

Next Task Force Meeting:

The next Task Force meeting is on September 13th 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 (Gene Mack)
Project Coordinator update
Conflict of interest concerns
Approval of 2007 NET grant application

Updates:

Mallard survival study

12:00 Lunch

The Grazing Manager software (Agren, Inc.)
CRP buffers in the Sandhills
Replacing Craig Utter
Funding SRM Youth Camp
Funding Prescribed Fire Task Force

3:30 Adjourn

Additional funding received from NRCS

In early August, the Sandhills Task Force was notified by NRCS that they wished to modify our existing cooperative agreement. They were able to find approximately \$10,000 to add to our agreement. Earlier this year, because of budget decreases, they reduced our agreement by about the same amount. It is noteworthy to recognize that we apparently are doing the kind of work that NRCS supports for them to restore the original funding. It makes for a good partnership.

Small group has problem with Jim Van Winkle being County Commissioner

In the last newsletter, I reported that Jim had announced his candidacy for Cherry County Commissioner. During the primary, he was elected. Although no Democrats are opposing him, he has the formality of the fall General election. A small group of individuals have expressed opposition to having him serve as County Commissioner. Their claim is that there is a conflict of interest between being a County Commissioner and working on behalf of the STF. Their recent claim is that Jim is in violation of the Hatch Act.

The Hatch Act restricts federal employees from running for a partisan position in federal, state, and local elections. The Act further states that employees of some non-profit organizations which receive Federal funds granted to them through legislation, which identifies the non-profit employees as serving in a federal or state employee status, are also precluded from running for a partisan position.

Jim has contacted the Washington Office of Special Council for a ruling on this matter. A copy will be forwarded to both NC and STF when available. I am not

the Office of Special Council but my opinion is that Federal funds described in the Act are more in line with funding in the form of Community Development Block grants and some Health and Human Service funding.

We receive two sources of Federal funding: NRCS and USFWS. NRCS funds are through a cooperative agreement to cover costs we incur while Jim is providing assistance to ranchers involved in Farm Bill programs. The money from the FWS is direct reimbursement for costs of material and construction associated with grazing and wetland projects. No portion of that funding goes to support the administrative costs of the STF.

Regarding a conflict of interest between working for the Task Force and being County Commissioner; it appears to me that the voters of Cherry County did not see a conflict of interest or else they would not have elected him. It would be a terrible shame if we took any action that would discourage an individual from stepping forward to serve his or her community.

NGPC to provide an update on duck study

Dr. Mark Vrtiska, NGPC's waterfowl biologist, has requested time on the agenda to report the results of the second year of their mallard survival study.

STF co-hosts public meeting in Hyannis

In late June, the STF joined with Nebraska Game and Parks to host an open house to discuss the role of the STF and the new Nebraska Natural Legacy Plan. There were approximately 80 people present. Some comments received after the meeting was that we had clarified some of the rumors that were going around. A small group of attendees expressed to the crowd that this plan was part of a United Nations' conspiracy to take property rights away from Sandhill ranchers. NGPC made it clear several times that the plan was required to receive Federal funding to do voluntary projects which benefit ranching. And, if the local people did not want to participate, that funding will be directed to other parts of the state.

Agren, Inc. receives grant to help train users of forage management software.

At our last Board meeting, I asked the Board to approve supporting a grant which Agren, Inc was going to submit to NRCS. The grant was to obtain funding to help train ranchers who wish to use a forage management software to help them better plan for their yearly forage needs. NRCS awarded Agren the money. Stan Buman, vice-president of the organization, has requested time on our agenda to speak about the project.

NGPC wishes to discuss CRP buffers

A recent project funded by the STF included funding from a NRCS program which requires wetlands to be fenced out with its perimeter planted with woody plants. Although the overall project was in line with what the STF supports, this portion raised the question if we should be supporting projects that do not allow grazing

and encourages planting of woody plants along the wetland. Ted has asked that this item be added to the agenda.

