

Sandhills Task Force

"Where People and Land Are One"

**P.O. Box 1686
Kearney, NE 68848**

August, 2003

Next Task Force Meeting:

The next Task Force meeting is scheduled for Thursday, September 11 at Stubbs Restaurant in Thedford. The meeting will begin at 9:30 a.m.

Effroymsen Fellowship Workshop.

Several hundred locally based project teams engaged in conserving functional landscapes over the last 15 years have used the Effroymsen process.

During the third week of June, Ted, Rob, A.B. and Jim attended the second Effroymsen Fellowship workshop for the Great Plains at Thief River Falls, Minnesota. The group joined others in a tour of the Tallgrass Aspen Parkland region, and worked alongside teams from several other grassland regions to describe critical stresses and the sources of these stresses on their respective grasslands. Three conservation targets were identified for the Sandhills. They are: 1. Wetlands / Streams, 2. Rivers, and 3. Upland Grasslands.

The integrity of each conservation target is believed to be good to very good. A summary of active threats was compiled and ranked for each. We worked on identifying strategies to abate critical threats and/or enhance biodiversity health.

The next session is planned for November in Iowa. The Effroymsen grant pays all expenses involved for participants.

Beginning Rancher Meeting Held

Al put together a beginning rancher workshop with a variety of people attending. The two key groups were TNC and the Sandhills Task Force. Byron, Rob, Jim, Al, and myself attended. Senator Jim Jones also requested the opportunity to attend. Staff people from Sustainable Agriculture and UNL gave an overview of the decline of young ranchers. After much discussion, we agreed to work together to establish a beginning rancher program on lands owned by TNC.

Fire Learning Network Video Being Shot.

The Niobrara/Sandhill fire video being produced moved ahead with extensive cooperation from Volunteer Rural Fire Departments, and landowners. Filming of the landscape, as well as, local fire chiefs and interviews relating to various fire issues has gone well. Footage includes NRCS & NGPC personnel meeting with landowners, discussing goals and fire ecology issues, and recent aerial videoing of four prescribed burn sites in three counties. In December, it is tentatively planned that Al Steuter and Jim Van Winkle will attend the National FLN meeting in Pensacola, Florida. National Fire Plan funds will cover these travel expenses. There are five funding sources, including STF, who will pay for the production and distribution. Estimated total cost is \$20,000.

UNL receives \$1.8 million to study drought in Sandhills.

Dr. Dave Wedin will be one of 15 faculty members who will be conducting a 4-year study of the effects of drought on the Sandhills. They will be trying to determine how bad drought has to get to start the dunes blowing at the large scale. Experiments will be done on about 30 acres of ground at the 6,000-acre Barta Brothers Research Ranch located south of Long Pine. They will set up plots with different types of cover - bare sand, grazed and ungrazed grass - and measure such things as moisture content, groundwater recharge and temperature.

Data from these small plots will be fed into a computer and used to simulate various changes in the landscape, including widespread desertification.

Dr. Wedin to Speak to the Sandhills Task Force.

It is important to Dr. Wedin and the other researchers to have the support of the Sandhills Task Force on their Sandhills drought research project. Dr. Wedin has contacted me on several occasions and has offered to give a presentation of the research proposal to the Board at our September meeting.

NET Grant Application Submitted.

This year's NET funding is looking better than in past years. Our current grant will end within a couple of months. Projects that benefit the water resources of the state will be given special consideration. I saw this as an opportunity to request funding to develop more stream restoration projects with small water control structures. The grant was written last week with changes made this week and it will be delivered to NET by next Monday. The application requests funding for water control structures, fencing, livestock watering systems, and \$24,000 annually for operating costs. The grant request is for three years of funding. Total amount being requested is \$279,000. I will be asking the Board to approve the grant application.

New laptop computer purchased for Jim.

Following approval by the Board, a new laptop computer was purchased for Jim. It is a Dell with all the speed and storage capacity he will need. It includes a CD-writer so he can store and mail large data files, such as photos and maps.

Nebraska Range Youth Camp Requests Funds.

Nebraska Range Youth Camp contacted me requesting funds to cover the costs of awards for the "Top Campers". The total number of youths participating was 54. Last year we provided them with \$536.28. I do not, at this time, have the amount the Camp is requesting from us this year.

Sandhills Discovery Request Funds For Seminar.

I received a request from Sandhills Discovery in Ainsworth for us to support their annual one-day seminar. Their request is the same amount as last year, \$500.

Annual Audit Completed.

Our annual audit and filing of tax forms was completed. The auditing firm provided a report, which will be provided to each board member.

USFWS and NCBA Developing a “Walk a Mile In My Boots” program.

Back in the early spring, the FWS and NCBA agreed to develop a program with ranchers and biologists doing an exchange program. It would give each profession a better understanding of the issues each other face. Our STF organization drew quite a bit of interest and I was asked to help develop that program within Nebraska.

Mike Kelly heard about the program and realized what a benefit this would be to the STF and the Sandhills. He has sent in his application to participate. Mike requested the opportunity to spend time in Washington DC with the Director of the FWS. The response from Washington sounds encouraging. I am hoping a second ranching board member will volunteer so the two can go to DC together to tell the STF story and learn how we can interact with the FWS to benefit ranching.

I believe we have an excellent shot at having this happen since the individual in charge of the program will be coming to the Sandhills in October for a tour of the area and to discuss our partnering with the FWS to put on a national workshop. The workshop would be using the STF as an example of grassroots approach to building partnerships with landowners.

Final Stage of West Twin Lake Restoration Nears.

Jim and I have been working with the Cobles, contractor and NRCS to construct the permanent water control at the outlet of the lake. We expect construction to occur within 30 to 60 days. The Cobles have voluntarily held the lake elevation higher than our easement required, resulting in excellent wildlife habitat.

Two Wildlife Extension Agreements Out For Signatures.

Two wildlife extension agreements are currently out for landowner signatures. One is for a water control structure in central Cherry County and the other is a water control and whole ranch management project in Garden County. At least ten STF/NRCS projects are awaiting final state ranking under WHIP or EQIP. The extent of the STF involvement in these projects will be established within the next month.

Letters Drafted Seeking Funds

At our last Task Force meeting, it was decided that letters requesting financial support be sent out to various organizations and agencies. The hectic summer delayed that project until two weeks ago. A letter, work plan and 2004 operating budget were developed and forwarded to Al, Jim and Rob for comments. It will be presented to the Board at our next meeting.