



# Annual Report

2010

*“Making the Sandhills a Better Life”*

## Mullen High School Receives Wind Turbine

To assist the RC&D area in renewable energy development, the Sandhills RC&D Council adopted an ongoing energy project. One strategy is to assist schools that wish to install small wind turbines as a teaching tool in hopes of developing student interest in the emerging wind industry in Nebraska.

Mullen Public Schools recently received a check in the amount of \$16,000 from the Attorney Generals Environmental Protection Fund to use in the construction of a wind turbine under the National Renewable Energy Labs Wind for Schools program. The installation of a Skystream 3.7 (1.8 kW) wind turbine will be complete, once with a few wiring steps are finished.

The turbine, which is located north of the bus barn at the high school, will slightly reduce the electrical costs for the school system, but its main purpose will be educational. The project will be specifically geared towards the juniors and seniors in upper level math and science classes, studying data logged by the turbine, monitoring wind speed and turbine performance.



[www.sandhillsrcd.org](http://www.sandhillsrcd.org)

## Byway Receives \$99,900 Grant

The USDA Rural Development awarded the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway a \$99,900 Rural Business Enterprise Grant (RBEG) that will support business development and entrepreneurship along Nebraska Highway 2. In partnership with the Byway, the Sandhills RC&D will perform the grant administration duties.

The SJSB will use this grant to contract with a qualified individual (s) to assist them in promoting existing Byway businesses, raise awareness of new business creation opportunities and attract travelers to a rural and relatively underserved region of NE. Funds will be used for marketing, promotion and technical assistance. Targeted counties include Blaine, Custer, Garden, Grant, Hooker, Sheridan, Sherman and Thomas. Specific action items in this one year grant include:

- Build relationships between Byway & business community
- Increase business development training
- Expand Byway communications including press releases, feature stories, website upgrades & bi-monthly newsletters
- Develop & implement state & regional media advertising exposure
- Develop presentation regarding Byway amenities, quality of life and business development opportunities
- Develop business directory
- Develop user survey to find traveler's needs & experiences
- Develop & market vacation packages with local attractions & businesses



*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.*

- Make business opportunity presentations to high school career fairs, college job fairs, chambers of commerce & economic development groups
- Conduct workshops and/or events targeting specific interest groups
- Promote the Byway & businesses at trade shows to increase exposure, boost traffic and create economic development opportunities
- Develop biannual familiarization travel tours for press & media contacts
- Encourage young adults to return to the area to work and live

The promotion of the tourism industry is crucial to the continuing viability of our villages and local businesses that operate along this byway. This grant will assist in the implementation of the long term strategic plan of tourism marketing and business development that is desperately needed to help stabilize current declining population trends in this rural area.

### Byway Facilitator Hired

Georgeann Wearin of Hyannis Nebraska was selected as the new Facilitator for the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway (SJSB). Wearin has lived in the Sandhills of Nebraska for over twenty-six years having moved here from Wyoming.

Wearin is the mother of three sons and the wife of Andy Wearin. The couple makes their home on the Wearin Brothers Pitchfork Ranch outside of Hyannis. Wearin has been involved in community service at numerous levels and is an award winning western entertainer and free-lance writer. "I am looking forward to this great opportunity," said Wearin. "I absolutely love the Sandhills and can't wait to promote our Scenic Byway."



As an independent contractor, Wearin will assist and facilitate the Scenic Byway in carrying out the purposes and objectives of the SJSB Rural Business Enterprise Grant awarded by the USDA Rural Development Program. Some of her duties will include building relationships between the Byway and the business communities, increase business development training, expand Byway communications and create a Byway business directory.

### Housing Rehabilitation Program Expands

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.

Eligible expenses include repair or replacement of windows, doors and siding; roof repair or replacement; water heater, furnace / AC; insulation and storm windows; repair of walls, ceilings and floors; accessibility changes for persons with disabilities; and other health and safety related items.



The program does have income eligibility requirements and also the home must be owner-occupied, property taxes must be current, and a homeowner's insurance policy must be in force for the home in question. Funds are provided as a low-interest or deferred loan. Applicants are approved on a first-come, first-ready basis.

Since the beginning of this project in 2005, the Sandhills RC&D has been awarded \$500,000 for the Nebraska Affordable Housing Program through the Nebraska Department of Economic Development. During 2010, the Sandhills RC&D received notice that this program will be awarded another "Set-A-Side" of \$150,000, allowing the program to continue expansion in 2011.

