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Sandhills Task Force

"Where People and Land are One"

P.O. Box 1686

Kearney, Nebraska 68848

April, 2001

Next Task Force Meeting: April 4th

Our next meeting will be held at Stub's Restaurant in Thedford. The meeting begins at 9:30 a.m. Central Time.

Sandhills Task Force Serving as Land Trust

At our last meeting, an ice storm kept us from formally approving the Sandhills Task Force to become a land trust. That step is necessary to take future actions, including accepting the conservation easement on Jumbo/Pullman Fens.

If the Board approves the Land Trust, the next step will be to form a committee to list the criteria that must be met before an easement will be accepted by the Task Force. The criteria would include what type of habitats, what type of rights would be obtained, and any social or political considerations that would be taken into account. Also, would the Task Force actively solicit for easements and would they use their own funds to purchase easements?

Action needed from the Board:

1. Is the STF willing to be a Land Trust and hold the conservation easement? If so, who will define the easement guidelines?

Interest in Easements Grows

Recently, I have received two inquiries about the Task Force taking conservation easements. One was associated with the Hansen Ranch near Alliance. The whole ranch is for sale, but the owner is interested in selling a conservation easement. The second is a small tract of land along the North Loup River near Purdum.

I responded to the Hansen Ranch request by explaining that the Task Force was not far enough along on establishing itself as a land trust to act on the property, nor are we financially structured to purchase easements.

The Loup River property, is being checked out to determine if the easement is being offered as a donation or for sale.

Fen Easement Discussed with Cobles and Huffmans

Jim Van Winkle and I met with Paul, Bob and Jason Coble to discuss the language of the conservation easement drafted for the fen. We did the same for Stan, Jean and Zoe Huffman.

At both meetings, we made it clear that the land would be appraised and offered to both parties for appraised price. Each would be given an opportunity to bid on the property. The appraisal could not be done until a conservation easement was in place so the appraiser would know the effect the easement would have on land values.

Cobles expressed concern that the easement might prevent cleaning of ditches that allow water to drain off their portion of the Pullman Fen. I informed them that it is not the intent of the STF to back water onto their property. We would provide language in the easement to satisfy any concern they may have on this matter.

Stan expressed concern that if we allowed grazing on Jumbo, we would be "bogging" (creating hummocks). Since the easement does not allow rototilling to smooth the surface, it would ruin the fen. Jim suggested language be added that would only allow grazing when the ground is frozen.

We also posed the possibility of accepting an easement on a portion of their property as a partial trade to reduce the amount of cash paid. Both parties were interested in giving the idea some thought.

Action needed from the Board:

1. Approve language in the easement.

Grant Application to National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

Jim and I have been exploring the NFWF as a possible source of funding future projects. The Foundation provides matching funds for conservation projects. Their focus is on projects that preserve and improve grasslands, involve privately owned lands, and have multiple partnerships.

My wish is to do a "test" application to the Foundation to see how easy it is and how willing they are to help the STF meet its goal. Hopefully if we are successful, we can submit a future application that is more general and addresses the landscape.

NFWF will match one dollar for every two dollars contributed. The contributed dollars cannot be federal funds. The deadline for the application is April 10.

Action needed from the Board:

1. Is the STF willing to commit funding to a specific ranch project already identified?
2. Is the STF willing to submit a grant application to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation?

Partnering with NGPC for a Website

I have been contacted by Steve Riley about the Sandhills Task Force interest in having a website. The terms we are working on are:

Sandhills Task Force would be able to get a website address that is not associated with any agency. E.g., Sandhills_Task_Force.org

The cost would be free to the Task Force.

Any other organizations associated with this agreement would have to be non-political whose primary mission is to help improve wildlife habitat on private lands.

Steve is exploring the possibility of using habitat stamp dollars to pay for the website. The site has the potential to provide landowners with one site that would provide them with information about various organizations that may be able to assist them with specific projects.

Action needed from the Board:

1. Is the STF willing to enter into such an agreement?

Project Coordinator, Expanding STF Involvement in Sandhills

In Jim's short time of employment, he has gone from what he would be involved in to trying to decide which projects to spend his time on. I met with Jim for a couple of days in late March and his list of projects extended onto two pages. Some of them can have an effect on future direction and policies of the STF.

Action needed from the Board:

1. Decide if these projects are in line with the STF goal and what the STF wants Jim to spend his time on?

Sandhills Bird Study

I have been working with NGPC and UNL on trying to refine what a Sandhills Bird Study would look like and what questions the Task Force want answered.

The study would record birds observed along sample transects on three types of grazing systems: short-duration, 30-45 day grazing, and season-long. A total of nine ranches is needed. We are hoping to also

include sampling insects associated with each system. Insects are known to directly respond to environmental conditions.

The question that may be answered is:

What is the level of bird and insect response associated with three types of grazing systems: Both **breeding** and **migrating** bird presence and abundance associated with each system.

Dr. Ron Johnson, UNL has submitted a grant application of \$20,000 to the Arthur William Sampson Endowment to help fund the first year of funding.

Action needed from the Task Force:

1. Does the STF approve of funding \$15,000 each year for three years?
2. Is the question stated above, the one the Board would like answered?

Report to Secretary of State Completed

The biannual report, required by the State to maintain our nonprofit corporation status, was completed.

STF Awarded \$87,500 from NET

The Nebraska Environmental Trust awarded the Task Force its second year of funding as identified in our three-year grant application.