STF co-hosts an open house at Horse Creek Fen ranch

The open house held at the Horse Creek Ranch appeared to have been a success. Over one hundred people attended, included about eight ranchers from Montana. Both Beginning Rancher families were present and gave a short speech about how they felt about their arrangement.

STF conducts workshop with Montana ranchers

On the day following the Horse Creek Ranch open house, Jim Van Winkle, Jim Luchsinger, Rob, and I gave a group of Montana ranchers a tour of the Cow Creek project we did in the mid 1990's. We spent the entire day talking about the workings of creating and sustaining a grassroots organization. They expressed a great deal of appreciation for the time and information we had given them. Their next step was to take that information back home to form their version of a grassroots organization.

Prescribe Burn Task Force seeks support from STF

I received a request from the Prescribed Burn Task Force asking for a letter of support and any financial matching funds we wished to contribute. Their request had an extremely short deadline because they needed it to include in their grant application to the Nebraska Environmental Trust. That short deadline did not allow time for me to bring it to the Board. It is, however, something the Board may wish to discuss in preparation of future requests.

Request from SRM to fund Nebraska Range Youth Camp for Range Management

A request for funds was received from the Society of Range Management to again support their annual youth camp. In past years, we have contributed about \$500. Their request this year did not specify an amount.

NET does site review of Jumbo-Pullman Fen property

Nebraska Environmental Trust notified me about their interest in conducting an on-site review of the success or benefit of the Jumbo-Pullman Fen project they funded in the 1990's. The review was held the last week of June and included Mary Harding from NET and Gerry Steinauer from NGPC. The current landowners graciously welcomed us onto the property. The preliminary findings showed that the change in vegetation has been positive. We noted that livestock grazing was focused on the invading plant species, causing the native species to return to areas.

NET extends length of STF grant by one year

The STF currently has a grant from NET to purchase one or more conservation easements within the Sandhills. The conditions of the grant are quite specific-limiting the potential sites. The term of that grant expired at the end of June. I formally requested a one-year extension. The request was granted.

Three-year grant application submitted to NET

Our current three-year NET grant will expire in the summer of 2007. I submitted another three-year grant on behalf of Task Force. The terms of the application are nearly identical to the previous grant. The main change was that it request \$3000 more than the previous grant did. This action needs the Board's approval.

Nebraska Farmer writes conservation easements articles

After an on-site interview of the Keller family, the editor of the Nebraska Farmer magazine ran three separate articles about conservation easements in a recent edition. One article made the cover, while the second article featured the Keller family and the effect of the easement on their life and long-term goals. The third article was an editorial in which the editor identified that some people are opposed to this action. The opposing group connects this action with the United Nations conspiracy to take private property rights. After considering their point of view, the editorial supported the STF approach to helping young ranchers be continued.

STF's financial records reviewed by accounting firm

The annual review of our financial records by a Kearney accounting firm showed us to be in good standing. Those findings will be included in our annual accomplishment report.

Jim Van Winkle speaks at DOI listening session

Last year the White House Council hosted an invitation-only event in St. Louis to discuss how government can do a better job of responding to the public on cooperative conservation. From that meeting came the decision to hold about 26 listening sessions throughout the United States. One of those was held in Omaha in late August.

Jim was one of two people asked to speak before the Department of Interior panel. He was asked to share how the Sandhills Task Force has been effective at bringing cooperative conservation to the Sandhills.

I joined Jim at that event and must say that Jim did an excellent job of representing ranchers, as well as the Task Force. Barb was also present and spoke on behalf of the Nebraska Cattlemen. Hopefully, the message of working with private landowners was heard clearly.

STF contributes funds to maintain Sandhill weather station

A request from Middle Niobrara NRD was received to again pay \$200 toward annual maintenance and operation of the weather station near Merritt Reservoir. Payment was sent to the NRD.

