



Annual Report

2008

“Making the Sandhills a Better Life”

Housing Rehabilitation Program Continues

The Sandhills RC&D is pleased to serve as a regional housing resource provider and continues to offer funds for the rehabilitation of owner-occupied houses. When the Sandhills RC&D began its planning for this housing rehabilitation program, the long-term goal was to make the funds available to all areas of the six target counties. This project initially started in three communities, but over the past 3 years it has expanded to cover all areas in the six counties of Thomas, Hooker, Grant, Arthur, McPherson and Logan.

Since the beginning of this project in 2005, the Sandhills RC&D has been awarded \$350,000 for the Nebraska Affordable Housing Program through the Nebraska Department of Economic Development. Additional funding is available from a 2008 Set-Aside once the initial funds are utilized and the program administrators are confident this will occur quickly with the recently expanded service area. 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.

Platte River Restoration Project Focuses on Lincoln County

The Platte River Restoration Project is a long-term strategic project that will restore critical habitat for millions of migratory water fowl and many other wildlife species as well as reduce flooding potential to communities along the river by improving river flow conveyance .

The Platte River of Nebraska is known for its wildlife habitat and for a diverse range of flora and fauna. Within the Platte River, an invasive species called *Phragmites* has out-competed native vegetation by reducing biodiversity. This plant is an aggressive invader and



During the fall of 2008, a total of 2,694 acres of the invasive Phragmites were treated on the Platte Rivers in Lincoln County

rapidly replaces native plant communities. The Sandhills RC&D, working in conjunction with the West Central Weed Management Area and many other partners, has developed a multi-year plan to reduce Phragmites infestations with a variety of treatment methods. The project will incorporate an integrated weed management philosophy and an applied research approach that is supported by the state's Riparian Vegetation Management Task Force.

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

During the fall of 2008, a total of 2,694 acres of the invasive Phragmites were treated on the Platte Rivers in Lincoln County by North Star Helicopters. This completed treatment on the first three project priority areas that were designated earlier in the year. The helicopters in the area also lead to great publicity for the West Central Weed Management Area. KNOP-TV ran footage and interviews during the beginning of the application process. The North Platte Telegraph, Omaha World-Herald, and Kearney Hub all ran stories about this project and Platte Valley Weed Management Area's project that occurred in south central Nebraska as well. This publicity ran across the state making more Nebraskans aware of the problems within the Platte River.



Monoculture stands of Phragmites degrading habitat and 'choking' river flows.

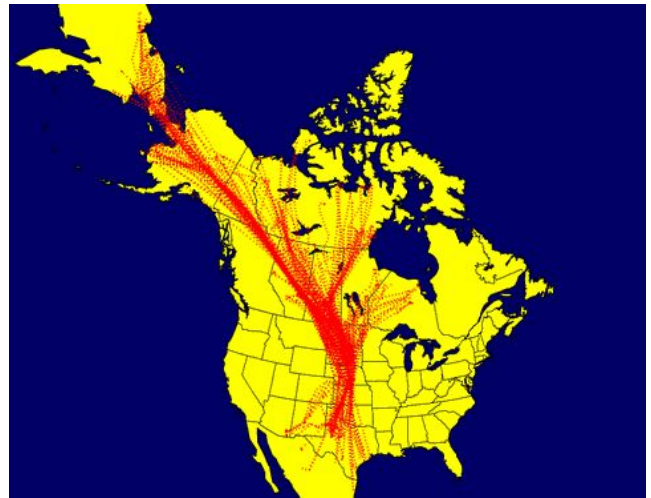


Goal of the Project would result in more native Platte River habitat – above is a current picture taken in Hall County on treated and managed lands. (2008)

The project will use a regional watershed approach encompassing the North Platte River from Kingsley Dam and the South Platte from the Colorado state line through the Platte River system down to the

confluence with the Loup River covering approximately 257 'river' miles of the Platte River between Ogallala and Columbus. By focusing on the entire system, the project can maximize control, efficacy, and long-term maintenance, while restricting reinfestations from up-stream seed sources.