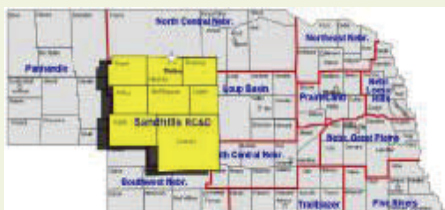
#### *Active and Ongoing Projects for 2010*

*Housing Rehabilitation Phase IV  
Platte River Restoration  
Hooker County Tourism Pilot  
No-till Farming Outreach  
Pioneer Memorial Rest Home Improvements  
Sandhills Journey Byway Promotion  
Range Youth Camp  
Mullen Community Building  
Youth Leadership Seminars  
Business Development Outreach  
Aronia Berry Feasibility  
Upper Loup NRD Recycling Project  
Sandhill Ranchers Beef Co.  
Arthur Flood Plain Re-evaluation  
Seneca Park Restrooms*

**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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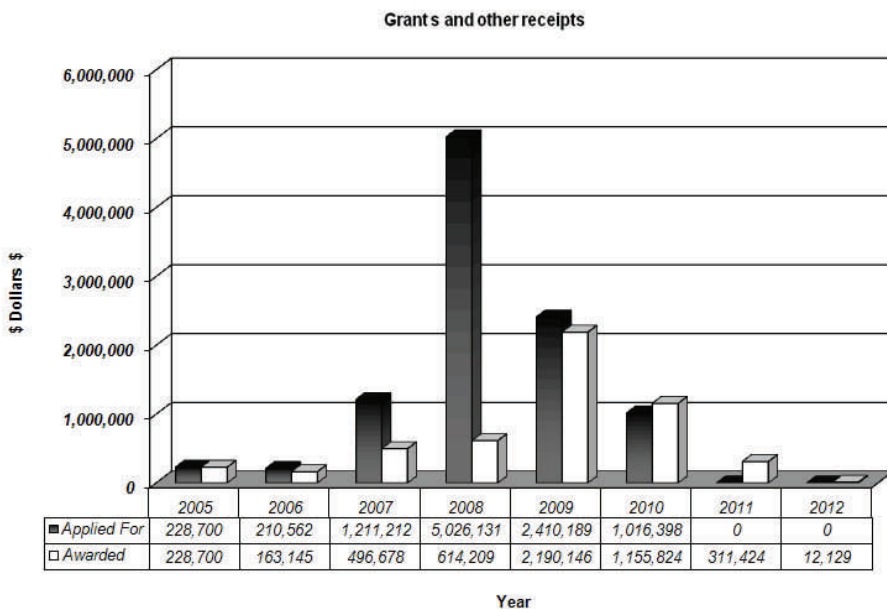
**RC&D Staff**

Twila Phillips  
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**NRCS Staff**

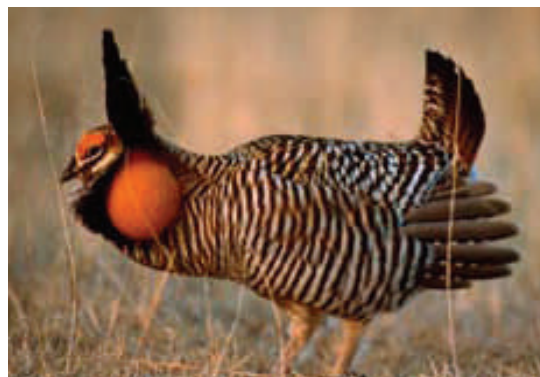
Bob Broweleit  
 RC&D Coordinator

**Sandhills RC&D Project Funds**



**Nebraska Sandhills Grazing Systems and Grassland Bird Diversity Tour**

The Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition held the first Nebraska Sandhills Grazing Systems and Grassland Bird Diversity Tour near Burwell, NE June 2-3. Participants viewed abundant bird populations and learned how rangeland management plays an important role in the state's agricultural industry as well as provides an exceptional environment for many of Nebraska's grassland birds.



The two day tour began at the Switzer Ranch-Callamus Outfitters where guests learned about the Switzer Ranch rangeland management view and history. Afternoon sessions covered topics of plant identification, classroom and field-based bird identification, and information regarding habitat needs of various species and how grazing and burning practices influence the quality of grassland bird habitat. The evening after a buffet dinner, Bob Budd, with the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust spoke on the importance of wildlife on your ranch.

