



Annual Report

2007

“Making the Sandhills a Better Life”

2007 Nebraska RC&D Association Conference

The Sandhills RC&D Council hosted the 2007 Nebraska RC&D State Association Conference held at the Grey Goose Lodge in Ogallala, NE Oct. 2-4, 2007. The 90 plus registrants could choose from afternoon training sessions including QuickBooks Pro, Non-Profit Director's Training, Sustainable Non-Profits, and an eBay Starter Course. Spouses enjoyed an afternoon of touring local attractions and unique businesses in the Ogallala area.

A special evening program was presented by Rulon Gardner, the 2000 Olympic Gold Medalist in wrestling, whose late father was inducted into the National RC&D Association Hall of Fame earlier this year. Day two of the conference featured a bus tour of the area with stops at the Old West Soap Box Derby track in Ogallala, Kingsley Dam, Figure Four Traditions at Haythorn Land and Cattle Co., Dismal River Golf Club near Mullen, and the Straw Bale Church in Arthur, NE. That evening, the group enjoyed dinner and musical entertainment by Kristina Marie, a local country western star from Whitman, NE. Kristina recently appeared on Martina McBride's music special and will be traveling to Nashville shortly to continue her career.

The final morning of the conference concluded with the annual state association business meeting while program assistants share a question and answer session.

Housing Rehabilitation Program Continues

With the success of round one and two of the Mullen/Arthur/Theadford and Logan/McPherson rehabilitation program, the Sandhills RC&D continued with round three and received funds for the Nebraska Affordable Housing Program through the Nebraska Department of Economic Development.

The Sandhills RC&D has been awarded \$150,000 state set-aside funds for the rehabilitation of owner-occupied houses. The benefits of this program include the continuation of providing housing rehabilitation funds to eligible homeowners in the Sandhills RC&D region. Given the age of housing in this area of the state and the average family incomes in the targeted counties, there is a demand for these funds that far exceeds the amount available.



Ken Noonan (right), Nebraska RC&D Program Manager honored for his years of commitment to the RC&D Program.

The mission of the Sandhills RC&D is to create an environment where all the citizens of the regions work together to revitalize the rural economy, enhance and protect the natural resources, improve community infrastructure, and improve and increase tourism opportunities.

Seneca Auditorium Restored

The Seneca Historic Preservation Society, Inc. organized January 16, 2000 with a goal to restore the Seneca Auditorium. The Auditorium was built in 1915 as a two story building. In the thirties, the building was rebuilt by the Civilian Conservation Corps crews after a tornado took the top floor. The Village of Seneca currently owns the building and is responsible for utilities, insurance and maintenance.

The facility condition had become run down and in need of repair due to modest use and minimal maintenance. The Seneca Historic Preservation Society went to work organizing a fundraising campaign and brought in over \$50,000.00 cash for renovations. Hundreds of volunteer hours have been utilized to raise funds and perform in-kind labor for the restoration. Additionally, countless items have been donated for the fundraising cause. Examples of fund raising events that have been held include sales of Seneca souvenirs, dances, rummage sales, fund raising dinners, and beef raffles. Other fund raising activities include serving food at auctions and antique sales, memorials, alumni donations, church donations, cemetery board donations, and the selling of memorabilia related to the building.

In 2006, the Sandhills RC&D accepted a project proposal to assist the Seneca Historic Preservation Society and the Village of Seneca find funding to complete the restoration and were successful in finding over \$35,000 for the project. During the past two years, a new metal roof was installed and exterior walls were repaired. The restrooms were replaced with new handicap accessible restrooms, the kitchen was remodeled, and the ceiling was lowered with new lights installed. Also, new windows and doors were put in and the interior walls were repaired and painted. The restoration continued this past

fall when the original wood floor was sanded and a protective finish applied.

To make the most efficient use of energy, a new heating and cooling system needs to be installed in the Auditorium. The existing heating system is old and inadequate. When occasional repair work is needed on the existing furnace, repair parts are often difficult to locate due to the age of the unit. One of the final objectives of the restoration project was to replace the heating system and add an air conditioning system to the facility. The Village of Seneca applied for assistance through USDA to help with this phase of the restoration. USDA assistance provided 75% of the costs of the application and contributed over \$22,000.00 for the project.

