

# Sandhills Task Force

"Where People and Land Are One"

P.O. Box 1686

Kearney, NE 68848

May, 2005

## Next Task Force Meeting:

The next Task Force meeting is on June 7 at Stub's Restaurant in Theford. The meeting begins at 9:30 a.m.

### Agenda Items:

- 9:30 Meeting called to order
- Introductions
- Approval of minutes
- Financial report (Gene Mack)
- Updates:
  - Effroymsen Committees
  - Beginning Rancher Program
  - Mallard research project
- Memorandum of Understanding with FWS
- 12:30 Lunch
  - Support of grazing software testing
  - Project Coordinator update
- 3:30 Adjourn

## \$93,000 received for second year of NET grants.

The Nebraska Environmental Trust approved the second year of funding of the "Sandhills Riparian and Wetland Restoration" grant. During the first year we came pretty close to spending all of the first \$93,000. We expect to do the same this year.

## NET provides \$250,000 to the STF to purchase conservation easement.

The Task Force is stepping into some new territory with the recent awarding of \$250,000 for the purchase of conservation easement(s) associated with Sandhill streams and wetlands. We do not currently have any property in mind but hope to be able to use the grant to resolve landuse conflicts or assist beginning ranchers.

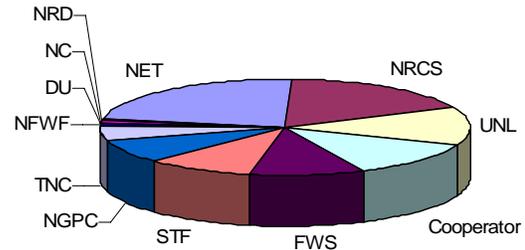
## Nebraska Cattlemen is expected to revisit their policy statement at mid-year convention.

At Nebraska Cattlemen's annual convention a resolution was passed, which opposed NET funds being given to non-profit corporations to purchase land or conservation easements. In June, the subject will again be brought up at their mid-year convention.

Craig thought it would be a good idea for the Task Force to take that opportunity to explain what the Task Force is all about. And, how our organization works to benefit profitable private ranching, as well as the natural resources of the Sandhills. I have agreed to give a brief presentation.

In preparing for the presentation, I was impressed with the number of partners, dollars, and wide range of projects we have done over the years. I put together a pie

chart showing the source of matching funds and in-kind services we have received associated with NET funds. The pie chart represents a total of over \$1.5 million. (Does not include the fen project).



## STF to receive \$100,000 from Department of Environmental Quality.

We have received word but no formal paperwork stating that the Task Force will receive \$100,000 to re-establish a portion of the stream channel on Birdwood Creek. That portion was ditched decades ago and we now have an opportunity to restore the old meander and rebuild the groundwater table in the valley. DEQ has told me that the paperwork should show up in June.

## Argen, Inc asking for STF support in seeking USDA funding

Argen, Inc., an Iowa company, is seeking a USDA grant to test the usefulness of a grazing management tool call "The Grazing Manager". Their goal is to find 30 ranchers in Nebraska that will trial-test the computer program and provide feedback in ways to make the program more accurate and easier to use.

The software program will simulate forage production and animal demand; monitor forage growth related to climate conditions; measure pasture utilization; and warn of forage shortfalls. Its usefulness will be especially important during drought conditions.

They are asking our organization for a letter of support and assistance in finding ranchers who would be willing to test the product.

## Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking an MOU

The Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking a formal memorandum of understanding with the Sandhills Task Force to clarify my role within the Task Force. A copy of the MOU will be presented to the Board for their consideration at the next Board meeting.

## Mallard study in Sandhills appears to be progressing nicely.

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has provided updates on the progress of the mallard study. Two technicians have been hired, Lindsay Ware and Zach Cunningham. Lindsay worked last year on a similar project in North Dakota, and Zach will be

graduating from UNL this spring. They have found summer housing in Bassett.

As of 5/11, Lindsay and Zach (with the help of others) have captured 26 mallard hens and affixed transmitters to them. Trapping really picked up after the week long cold period with morning temperatures at or below freezing. Of the 26, 25 have been re-located (meaning they have not left the area after being captured) at least once. Two of the hens had brood patches, indicating that they may have already initiated nesting.

One of the objectives of the study is to determine nesting behavior and success and survival of the brood. It will be interesting to see the number of nest and their success in the uplands compared to those in the meadows.

### **Search continues for two Board members to replace Dobbins and Funk.**

I have gotten word from Jim that he has some names of potential candidates. He will present them to the Board for their consideration and action. I would encourage other Board members to find additional names to add to that list. Our success depends on our Board members.

### **Update on Beginning Rancher Project**

The Horse Creek Fen Beginning Rancher project has been moving along rapidly in the past sixty days. In late March, TNC received a property appraisal including the value of the conservation easement that will be put in place on the property. The committee, consisting of Al, Mick, AB, Jim V and Jim L, met in Thedford and drafted the wording for the Beginning Rancher application, property description and lease with purchase option format. Applications were mailed during April to anyone requesting and Jim V. and Jim L. handled many calls and answered many questions. Many of the financial institutions contacted liked the format and thought there were great opportunities in the Sandhills for this program. Jim L provided ranch tours to those requesting. Many chose not to submit applications for a variety of reasons ranging from concern about the remote living location, to the requirement that they submit financial and business plans. On the May 15 deadline, five applications had been received.

One part of the process was getting NET's approval to sell the property. TNC originally presented to the NET Board the proposal to have the funds received from the eventual sale of the ranch property turned over to the Sandhills Task Force. I believe that proposal was very generous of TNC. The NET Board's decision, however, was to have the funds returned directly to the Trust.

### **STF represented at Grassland Summit**

Board member A.B. Cox and Jim Van Winkle attended the Grassland Summit recently at the Rowe Sanctuary near Gibbon representing the Sandhills Task Force. In addition, Board members, Barb Cooksley, Dana Larsen and Al Steuter were in attendance. Approximately twenty five organizations were in attendance representing most agencies and NGO's interested in the grassland resources of our state. The

event was sponsored by the Grazing Lands Coalition. Each group presented a short introduction emphasizing methods of operations followed by their top priorities regarding grasslands. All participants were then encouraged to rank these grassland related issues and the list of thirty was reduced to four that were then brainstormed in breakout groups. The priority issues centered on water, invasive species, diversity, working with and empowering private landowners grass stewardship efforts.

Our new Nebraska Director of Agriculture Greg Ibach was in attendance, as well as legislative staffers from Lincoln and good representation from senate and congressional staff. Efforts will be made to find grassland issues that all participants will get behind and by using this "strength in numbers" concept an effort will be made to strengthen our grassland resources.

### **Booth display at SCA convention**

The Sandhills Task Force will have a booth at the upcoming Sandhills Cattle Association Convention in Valentine on May 26

### **A bird's eye view of the benefit of partnerships**

The photo below was taken by Jim in his personal airplane. It shows a project we completed on Wolfenden two summers ago. This photo was taken this May. The structure (in the lower right corner) impounds water in Gordon Creek and allows Wolfenden to irrigate a large meadow located downstream of the structure. The pastureland shown in the picture is pocked with shallow seasonal wetlands.

Thanks for the great photo, Jim!



*Aene D. Mack*