A long-term management strategy being developed will work with the landowners to implement grazing systems focused on maintaining native wildlife habitat. Fence-line visual observations show that grazing significantly reduces stands of phragmites. By offering incentives to landowners to implement grazing in the riparian zone, long-term sustainability can be achieved to control this invasive plant.



This diagram illustrates the migratory flight pattern resulting in the natural phenomena called central flyway "funnel" that passes through the heart of Nebraska. Millions of migratory birds visit each spring and native river habitat is critical for their migratory trek.

Platte River Restoration Marketing Plan

An advertising campaign is being developed based around the slogan, "**Take a bite out of invasive weeds**" and will utilize a variety of media venues to spread the message. The challenge is to send a message that gets landowners to recognize the problem, then learn about and adopt a solution. Conservation partners will use their extensive network including organization newsletters, fact sheets, and media contacts to spread the message.



Promotional materials may use images similar as these photos to help the audience visualize the message "Take a bite out of invasive weeds".

Sandhills RC&D

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



*Serving the Nebraska Counties of
 Arthur, Grant, Hooker, Keith
 Lincoln, Logan, McPherson, & Thomas*

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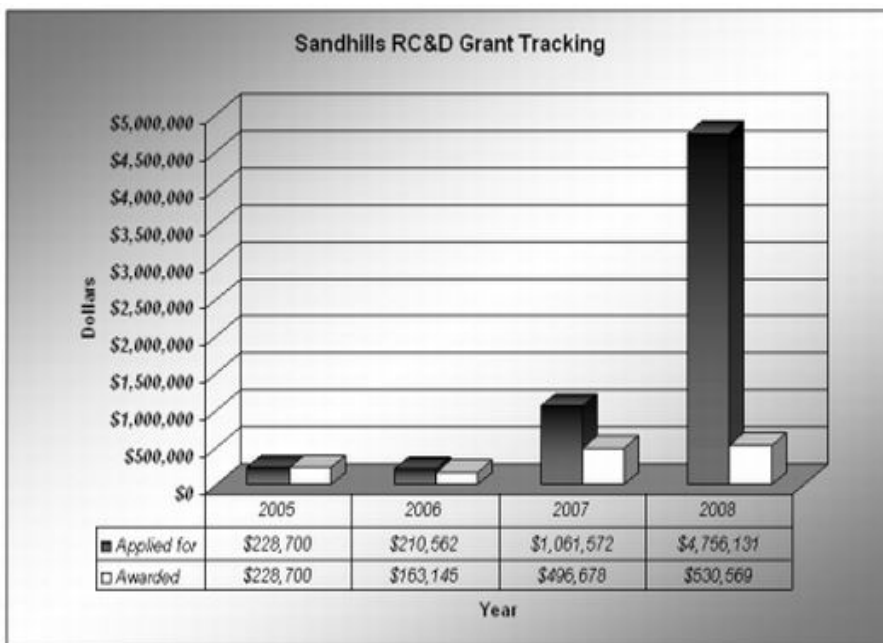
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**New Equipment For The Mullen Rural Fire
 Protection District**

The Sandhills RC&D received an \$11,700 grant from the Sterns Charitable Foundation, Inc. to assist the Mullen Rural Fire Protection District with the purchase of fire protection equipment.

The Mullen Rural Fire Protection District is comprised of very active and well trained volunteers with a strong commitment to education and training that improves safety for the fire fighters. The District was in need of eight new face masks for air packs. The grant enabled the District to have an air mask for each fireman that is trained on interior structural fire suppression. In addition, the Department purchased a thermal imaging camera used for a variety of functions, but primarily used for locating victims in a fire situation. The camera has the ability to allow the fireman to see through dense smoke and locate anything with heat such as a body or fire hot spots hidden inside a wall by monitoring the temperature of the air inside a fire. This is a tremendous tool to help aid in fire suppression and will improve the safety for the fireman.