Total cost outlays for the whole restoration project surpassed \$85,000.00.

Citizens of Thomas, Hooker and Cherry Counties and other Sandhills communities are benefiting from this facility restoration project by using the facility to serve



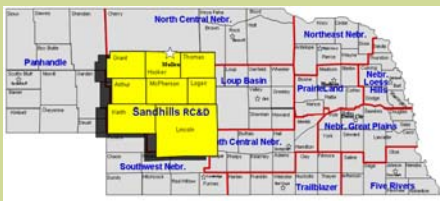
as a community resource. No other meeting place is available in the Seneca area except a church and local cafe. It is the only facility large enough to accommodate moderate size groups. Neighboring communities that use the facility include Thedford and Mullen. The auditorium is used for village board meetings, wedding receptions, funerals, community dinners, dances, and family reunions. Meetings of all types have been held in the building, including ranch safety, first responder training, boy and girls scouts, 4-H meetings, and cattlemen's association meetings.

Efforts and improvements on the Seneca Auditorium thus far have created new energy and interest in the restoration project. Several fundraising events have been held for the project, renewing a sense of pride and spirit in the community. As our area population grows smaller, Seneca has fought to hold our identity and sense of community.

Sandhills RC&D

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**We are private citizens,
 doing public good in your
 neighborhood!**



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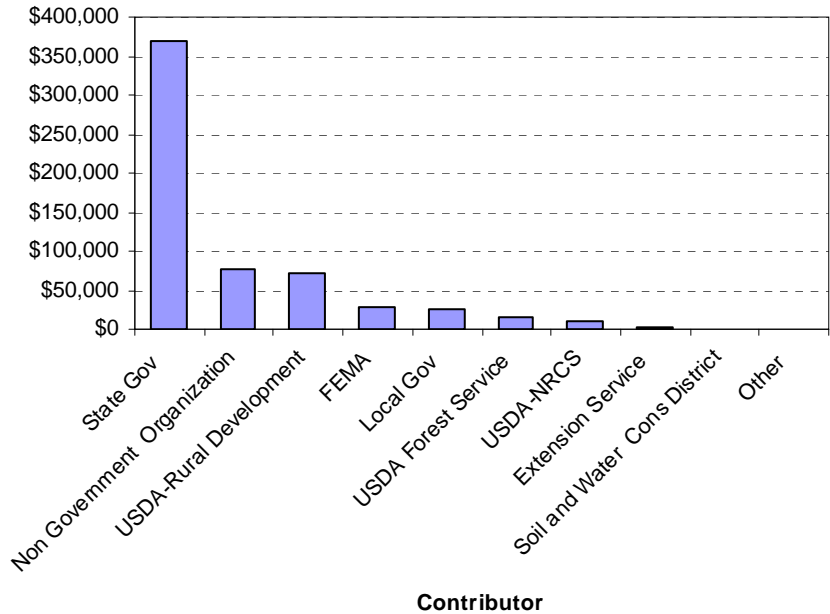
RC&D Staff

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2007 Project Contributions



West Central WMA Begins Platte River Restoration

West Central Weed Management Area formed and organized in 2006 with assistance from Sandhills RC&D. During 2007, the West Central WMA received over \$359,000 to control invasive species on the Platte River system. Over 2,000 acres of invasive Saltcedar on the dry portion Lake McCaughey was treated in fall of 2007. The WMA continues to seek partners and plan treatment options for Phragmites that is choking the Platte River in many areas. With assistance from the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, over \$10,000 was used to treat "Phrag" in the North Platte area as a plan to establish demonstration plots that will be used for educational opportunities in the future.

The Sandhills RC&D adopted the Platte River Restoration Project in fall of 2007 and will continue to assist the WMA with their work.



