegetation, resulting in a higher quality habitat.

North Valley Farms

This is the second phase of a project that began in 2004, involving the enhancement of 1/2 mile of degraded stream habitat adjacent to the North Platte River. The first phase included excavation of sediment and reshaping the stream/slough habitat. In 2009, the STF, FWS and the landowner developed a plan that included reconstructing the historic dike, replacing a culvert with a variable water control structure and providing cattle an alternative source of water. The project was completed in October.

Stewart Project

Phase one of the Stewart stream restoration project consisted of constructing a grade stabilization structure that failed due to a high flow event. The structure will stabilize a portion of the Elkhorn River that has become incised due to stream erosion. Phase two will result in a large scale, in-stream restoration project of over one mile of the Elkhorn River. Construction is planned to be completed in the summer of 2010.

Switzer Project

The Switzer property adjoins Gracie Creek Ranch and includes a portion of Gracie Creek. After completion of the first phase of stream restoration projects on Gracie Creek Ranch the Switzer family noticed significant benefits and decided to partner with the STF, FWS, and NGPC in a stream restoration project. The entire project consisted of removing eastern red cedars and renewing the natural hydrology to a portion of Gracie Creek. The stream restoration project consisted of installing a water control structure designed to slow down the flow of Gracie Creek and return stream to a natural gradient. The project was completed in July of 2009.





Projects

• Russian Olive Removal Projects

Minnechuduza Creek Russian Olive Removal Project

After several years of watching a highly visible patch of Russian olives expand along the Minnechuduza Creek near Valentine, it became apparent that the trees would eventually dominate the riparian area. The invasion of trees had already expanded onto four different landowners of which two had the bulk of the trees. The project began with a unique partnership between the STF, FWS (Partners for Fish and Wildlife), landowners, Nebraska School Lands Educational Lands and Funds, and the Sandhills Weed Management Area (SWMA). The project consisted of removing Russian olives and eastern red cedars on three adjacent properties along five stream miles. As a result of the project, 35 acres of invasive trees were removed, piled, and will be burned when conditions permit.

Niobrara River Russian Olive Removal Project

On a cold, snowy, late January day, a group consisting of landowners, government agencies and non-profit conservationists came together to discuss Russian olive trees. The area of concern is a 10 mile stretch of the upper Niobrara River located in Sheridan County. Landowners recalled that within the last 10 years they have observed an explosion of Russian olives within the historic flood plain. One landowner explained, "For about five years the trees grew and the grass did not," commenting on the recent drought. The group decided to pursue a project that would result in the removal of 1037 acres of invasive trees on 9 different properties. Russian olives and eastern red cedars were mechanically removed by several Bobcats with tree shears and one Hydro-Ax tree saw. Trees were stacked into centrally located piles that will be burned in the winter of 2010/11. Project work began on September 29th and finished in late November.

Funding for the project came from multiple sources, including NGPC, STF, FWS, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO), Panhandle Research Integration for Discovery Education (PRIDE), in addition to the landowners. The mechanical removal portion of the project will be followed by two years of retreating any re-growth that might occur. In addition, a monitoring plan established by the NRCS and the Sheridan County Extension office will provide information regarding the long term effects of the project. Following the completion of the Russian olive project, several of the landowners plan to adopt grazing plans which will boost the return of native shrubs and grasses.



Cherry County Weed Superintendent,
Barb Small →





History of Russian Olives in the Sandhills

Indigenous to Europe and western Asia, the Russian olive tree was first planted in the United States in the 19th Century as a ornamental. In the wake of the Dust Bowl, the Civil Conservation Corps (CCC) planted thousands of Russian olive seedlings into shelterbelts. Some shelterbelts fell victim to drought, grasshoppers, poor maintenance, but many survived to produce offspring. In Nebraska, Natural Resource Districts picked up shortly after where the CCC left off by providing landowners with Russian olives for shelterbelts. The bulk of these trees were planted in the central and western Sandhills where trees and shrubs typically are difficult to establish. As with most invasive trees, the same characteristics that allows the tree to survive in an harsh environment will eventually cause havoc when the trees escape planted shelterbelts.

The Niobrara River in Sheridan County is a prime example of where Russian olives formed a dense thicket along the riparian area that eventually outcompeted native grasses, shrubs and trees. The photo above reveals an area along the Niobrara River where the density of the trees has diminished the habitat value to native wildlife. Several studies reveal that a mono-culture of Russian olives support fewer numbers of birds and diversity when compared to native vegetation. In addition, the trees negatively affect the hydrology, nutrient cycling, and the loss of forage available to live-stock.

