Next Task Force Meeting:

The next Task Force meeting is on Wednesday, February 24th at Stub's Restaurant in Thedford. The meeting begins at 9:30 a.m.

Agenda Items:

9:30 Meeting called to order Introductions Approval of minutes Financial report (Mack)

> Project Coordinator update (VanWinkle) Replacement of NRCS Board Member Partners for Conservation Program (Cox)

12:00 Lunch

Report on NET grant application Report of the Executive Committee Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition (Hunter) Update on the Leopold Award (Craig Utter) Gene Mack's retirement

2:30 Adjourn

NET grant not awarded

On February 4 the Nebraska Environmental Trust announced their preliminary rank of projects they plan to fund in this year. The Task Force's grant for riparian and wetland conservation easements was scored at 128 points. The highest scored project had a score of 198 and the last project funded had a score of 130. I am sure that there are multiple factors that affected our score. A couple of those were probably because we did not have a definite property identified and the political climate at the time is not supportive of conservation easements. In my opinion it was a great effort and I want to again thank Ted for putting together the grant.

Steve Chick to attend Task Force meeting.

State Conservationist, Steve Chick, accepted Byron's invitation to attend our February board meeting. His attendance will give us an opportunity to discuss common interests and visions of the Sandhills. The STF and NRCS share a lot of common goals and anything we can do to strengthen the working relationship between us is good for Sandhill ranchers. Among the topics to discuss will be filling the vacancy left by Dana Larsen.

Accounting firm completes financial review of STF books.

After a quick start last March to complete our financial review, the Kearney accounting firm lost speed with the birth of a child by our accountant. The company filed for an extension of our tax returns and completed the final review at the end of December. They apologized for the delay and promised to do better this coming year.

The result of their review was that our books appear to be in order. A copy of the financial report will be provided to board members at the upcoming board meeting.

Craig Utter to discuss the Sand County Foundation's Leopold Award.

Craig Utter has asked for time on the agenda to discuss past activities of the future of the Leopold Award. The award is given to a private landowner(s) who has demonstrated good sustainable stewardship of the land. Last year the Board supported that award by providing \$3000.

Marcy Hunter to attend STF Board meeting

Marcy Hunter, recently hired coordinator for the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition, has accepted our invitation for her to attend our February Board meeting. Nothing formal has been planned. The intent is to give both parties an opportunity to get to know each other and discuss how our two organizations can best work together.

Coordinator's update of STF work being accomplished.

I asked Jim to provide me with a brief update of work being done to include in this newsletter.

Hay Springs Rancher Grazing Meeting-Jim gave a presentation in January to a group of ranchers at this event which centered on using wildlife diversity as an indication of overall ranch health and profitability. Some of the ranchers involved in the event were landowner partners from our 2009 Sheridan County Russian olive project with most being new faces to the STF.

Prescribed Fire Association-Jim was a presenter at the recent prescribed fire association winter fire management seminar held at the Cherry County fairgrounds in Valentine. Past STF board member Dr. Al Steuter has been the driving force with this organization that is focused on landowner driven prescribed fire strategies. Jim focused on the STF VFD award program that will be in its second year. Jim expects significant participation during the spring 2010 burn season.

Water Control Structures-Renovations and repairs were completed to the east Marlatt water control structure since our last meeting. Wet fall weather and an early prolonged winter made for difficult working conditions. This structure creates extensive spring shallow water wetlands for a variety of migrating waterfowl and shore birds.

Both AgriDrain structures were completed on the Greer ranch since our last meeting. Snow and mud gave the contractor a great challenge. He persevered and when we receive a break in the weather he will be back to smooth up some of the site details.

Holt County Young Rancher- Jim and a group of our partners, with NRCS in the lead, have been working with a young rancher in southern Holt County. He purchased a 3200-acre property two years ago after having worked with the former old ranch owner for several years. Limited livestock water and fence has made cattle rotation and land management difficult. Encroaching red cedar on an estimated 800 acres has compounded the problem. With Western Prairie Fringed Orchids on the property we are exploring a variety of options and working towards a long term management plan.

Holt County-Site visits and partner coordination with two large operations and new landowners are ongoing. One is focused primarily on quality prairie chicken habitat and the second is seeking assistance with a series of water control structures as well as development of a long term grazing plan.

Cherry County-A new landowner of a small but very high visibility property in Cherry County is working with us to develop a sustainable grazing management plan that emphasizes wildlife.

Garden County-Jim has met twice in January with Given Smith and Dan Kessen, the new owner and manager, of the Curry ranch north of Oshkosh. The prior owner Roy Curry along with STF and our partners had spent in excess of \$80,000 on this 10,000 acre parcel in 2008 to develop a solid summer grazing rotation. Mr. Curry decided to sell his ranch. The new owners have accepted all the conditions of our WEA but will be converting to a year-round cow herd. Kyle Graham, along with Dave Cook from NRCS, are very pleased with the transition planning and we are looking forward to working with the new owners.

Brown County-Early landowner and partner discussions are proceeding on a potential large multi-lake renovation project in southern Brown County. Discussions with landowners in adjacent counties have also taken place.

Partners for Conservation update

A few months ago, AB attended a meeting in Denver involving the Fish and Wildlife Service and landowners from multiple states. The landowners had a separate meeting to discuss the possibility of landowners forming a "Partners for Conservation" group. This regional or national group would begin by focusing on two tasks: 1) to share information, resources and provide support to one another (i.e. lessons learned related to conservation easements, etc.), and 2) to inform and shape federal policy related to private land conservation and stewardship. Hopefully AB can shed more information on this at the Board meeting.

Gene Mack is planning his retirement.

Sometime within the next 12 months I will be announcing my retirement. My plans are not firm at this time but I do know my time with the Fish and Wildlife Service is near an end.

I am putting this in the newsletter to give the Board as much heads up as possible. If time permits, the Board may want to discuss how they would like to fill the position I vacate and what guidance they would like to give me on handling finances and records so there will be a smooth transition to the next Secretary/Treasurer.

Some D. Mack