



SANDHILLS TASK FORCE

2010
ANNUAL REPORT



Ten years ago, I began as Projects Coordinator for the Sandhills Task Force. The commitment of our partners to make positive things happen for the Sandhills region has been very rewarding to be a part of. Our rancher board members share a strong desire to support their neighbors by providing the tools to strengthen the ranching stewardship ethic. Profitable cattle ranching works well with an intact and flourishing grassland/wetland ecosystem. Grasslands with vigor and diversity help both cattle and wildlife ride out long winters and droughty times. It has been a real honor to work with all our partners on new ranches each year to help their owners meet individual stewardship goals. Many landowners are becoming increasingly aware of that inexorable link between sustainable healthy plant communities, and using animal, bird, and plant species as an indicator of how well their property is being managed. The landowners that maintain the highest levels of stewardship have found that land health and livestock profitability work best in tandem. This annual report reflects these dedicated efforts that individuals are making. Each ranch possess unique opportunities, management skills and future projects will continue to apply resources that help the Sandhills continue to be the place “Where People and Land are One”.

Jim Van Winkle, Projects Coordinator





2010 NEWS

A YEAR FOR THE RECORD BOOKS

Few eastern Sandhills residents have any recollections of what they witnessed this past June. Rainfalls of nearly 14 inches were measured in several locations over a period of several weeks. Widespread and damaging floods ensued, thanks in part to the failure of several dams. Numerous county roads, highway bridges, and culverts were washed out and several ranch headquarters were inaccessible by vehicle for weeks. Several wetland and stream restoration projects, designed by the Sandhills Task Force were lost to high flows. Due to the high water table throughout the summer, reconstruction efforts became nearly impossible until this fall.

BOARD MEMBER UPDATE

It was a year of transitions for the Sandhills Task Force board. Long time board members Rob Ravenscroft and Richard Lackaff resigned from their positions on the board. Rob and Rich both served on the board for nearly 20 years and will be sorely missed. In addition, Gene Mack resigned from his duties as Secretary/Treasurer, but will remain on the board as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) representative. Two new board members joined the STF this past year, Homer Buell replaced Richard Lackaff as a rancher board member. Homer is a fourth generation rancher and past president for the Nebraska Cattlemen. Britt Weiser will replace Dana Larson as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) representative on the board. Britt recently joined the Nebraska NRCS staff and functions as the Assistant State Conservationist located in Lincoln.

BEGINNING RANCHERS PURCHASE RANCH

The aging demographics of the current ranching community reflects the difficulty associated with a young family starting a viable ranching operation. This is a troublesome trend for the ranching industry and the "land ethic" that has kept the Sandhills intact for several generations. Five years ago The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and STF partnered on the first ever "Beginning Rancher" project in the Sandhills. The goal was to find a qualified young family that could eventually own a 3,420 acre property owned by TNC in Cherry County. After an extensive interviewing process, the Daniels family was determined to be the best fit for the ranch. The family entered into a 5 year lease, with an option to buy the ranch at the 2005 value. During this time period, the family was closely mentored by a committee made of STF board members and Jim Luchsinger (Niobrara-Sandhills Program director for TNC). In December of 2010, the Shane Daniels family closed on the Horse Creek Fen Ranch, on which the Nature Conservancy retains a conservation easement. Shane Daniels was quoted saying, "It took a miracle to get us started, but this is where we'll be when we're old and gray."



Education and Outreach

Upper Niobrara Landowner Meeting

In the fall of 2009 a successful partnership resulted in a large Russian olive clearing project along the Upper Niobrara River in Sheridan County. The project included 10 miles of river, 9 adjacent landowners, and six conservation organizations, including the STF. This past summer a landowner meeting was held to learn about history of the Upper Niobrara River and discuss the Russian olive removal project. The meeting was well attended by local landowners and resulted in additional habitat improvement projects along the Upper Niobrara River.

VFD Award Program

In 2009, the STF initiated a new program designed to reward Volunteer Fire Departments (VFD) that assist landowners with conducting prescribed fire. The VFD's responded in 2010 by assisting landowners burn 2,086 acres across the Sandhills. Each burn focused primarily on eliminating invasive trees on otherwise productive rangeland.