Early detection and rapid response is the key to preventing and controlling invasions of Russian olives along Sandhills waterways. Managed grazing and haying along riparian areas can limit excessive disturbance while boosting the vigor of native vegetation.

Projects	STF	FWS	Cooperator	NGPC/RMBO	NRCS	PRIDE	Totals
Johndreau	875.70	1,100.00	1,180.78	1,100.00	2,205.00	710.22	\$7,171.70
Hoos	900.00	2,400.00	800.00	1,400.00		800.00	\$6,300.00
Housh	1,511.60	2,620.50	2,249.78	3,130.15	142.20	2,132.18	\$11,786.41
Hunter	487.62	845.32	725.74	1,009.72	45.87	687.80	\$3,802.07
Terrell	1,755.41	3,043.16	2,612.65	3,635.01	165.14	2,476.07	\$13,687.44
Parkes	487.62	845.32	725.74	1,009.72	45.87	687.80	\$3,802.07
Prokop Sr. Trust	3,900.92	6,762.57	5,805.73	8,077.79	366.97	5,502.38	\$30,416.36
Carlson	633.90	1,098.92	943.46	1,312.64	59.63	894.14	\$4,942.69
Glenn	1,800.00	4,200.00	3,410.00	4,200.00		3,000.00	\$16,610.00
Totals	\$12,352.77	\$22,915.79	\$18,453.88	\$24,875.03	\$3,030.68	\$16,890.59	\$98,518.74



← Arch Ferguson, 2008 Sandhills Cowboy Hall of Fame inductee.

Financial Summary

Income

Carryover from 2008 (Cd's)	\$	697,000.00
Money Market Account	\$	75,596.14
Cooperative Agreements and grant funding	\$	98,969.13
US Fish and Wildlife Private Stewardship Grants Program	\$	32,883.44
	\$	904,448.71
Private Grants		
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	\$	24,127.48
NGPC Habitat Stamp Funds	\$	33,723.89
Agren	\$	2,869.43
Interest from Cd's	\$	17,354.22
Total New Income	\$	78,075.02

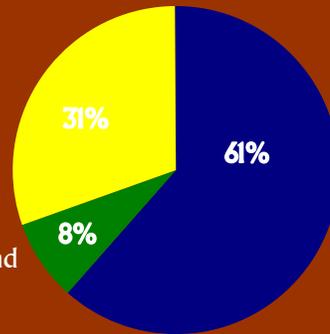


↑ Jim Van Winkle visiting with landowners.



L→R. Roy Johndreau, Andrew Pierson (RMBO), Shelley Stolley (NGPC), Kristi Paul (PRIDE), planning Russian olive project.

Operations



Habitat Enhancement Projects

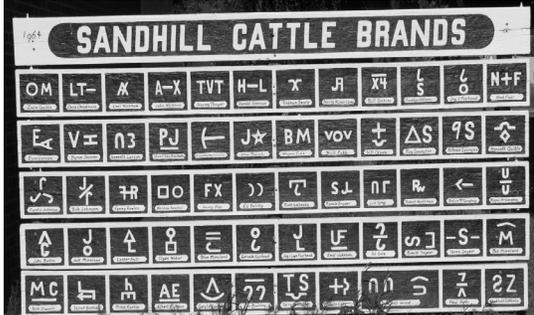
Education and Outreach

Expenses

Projects, Operations, Programs \$208,011.95

Expenses by Program Areas

Habitat Enhancement Projects	\$127,950.60
Education and Outreach	\$16,433.34
Operations	\$63,628.01



Photography credits: Cover: Top to bottom, Sandhills Cranes. Gerry Steinauer/NGPC; STF board members. Kyle Graham/FWS; Sunflower. Kyle Graham/FWS; Pg 3. (Top) Byron Eatinger. Kyle Graham/FWS; (Bottom) Jim Van Winkle. Kyle Graham/FWS; Pg 4. (Top) A.B. Cox. Kyle Graham/FWS; Prescribed fire. Gerry Steinauer/NGPC; Long - billed curlew researcher. Cory Gregory; Pg 5. North Valley Farms project construction. Kyle Graham/FWS; Pg 6. (Top to Bottom) Russian olive removal project. Kyle Graham/FWS. Pg 7. Russian olives along Niobrara River. Kyle Graham/FWS; Pg 8. (Top) Arch Ferguson. Jim Van Winkle/STF; Landowner visit. Kyle Graham/FWS; Russian olive removal project partners. Kyle Graham/FWS; Sandhill Cattle Brands.