Aerial treatments in Lincoln County

The West Central WMA is in the process of developing a watershed plan and is applying for funds that will support continued treatments and expansion of the program throughout the entire reach of the Platte River in Lincoln and Keith Counties.

New Fire Trucks for Mullen and Thedford Fire Districts

The Mullen & Thedford Rural Fire Protection Districts will add four new trucks to the fire fighting line-up. Sandhills RC&D also provided technical assistance in preparing and submitting grant proposals.

In Mullen, one truck will replace the current 1982 pickup with over 150,000 miles on it and will come complete with a flatbed, pump and hoses. The second truck would replace a 1984 truck with over 180,000 miles. These new grass rigs will enable firefighters to reach remote fires in rough terrain with well equipped and reliable fire fighting resources. The upgrades totaling \$61,000 were financed with grant assistance from FEMA, USDA Rural Development, Burlington Northern Santa Fe Foundation, and the Nebraska Census grants. These grants totaled over \$53,000 with an \$8,000 balance coming from the Mullen Rural Fire District.

In Thedford, two military 6 X 6 truck from Federal Surplus will replace two old tank trucks used by the Fire District and fit the replacement trucks with the proper equipment needed. The districts are characterized by rough terrain and few roads and both tankers are vital to the mission of the Thedford RFD. The Thedford upgrades totaled \$47,250 and were financed with grant assistance from FEMA, USDA Rural Development, Burlington Northern Santa Fe Foundation, Peter Kiewit Foundation, Thedford Area Community Foundation and the Nebraska Census grants. Thedford volunteers will fabricate and mount the necessary equipment on the tankers, providing in-kind match for the grants.

The new trucks will provide a direct benefit to the firefighters and to the public of Hooker, Thomas and Cherry counties by giving them safer and more dependable trucks to serve the district residents. The districts main call volume is for wildland grass fires in remote locations within the largest fire districts in the state of Nebraska. The time spent traveling within the dis-



tricts to get to a fire is up to 1.5 hours one way so it is helpful to have dependable and reliable trucks.

“Without the grant funds the purchase of a new trucks would not be feasible,” stated James Hoffman, president, Mullen Rural Fire District. “The trucks will greatly enhance our ability to serve the over 2,000 square miles in our fire district.”

The Rural Fire Protection Districts are volunteer run organizations and exist solely through local efforts. Thanks to all that support these volunteer efforts.

Sandhills RC&D Fiscal Year 2007 Budget

Incomes

<i>Interest</i>	\$206
<i>Dues</i>	\$900
<i>Private Sources</i>	\$18,575
<i>Public Sources</i>	\$109,863
<i>Other</i>	\$21,008

Total **\$150,552**

Expenses

<i>Operational</i>	\$14,449
<i>Project</i>	\$88,121
<i>Other</i>	\$1,238

Total **\$103,809**

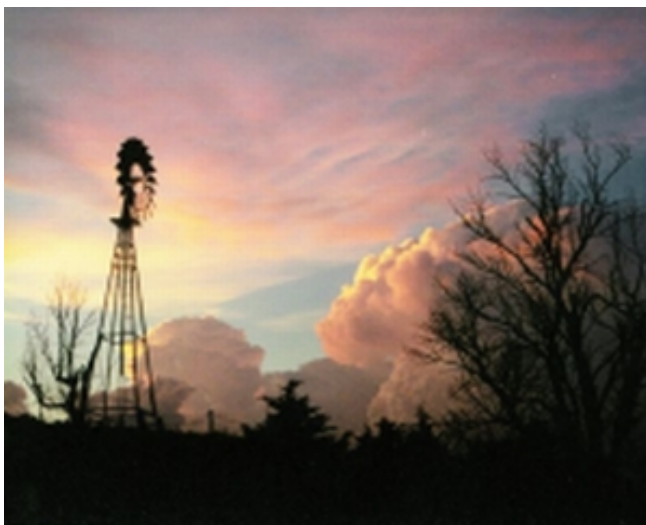
Tourism Efforts Include Photo Contest

The Sandhills RC&D is assisting the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway organization with tourism efforts along Nebraska's Highway 2. Deemed one of the ten most scenic roads in the United States, Nebraska's "Sandhills Journey" takes you through some of the most remote and breathtaking countryside you will ever see.