Sandhills Grazing Systems and Grassland Bird Diversity Tour

Jim Van Winkle gave a presentation about STF activities at the Grassland Bird Diversity Tour held at Calamus Outfitters this past June. The 2 day tour focused on prairie management, bird identification, prairie conservation, as well as examples of ranches who have successfully managed for native wildlife.

Panhandle Graziers Seminar

The STF was asked to speak to an fledging "graziers" group located in the northwest Sandhills. The group was made up mostly of ranchers who are interested in becoming a formal organization that would promote educational events such as ranch tours and seminars. The group asked Jim Van Winkle to share information about conservation projects in the Sandhills region. Jim challenged the group to think about grazing management in terms of wildlife conservation and opportunities to partner with conservation groups such as the STF.

Leopold Conservation Award

The STF has continued to support the Leopold Conservation Award since its inception in Nebraska. In 2010, the STF board agreed to financially support the award by contributing \$3,000. The STF board views the award as a meaningful way to recognize private landowners for outstanding stewardship.

Projects

Baumert Project

A new landowner and neglected ranch brought about an opportunity to develop a “whole ranch plan” that will result in an improved resource for both wildlife and cattle. The location of the ranch encompasses several ecotypes including multiple intact subirrigated wet meadows, oak bottom lands, and several miles of ephemeral streams. Historically, the 12,000 acre ranch lacked the range improvements to facilitate a rotational grazing system. In addition, previous landowners converted a wetland complex into a seasonally wet hay meadow. The new landowner and the STF, FWS, and NGPC designed a plan that will restore the drained wetland complex and develop a rotational grazing system. The landowner and partners expect to see a dramatic shift in the vegetation and wetland production on the ranch. The project work is expected to take place during the summer of 2011.

Beam Project

Clear Creek is a perennial spring feed creek that originates from a Sandhills wetland complex in Keith County. Within the last decade, Russian olive trees have migrated upstream from the confluence of Clear Creek and North Platte River. Mr. Beam became concerned about the explosion of Russian olive trees along his ownership of Clear Creek. The partnership included NGPC, STF, and the landowner, in a project that resulted in the removal of 30 acres of Russian olive trees. A moderate grazing plan combined with adequate rest will result in higher quality habitat for grassland dependent wildlife species.

Clear Lake Project

The negative affect of carp invasion in Sandhills lakes has been documented for a number of years. Clear Lake in southern Brown County was once a high quality aquatic ecosystem that supported a quality fishery and a robust population of waterfowl, and shorebirds. In the 1990's, carp were allowed to invade the lake and as a result, water quality has declined to the extent that the habitat is not suitable for waterfowl, shorebirds or game fish. The Clear Lake Project involves a unique partnership between the STF, FWS, NGPC, North Central RC&D and the Clear Lake Club. The project will include the use of rotenone to eradicate the carp from the lake. Due to the above average rainfall this summer, the project will not take place until the water elevation drops below the shoreline vegetation. It is expected that the project work will take place in the fall of 2011.

Foster Project

Mr. Foster entered into an agreement with STF, NRD and NGPC in a project that involves enhancing a series of wetlands by installing two variable water control structures. The structures will allow the landowner to adjust the water elevation within the wetland units, promoting desirable vegetation for waterfowl and shorebirds.

Harthoorn Project

The Harthoorn Project involves an extensive effort on the part of the NGPC, FWS, NRCS, STF and the landowner to restore natural diversity associated with a mixed grass prairie. The landowner's primary concern stemmed from an invasion of eastern red cedar trees **cont'd**



Projects

Harthoorn Project cont'd

across 1,700 acres of productive grasslands. The property lacked reliable water sources and fencing necessary to facilitate a rotational grazing plan. The partnership recognized that the success of the project depended on using prescribed fire and developing a sustainable grazing plan. Range improvements, including fencing, pipelines, tanks, and wells will be installed in order to facilitate a rotational grazing plan. The landowner will graze each pasture for a short time with a large cowherd, which will maintain the health of the grassland and provide residual cover important for grassland birds. In addition, cedar trees will be mechanically cut, piled and burned when the unit as part of a series of four prescribed fires over eight years.

