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Sandhills Task Force

"Where People and Land are One"

P.O. Box 1686

Kearney, Nebraska 68848

January, 2001

Next Task Force Meeting: February 7th

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

Sandhills Project Coordinator Hired

Jim VanWinkle accepted the position as Sandhills Projects Coordinator. He was hired by Nebraska Cattlemen through a cooperative agreement with the Task Force. His first day at work was December 13. For the first three days, him and I talked about every conceivable part of the Task Force; its objective, goals, activities, people, agencies, etc. The most common questions were "What if a landowner want to?" I have shared with a few people that it was like doing my orals all over again.

During the three days, Jim and I attended a meeting with UNL and other people interested in a grassland study in the Sandhills. We also met with Greg Reuhle to discuss Jim's employment arrangements and such matters as NC expectations, use of NC letterhead, reimbursement procedures, health and retirement benefits. We finished the three days by purchasing office equipment and supplies. Equipment included an laptop computer and an all-in-one office machine that does faxes, photocopies, and prints in color or B&W. I provided Jim with paper copies of wildlife extension agreements and a CD-ROM containing electronic versions of documents, forms, digital photos, public software, and short slide presentations of projects.

In early January, Jim and I met with Byron, Mick, A.B., and Richard to discuss their perspectives of Jim's role and the Task Force in general. We also stopped into the NRCS Ainsworth office and spent a couple of hours discussing potential projects.

Meeting Held to Discuss Grassland Bird Study

On December 13, UNL hosted a meeting to discuss the possibility of conducting a grassland bird study. Items discussed included evaluating individual bird species use of lands under different grazing systems. The design of such a study would include finding landowners willing to allow researchers to record the number and type of birds found along transects on their property. Three types of grazing systems would be focused on: season-long, 30-45 day grazing, and short (14 days or less) grazing.

One of the agenda items at our Task Force meeting is to get the Board's feedback on such an approach. The group felt it was very important for the Task Force to provide a list of questions the Board would like answered by such a study. A second meeting will be held on February 1st to discuss the project in a little more detail.

As a side note, Audubon has put out a "Watchlist" for birds in each state. Their list carries no official authority, it is intended to help local people identify what birds in their area are facing problems. The list for the Sandhills area, include: Trumpeter swan, Swainson's hawk, Ferruginous hawk, Greater prairie chicken, Long-billed curlew, Scissor-tailed flycatcher, Bell's vireo, Dickcissel, and Lark bunting. The list does not imply that the Sandhills is the cause of their decline. Rather, the list identifies birds that are declining in numbers and use the Sandhills at some time during their life. We know the change in the Sandhills grassland has not been significant. Therefore, the Sandhills represents one of the largest remaining homes for the birds.

All the more reason for people to support Sandhill ranching.

First Draft of Fen Hydrology Study Completed

The Task Force received a copy of the hydrology study findings, conducted by Ed Harvey at UNL. The report is over 100 pages in length. I am not sending out copies, but will highlight a few points in this newsletter.

Jumbo Valley Fen appears to be receiving most of its water from a large regional flow system, coming from the west. The water coming from this flow system has taken (at a minimum) more than 50 years to reach the fen. The 50 year mark is determined by changes in tritium associated with nuclear testing. The water samples did not contain the high tritium levels: thus, the water entered the groundwater before the early 1960's. Radiocarbon dating would need to be done to determine how old it really is.

A small portion of the fen's water is coming from a more local source (the dunes on the north and south side of the fen). The amount of water seeping into the fen each year is estimated to be about $1.6 \times 10^6 \text{ m}^3/\text{yr}$. I converted that to cubic feet per second: it equals about 18 cfs. That equals about 4.2 billion gallons per year. How much of that is flowing out through the ditch is unknown.

Groundwater is about 5 feet higher on the west versus the east end of the fen. Information about Pullman Valley appears to be similar, but studies in that valley were not as extensively done.

NET States Fen Project Completed

The Nature Conservancy was informed on August 15 that the fen project has been completed to the conditions of the grant agreement. I believe this is more of a bookkeeping matter, meaning they are no longer tracking the project. It does not relieve us of our obligations in the grant agreement.

Conservation Easements: Focus of Next Board Meeting

Much of the time at the next Board meeting will be spent on conservation easements. The intent will be to discuss each organization's perception of what conservation easements mean to their respective organizations. The main speaker or guest is Lynne Sherrod with Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust. CC has been active in acquiring easements to reduce development along the Front Range of Colorado.

Language is an important part of any easement. I have drafted a conservation easement language for the fen property. The Board will need to decide on what this language will ultimately look like when the property is sold. I thought having a draft would help us focus our discussion. In my researching of conservation easements, I am amazed at the variations that exist. They range from around 15 pages to just a couple of pages. Government ones appear to be shorter than Land Trust ones. For the one I drafted, I used the Birdwood Creek easement as a template.

Congressional Funding for Managing Wildfires

The large expanse of wildfires throughout the western half of the United States has caused Congress to budget an additional \$1.8 billion in funding to enable federal agencies and their partners to protect wildland-urban interface communities and restore ecosystems. The Nature Conservancy is taking the lead in forming a Fire Roundtable-2001 in Flagstaff, Arizona in March.

The conference will bring agencies and partners together to address wildfire issues. Part of the new funding is expected to be made available to local fire departments for equipment and training. Mike Behrens from the Niobrara Preserve plans to attend the conference. His intent is to speak about the Niobrara River and their property.

Al Steuter suggested to me that the Sandhills Task Force might wish to have Mike speak on behalf of the Task Force and include the Sandhills into the area of concern. I have put that on at the end of our meeting agenda. What may become of this, I do not know. But there is a chance it may provide additional support to Sandhill fire departments.