The extrication equipment that is currently available is greater than 10 years old and some is older than 20 years. The project plan included refurbishing three older Holmatro hydraulic tools and a pump that can be modified at about 25% of the cost of new items. The District plans to purchase one new Holmatro combi-tool and a new pump unit that can operate two hydraulic tools at the same time. In addition, the District will add to their equipment inventory with new cribbing and stabilizer jacks to aid in extrication activities.



Mullen Rural Fire Protection District conducted a training near Seneca for volunteers on structural fires .



Cedar/Brush Control Demonstration

Sandhills RC&D hosted a cedar and brush control demonstration in April. The demonstration site was four miles east and one mile north of Mullen along the Middle Loup River. Several vendors were on hand with timber harvesting equipment to demonstrate tools such as saws, grinders, shears, grapples, and choppers. Representatives from the USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service and the Nebraska Forest Service were present to discuss cost-share and other funding opportunities for pasture clearing and fuel-load reduction.



Rangeland Carbon Credit Education

The Sandhills RC&D teamed up with the Nebraska Farmers Union and UNL Extension to host informational meetings at Mullen and Arthur. Over 80 attended the meetings to hear Farmers Union and NRCS representatives discuss this relatively new market and answer questions related to the carbon credit program.

Practices that qualify include prescribed

grazing on native rangeland, no-till cropping, seeded grass, forage stands, and forestry. Other practices that qualify for the carbon credit market include livestock operations that collect and combust waste methane, and landfills that are not required to collect methane by law. Even if one does not believe the global warming theories, the fact is an international market has emerged to address green-house gas issues and qualifying land managers can benefit by selling their commodity, "carbon credits", on this market.

Sandhills RC&D will be teaming up with UNL Extension Service to offer more educational opportunities regarding this topic in 2009.

Sandhills RC&D No-Till Education Project

During 2008, two No-Till workshops were hosted in the Lincoln/Keith County area. Over 100 participants were present at the workshops to learn about topics such as planter equipment adjustments, carbon credits in a no-till system and soil quality and health using no-till systems. The summer workshop also included field tours to look at soil quality. Sandhills RC&D partners in this effort included the University of Nebraska, USDA-NRCS, and Nebraska Farmers Union.



During a field tour, Chuck Markley, soil scientist with NRCS explains some of the soil health benefits under a No-Till Cropping System.

Sandhills RC&D Fiscal Year 2008 Budget

Incomes

<i>Interest</i>	\$76
<i>Dues</i>	\$850
<i>Private Sources</i>	\$22,669
<i>Public Sources</i>	\$98,973

Total **\$122,568**

Expenses

<i>Operational</i>	\$18,126
<i>Project</i>	\$122,033
<i>Other</i>	\$245

Total **\$140,404**



Sandhills RC&D Partners with the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition

The Sandhills RC&D adopted a project to work cooperatively with the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition (NGLC) in their efforts to assist Nebraska's private grassland managers in the application of long-term invasive plant management. This project will help land managers protect and restore ecological balance to Nebraska grasslands through tried and proven grazing practices as well as innovative strategies that promote healthy grasslands.

Using grant funds administered by the Sandhills RC&D, the NGLC contracted with a program manager and reorganized the Rancher Stewardship Network within the past year. Designated land stewards were invited to attend a Training and Orientation meeting before the Nebraska Grazing Conference with more than 35 stewards attendance. The group participated in discussions of NGLC and identified topics of interest in their regions of the state. Based on these topics of interest, NGLC has organized, hosted or assisted with a variety of workshops, tours, conferences and seminars across Nebraska including: Nebraska Grazing Conference; Greg Judy Seminar; Reeves Ranch Tour; Multi-Species Grazing Seminar and Tour; and EQIP Invasive Species Meeting.