Kizer Project

The Cedar River valley is widely known as the preferred wintering habitat for waterfowl within the Sandhills region. A high water table supports hundreds of spring fed sloughs and backwater areas along the Cedar River. This project will enhance a man made, spring fed wetland by installing a variable water control structure near the overflow. The water control structure will allow the landowner to mimic the hydrology associated with high quality, naturally occurring wetlands. Seasonal drawdowns and flooding will manage the density of cattails and bulrush that currently dominate the wetland.

Living Waters

The Dismal River is truly a Sandhills river, both beginning and ending within the Sandhills. The river is undeveloped, difficult to access, and easily the “wildest” river in Nebraska. One threat to this grassland ecosystem is the slow and steady establishment of eastern red cedar trees into grassland adjacent to the river valley. Due to inaccessibility and roughness of the terrain, few attempts have been made in this region to control the spread of cedar trees. The Living Waters project will be the first of its kind along the Dismal River. The project will entail mechanically removing 105 acres of cedar trees in a fashion that will allow a prescribed fire to take place in several years. The owners of this ranch are committed to a long term plan that will maintain a healthy grassland ecosystem using moderate grazing, mechanical tree removal and prescribed fire.

Neiman Project

Calf Creek is a perennial Sandhills stream that in recent years has started to downcut to the extent where a large waterfall became established in the stream channel. Over a period of years, the NRCS developed a Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) project that was designed to stop the erosion. During this time, the headcut moved upstream and out of the reach of the NRCS design. The STF, FWS, and NGPC entered into an agreement with the landowner to develop an additional project designed to stop the stream from eroding further upstream. In recent years, the down cutting has escalated to the point where a large waterfall has become established in the stream channel. The project will consist of installing a water control structure below the headcut, which will stabilize the drainage of the groundwater table, thereby halting the down cutting activity. This project is in conjunction with a WRP stream restoration project located immediately downstream of the described project.

Perrett Project

The Perrett property encompasses several unique landscapes associated with the middle Niobrara River. Historically, cattle trailed through oak woodlands and several wetlands in order to find a water source. Mr. Perrett recently acquired the property and developed an agreement with the STF, FWS, and NGPC that will provide livestock water, and fencing necessary to limit grazing in the uplands, wetlands and riparian areas. The project was completed in the spring of 2010.





"IN THE END, WE WILL CONSERVE ONLY WHAT WE LOVE, WE WILL LOVE ONLY WHAT WE UNDERSTAND, WE WILL UNDERSTAND ONLY WHAT WE ARE TAUGHT." BABA DIOUM

Board Members

Byron Eatinger
President, Thedford
A.B. Cox
Vice President, Mullen
Barb Cooksley
Secretary/Treasurer, Anselmo
Ben Bailey
Rancher, Lakeside
Melody Benjamin
Nebraska Cattleman, Lakeside
Eric Hansen
NRD representative, North Platte
Mike Kelly
Rancher, North Platte
Joel Klammer
RC&D, Ainsworth
Mick Knott
Rancher, Hyannis
Homer Buell
Rancher, Bassett
Ted LaGrange
NGPC, Lincoln
Jim Luchsinger
The Nature Conservancy, Valentine
Gene Mack
USFWS, Kearney
Jack Anderson
County Commissioner, Lakeside
Britt Weiser
NRCS, Lincoln

Staff

Jim Van Winkle, Projects Coordinator
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Wood Lake, NE

Financial Summary

Income

Carryover from 2009 (Cd's)	\$	622,916.22
Money Market Account	\$	98,935.96
Cooperative Agreements and grant funding	\$	200,287.63
US Fish and Wildlife Private Stewardship Grants Program	\$	30,008.44
	\$	952,148.25
Private Grants		
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	\$	220.10
NGPC Habitat Stamp Funds	\$	27,315.60
Interest from Cd's	\$	10,919.43
Total New Income	\$	38,455.13

Expenses by Program Areas

Habitat Enhancement Projects	\$69,945.76
Education and Outreach	\$8,992.52
Operations	\$62,798.51

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