One of the projects of the group this year was sponsoring a photography contest to highlight life and scenes along the byway. With over 260 entries submitted, the contest was deemed a huge success. Work has already begun to utilize winning photos in marketing materials that will promote this unique region.



Highway Category Winner by Dale Link of Ravenna titled "Sundown on Highway 2"



Intrinsic Quality Winner by Ryan Ridenour of Mullen titled "God's Handiwork"

Byway Develops Marketing Plan

Within the last year, the Byway organization has selected an advertising firm, Idea Bank Marketing from Grand Island, to help with promotional projects. A comprehensive marketing plan has been developed to reach a specific target market. With the adoption of a new logo and slogan, the Byway organization's highest priority will be to develop this brand recognition through repetition and continuity in various media outlets.

The new tagline, "You're On 2 Something!", hints at the physical beauty and cultural treasures that can be found along the way. "You're On 2 Something!" suggests that the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway will indeed lead a visitor to something they will enjoy.

Be sure to check out the Byway's website at www.sandhillsjourney.com.



Cultural Category winner by Julie Hawkins of Arthur titled "Cold"



Scenic Category winner by Rich Walters of Ainsworth titled "Red October"

Gardener Visits Area Schools

When Rulon Gardener came back to Nebraska in October for the State RC&D conference, he also used his motivational talents to inspire area youth with his message, "Never Give Up, Never Stop Trying: 7 Points to Success".

As an Olympic Gold Medalist, Rulon Gardner, is perhaps most well known for his defeat of Alexander Karelin in the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sidney, Australia, earning him an Olympic Gold Medal. Karelin had been previously unbeaten for thirteen years and had not given up a point in six years. Rulon is now retired from the wrestling arena but has taken up a motivational speaking career and travels extensively throughout the United States.

Rulon shared his personal experiences to illustrate how persistence leads to success. His perseverance and determination in the face of sometimes overwhelming odds made him a very compelling speaker. With his engaging personality and positive message of encouragement, he was well received by his audience. Following his presentation, he signed autographs and met personally with the students.

Rulon's presentation was made possible by the Turner Youth Initiative, the Sandhills Resource Conservation and Development Council, as well as the Mullen, Hyannis and Gothenburg Schools.



Rulon Gardner, was the keynote speaker for the Youth Leadership Initiative project. His father, the late Reed Gardner, was inducted into the National RC&D Hall of Fame earlier in 2007.

Foundation Database Available in North Platte

Public access to the Foundation Center's FC Search 11.0 database is in the third year of availability located at the technology center at the North Platte Public Library. Thanks in part to a grant funded by the Mid-Nebraska Community Foundation based in North Platte; continuation of the grant searching software is once again offered to the public in western Nebraska. This software is a collection of nearly 80,000 foundations, corporate givers and grant-making public charities across the United States. Entering key words describing the kind of grant being searched for will bring up all of the matches for those types of giving organizations.

Sandhills RC&D

Active and Ongoing Projects for 2008

*Housing Rehabilitation Phase III
Thomas County Housing Planning
Byway Tourism Marketing Grant
Middle Loup Lake Project
Byway All-American Road Project
Retree Ogallala
Hooker County Tourism Pilot
No-till Drill Purchase
Mullen Park Improvements
Platte River Restoration
Mullen Community Building
Cedar Control Workshop*

Circle of Diamonds

Sandhills RC&D was recipient of the National Association of RC&D Council's Circle of Diamond Certification and Membership. Circle of Diamonds is the National Association of RC&D Council's Standards of Excellence Program and recognizes RC&D councils that are impacting the quality of life within their local areas. Circle of Diamond Members exemplify their public accountability and indicates honesty, integrity and a strong commitment of RC&D Councils to the RC&D mission. Currently, in Nebraska all twelve of the states RC&D Councils are now members of the NARC&DC's Circle of Diamonds.

