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Sandhills Task Force

"Where People and Land are One"

P.O. Box 1686

Kearney, Nebraska 68848

August, 2000

Next Task Force Meeting: August 18th

Our next meeting will be held at the Jumbo Fen site beginning at 8:30 Mountain Time. We will be meeting in the brick garage, so **Bring Your Own Lunch!**

Questions Remain on Where STF Will Invest Its Funds.

Dean Funk has done an excellent job of researching investment options. However, Nebraska Environmental Trust has some reservations about our plans to find another financial institution besides Nebraska Community Foundation. Their reasoning is funds in NCF are assured to be used for the purpose identified by the grantor and the state audits NCF books annually. Placing funds in another bank requires more trust in us. Mary Harding understands our concerns and has agreed to present our interests to the NET Board on August 8.

Nebraska Cattlemen Approves Cooperative Agreement With STF.

NC Board met and agreed to approve the agreement with a few minor edits to the document. The document should be signed in the next week or so. The main change was to place Troy and Greg Ruehle on a selection committee along with two STF members to select the employee. We have identified newspapers and magazines we will advertise in. The closing date for applications will be September 22.

Nebraska Public Radio Featured The Birdwood Creek Project.

Nebraska Public Radio interviewed Mike Kelly, Doug Whisenhunt, myself and maybe more about the Birdwood Creek Project. My portion of the interview was quite a bit about the Task Force. I did not personally hear the news article, but I have had a few positive comments about it.

Tallgrass Legacy Looking To Task Force For Answers.

An organization called "Tallgrass Legacy" has formed in the Flint Hills area of Kansas to help preserve the tallgrass prairies of Kansas. They have asked if I would be willing to attend their next Board meeting and answer questions about "How did the STF do this." I agreed to attend their August 3rd meeting.

Trumpeter Swan Study Being Done In Sandhills.

A graduate student at University of Montana is conducting a study of the trumpeter swans in the Sandhills. The study objective is to determine what physical factors of wetlands attract swans to use one wetland over another. Trumpeter swans came close to extinction by the beginning of the 1900's. Their numbers increased to around 600 by the mid-1950s. Beginning in 1960, 36 young were released on LaCreek National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota. Today there are about 430 swans that use the refuge during winter months. During the nesting season, many of them migrate to the Sandhills to nest.

Sandhills Perception Study Receives Payment Of \$18,309.47.

The Task Force made its first payment on the Sandhills Perception study being done by Amy Richert, UNL. A check for the same amount was received from the Fish and Wildlife Service to reimburse the Task Force. Balance in our NCF account is \$19,522.65. Amy has been invited to give the Board a brief report of her progress to date.

Mullen NRCS Needs Survey Equipment

Mullen NRCS has played a big role in helping the Task Force with various projects, including the Fen and Cow Creek projects. It is becoming more apparent that future planned grazing systems will include pipeline systems. The high-tech survey equipment, called "terra model station" allows surveys to be done with less people and in a fraction of the time. NRCS has formally asked if the Sandhills Task Force would be willing to buy a station for their office. Right now, they have to schedule and borrow one from the eastern or western part of the state. Cost of the equipment is approximately \$12,000.

Restoration Plans For Jumbo And Pullman Valley Fens Identified.

Al Steuter, Doug Whisenhunt, and I met with NRCS Engineer and Kevin Hood to discuss restoration plans for the fens. We were all in agreement that the structures placed in Jumbo last year were working and the same type needs to be installed in Pullman. Al shared that Stan Huffman thinks we should get more serious about restoring the water in Jumbo—its value for forage is pretty limited. So, we decided two additional structures need to be put in Jumbo: one in the north ditch and one in the middle ditch. NRCS says there remains about \$41,000 in the Wetlands Reserve Account to help with these structures. The three structures in the Pullman Valley will be placed on the north ditch. Their location will be at elevations that will not cause any flooding to Coble's portion of the fen.

NRCS Continues Evaluating The Effects Of The Thedford Fire.

Through the second growing season, NRCS—Mullen and Valentine offices—continues to collect data on plant response to the March 1999 fire.

Penstemon/Education Project Being Proposed.

I recently received a call from Paul Eckberg asking if the Task Force would sponsor a NET grant he would like to submit. The project is an environmental education project which involves having students collect baseline information on plants, soil and water associated with two ranch dumps. The dumps would then be cleaned up and the areas reseeded, including the introduction of blowout penstemon. The students would periodically collect data on changes in plants, soil, and water. The project enlists participation from accelerated students from various schools. The information is shared among schools via the internet. Paul has done similar projects at two other locations in Nebraska. Paul and Educational Service Unit #15 would be doing most of the work. The Task Force would be there mostly in name.

I hope to discuss this at our August meeting. Some issues to address are: What type of projects do we want to have our name on? What happens if the project is not completed by Paul and ESU?

Monitoring Grazing Systems??

In the recent grant we received from NET, the grant identified that the Sandhills Task Force would fund \$15,000 each of three years toward evaluating grazing systems. As I try to recall why that was put in the grant, I can only think that it was my idea and nobody opposed it. I have always believed that if the STF is going to fund grazing systems, we need to know what benefits we are receiving from such projects. For me, two measures would be comparison of vegetation and bird use of various grazing systems.

Realizing whom I work for, my preference is bird use associated with grazing systems and the general landscape. E.g., species and numbers of birds associated with season long grazing compared to short duration

grazing.

Why birds? Research has long documented certain species are associated with certain habitats. And, the free mobility of birds allows them to concentrate on preferred habitat not only grasses, but also abundance of seeds or insects. They become a biological judge of the health of select habitats.

At the national level, grassland species are recognized as the one group of birds in the most peril because of conversion of grassland to urban and cropland. Thus, there is a growing interest in saving grasslands.

I have done some preliminary contacts with UNL to see if a monitoring project is possible. They were excited and a face-to-face meeting is planned for this fall.

Because grassland birds are of prominent concern nationally, I believe I can get matching funds from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to help with this project.

Selling the Fen Property??

During our discussion on fen restoration, the question of when the Task Force expects to sell the fen property was raised. A proposal was made to sell the property in the fall of 2001. The second question that came up was will we sell the fen with the upland (conservation easement on all) or retain ownership of the fen and just sell the upland? This will be a discussion topic at a future Board meeting.