In July, NGLC designed and ordered new equipment for seminars and tradeshows, including a new booth system, outdoor tent and portable speaker system, all which have been utilized greatly. Additionally, a design for a grazing stick (square plastic yardstick with grazing information on three sides) was developed and produced. These grazing sticks are given out at various events to participants who complete a survey on their pasture utilization and grazing practices.



The Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition announced it had contracted with Tamara Choat to serve as coordinator of the producer-based stewardship group.

Center for Enterprise Partners with Sandhills RC&D to Present Entrepreneurship Training



To assist with entrepreneurial endeavors, the Center for Enterprise at Mid-Plains Community College partnered with the Sandhills Resource Conservation & Development Council, West Central Nebraska Development District Inc., North Platte Chamber and Economic Development, and Lincoln County Entrepreneurship Coalition, to offer training that was specifically designed for those who would like to learn how to research, develop and plan for business success.

The course was offered at North Platte Community College's South Campus with satellite feeds to Mullen High School.

An overview of the training was offered in August as a free, no obligation workshop to introduce interested individuals to the upcoming business development training opportunities offered in the fall of 2008. Jessica Hampton was contracted by the RC&D to be the Mullen coach. The training course began in September and ran 10 weeks with 3 businesses represented at the Mullen site and 4 at the North Platte location. Course topics included recognizing opportunities; defining a business concept and testing feasibility; management and organization planning; market and financial planning; and completing a business plan. Professional instructors, business coaches and guest speakers were all utilized in the training and offered materials that were personalized for use in attendees businesses.

Attendees to the course determined if now was the right time to capture enhanced management skills and new markets, or if different timing might be best to enjoy desired business growth.

Dismal River Club Job Fair

The Dismal River Club hosted a job fair at the RC&D building in April. Fifteen people filled out job applications and interviewed for summer employment. Sandhills RC&D would like to expand the job fair in 2009 and encourage other employers to join the job fair to reach a larger number of potential employees. Contact the Sandhills RC&D office for more details.



Foundation Database Available in North Platte

Public access to the Foundation Center's FC Search 12.0 database is in the fourth 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 Journey Scenic Byway Develops Strategic Marketing Plan

The Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway organization partnered with Sandhills RC&D by adopting a project that assisted in the development of long range plans and strategies. This project can impact the economy of the region along Nebraska Highway #2 from Grand Island to Alliance.

Following are excerpts taken from the Byway's strategic marketing plan.

There is a place in America virtually untouched by the hand of man. The largest area of stabilized sand dunes in the western hemisphere, the Nebraska Sandhills, occupies nearly 20,000 square miles. In this timeless, wind blown ocean of undulating dunes, native grass and vivid blue lakes, Nature is still master of the land. Nebraska Highway 2, the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway, bisects the region, leading travelers to treasures undiscovered anywhere else.

At the Byway's east end near Grand Island, an ancient rite of Nature occurs. The largest gathering of cranes on Earth descends on the shallow Platte River in a stop-over on their annual spring migration northward. Hundreds of thousands of Sandhill Cranes make brilliant morning eruptions into the sky as they leave their nighttime river roost to feed. It's a migration of proportions unparalleled anywhere on the planet. The North American Central Flyway is touted as a world class birding experience featuring more than 300 species of migratory and indigenous birds during the spring migration.

Heading west, the Byway's Cultural qualities abound through interaction with the local residents,

many of whom are of European descent. Travelers notice family homesteads where generations of farmers have worked the land. Small towns punctuate the road and friendly folks are always ready for rich conversation. Third, fourth and fifth generation cattle ranches still use horses as they have for generations. These rugged "Sandhillers" work along side Nature on a daily basis and are true stewards of the land, grazing cattle where buffalo once roamed. Cowboys still congregate to help each other with cattle work just as they did a century ago.

These enormous, wild places are virtual wildlife refuges. Species once common across the Midwest still find their stronghold in the Sandhills. The grass-covered sand dunes are peppered with shallow natural lakes and rivers fed by the High Plains Aquifer, North America's largest underground water supply. This aquifer feeds the Loup River System, creating the most constant and remarkably uniform flow of water in the world.

In the Sandhills, water percolates into ponds and marshes providing habitat for a myriad of fish, reptiles, amphibians and bird species. Formations of pelicans soar like bombers from lake to lake. Graceful swans have returned and are nesting again in the region. Sharp-tailed grouse and greater prairie chickens are still common here.

Explore Nebraska Highway 2, the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway. You'll leave with an immediate desire to return, a sense of rejuvenation and the comforting feeling of knowing that there is still a wild place in the world right in the heart of Nebraska.



This photo of the Middle Loup River valley west of Theford was adopted as the primary photo of Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway.
Photo by Twila Phillips

Sandhills Summit held in Stapleton

The Sandhills Summit, the first of the Rural Development Commission's — Listen and Learn sessions was held the evening of October 14, 2008 in Stapleton. Attendees traveled from Thedford, Arnold, Callaway, and Bassett to join the Stapleton meeting.

A variety of local, state, and federal resources participated including the Sandhills RC&D, Nebraska Business Development Center, Rural Enterprise Assistance Program, Nebraska Division of Travel and Tourism, Nebraska Community Foundation, GROW Nebraska, Department of Environmental Quality, Community Development Services, USDA— Rural Development, Nebraska Department of Economic Development, and the Nebraska Rural Development Commission.



The information gathered from the audience was shared with all the resource providers while the highlight of the evening was the meet and greet time where resource providers were available to visit individually with attendees. One person was heard to comment, "who ever knew there were so many resources to help us?"

Sandhills RC&D

Active and Ongoing Projects for 2008

*Housing Rehabilitation Phase III
Platte River Restoration
Hooker County Tourism Pilot
No-till Outreach
Carbon Credit Education
Mullen Park Improvements
Byway Tourism Marketing Grant
Retree Ogallala
Mullen Community Building
Cedar Control Workshop
2009 Market Place Conference
Youth Leadership Seminars
Business Development Outreach*

Hooker County Tourism Project

Assistance is being provided to Hooker County Lodging Committee to carry out tourism activities. These include responding to information requests, website development, advertising campaign development, and local tourism events.



The first Polar Bear Tank Race was held in February 2008 as a collaborative event with Hooker and Thomas Counties.



*Sandhills Resource Conservation and Development Council receives technical assistance from the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service.
An equal opportunity employer and provider.*

Third Annual MarketPlace Conference To Be Held in North Platte

The Third Annual MarketPlace conference will be held at the Sandhills Convention Center in North Platte on February 25, 2009. This event which is presented by the Center for Rural Affairs and many other partners including the Sandhills RC&D, is focused on strengthening small businesses and rural communities.

Visit www.cfra.org/marketplace/home for registration information.



Sandhills RC&D is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization recognized by the IRS and State of Nebraska.

Sandhills Youth Leadership Seminars

Included in the 2009 MarketPlace Conference are special sessions geared specifically to youth. As part of an on-going project called Youth Leadership Seminars, the Sandhills RC&D received funding to assist all high schools in the Sandhills RC&D service area to send students and business teachers to the 2009 MarketPlace Conference. This project was funded in part by a grant from Mid-Nebraska Community Foundation, based in North Platte.

97 volunteers contributed 2,444 hours toward projects of the Sandhills RC&D in 2008

Presented by the CENTER for RURAL AFFAIRS

Save This Date! February 25, 2009

Grow! with us at the 3rd Annual MarketPlace Small Business Conference
Sandhills Convention Center
North Platte, Nebraska

MarketPlace
empowering ideas for success

Focused on the needs of rural small businesses and communities

Go to www.cfra.org/marketplace/home for more information