The second day started out early with bird watching and recording species with the Nebraska Audubon. By mid-morning, guests traveled by bus to a radio-telemetry site where Walter Schacht and Larkin Powell with the Depart. of Agronomy and Horticulture at UNL presented information on a study being done on prairie chicken nesting.

To finish the tour, guests traveled to the ranch of Bob and Aaron Price for a picnic lunch and presentation on the Price Ranch holistic management and its positive impact on grassland birds.

Over 50 people participated in the event with plans to offer a similar experience at a different location in 2011.



## Council Renews 5 Year Plan in 2010

Every five years each RC&D Council is required to submit a new Area Plan. Planning and implementation are the central functions of an RC&D area. Strategic planning can improve the organization's ability to capitalize on changing conditions, improve overall productivity, and make better decisions that result in the implementation of a more efficient and effective program. A well developed area plan provides a basis and direction for the Council to serve the area to the best of its ability. The purpose is to set goals and objectives for the Council to address the specific needs of the region. The Area Plan basically serves as the contract between the council and the USDA. The plan is dynamic, and outlines the tasks the council plans to accomplish. It identifies needs and opportunities, as well as broad and specific objectives to reach each goal. The plan is reviewed periodically as needed and revised to reflect the changing needs of the area over time.

One of the important components of the planning process has been public input. Community needs input was received through public meetings, an online survey, and was a part of Council meetings in 2010.

The final draft was approved in August by the state and national headquarters and is available on the council website, [www.sandhillsrcd.org](http://www.sandhillsrcd.org).

## 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 plans to expand the job fair in 2011 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.

## Hooker County Tourism Project

Assistance is being provided to the Hooker County Lodging Tax Advisory Committee to enhance, grow and develop tourism activities, events, and outreach in Hooker County as well as the Central Sandhills of Nebraska. This assistance includes writing grants, maintaining meeting minutes and records, providing financial reports, responding to information requests, website implementation and updating, coordinating advertising efforts, and promotion of local tourism events.

## Energy Efficiency Project

The Sandhills RC&D is assisting area non-profits and currently is working with the Pioneer Memorial Rest Home to improve the energy efficiency of their facility. A grant to acquire stimulus funds of \$59,000 through the Nebraska Energy Office will provide needed resources to complete energy efficiency updates to the facility.



*New high efficiency boiler installed at rest home*

## Sandhills RC&D Fiscal Year 2010 Budget

### *Incomes*

<i>Interest</i>	\$68
<i>Dues</i>	\$850
<i>Private Sources</i>	\$29,708
<i>Public Sources</i>	\$149,982

***Total*** **\$180,608**

### *Expenses*

<i>Operational</i>	\$24,324
<i>Project</i>	\$170,821

***Total*** **\$195,145**

### 2010 Nebraska Range Youth Camp

livestock health and handling, range improvements,

The Nebraska SRM Section's 47th Annual Youth Range Camp was held June 7 - 11, 2010 at the Nebraska State 4-H Camp, located in the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey, Nebraska. The Camp is intended to be a blend of educational and recreational activities, with the primary emphasis being on range, livestock and ranch management. Each Camper received a notebook of refer-



41 students and 11 full-time professionals attended the 2010 Range Camp



Range Camp 2010.

ence materials as well as priceless experience coming from both the classroom and the field.

Forty-one high school students from across Nebraska along with eleven adult sponsors participated in this weeklong educational activity. This premier Section Activity is successful because of the long-term support we have from a wide array

of professionals involved in rangeland management.

Youth attending learned to identify range plants and range sites, judge range condition, and determine stocking rates. Other topics covered included

geology, and wildlife. Crew competitions were held for a variety of activities including water relays, canoe races, scavenger hunts, range judging, and plant identification. During the tour of a local ranch, campers participated in a range judging contest and a "ranch rodeo." A steak fry and dance topped off the week. With nearly 50 years to perfect and evolve this curriculum, every student, no matter what prior experience they had, learned substantial information that will help them become more aware of Nebraska's most prevalent land use.

The Sandhills Task Force and the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition continues to be invaluable sponsors and supporters of the Camp. The support of Nebraska ranchers, professionals, and other sponsoring organizations is also essential for a successful Camp. The 2011 Nebraska Youth Range Camp is scheduled for June 13-17, 2011.

### Sandhills RC&D Area Agricultural Facts

County	Farms/ Ranches	Average Size	Cattle inventory	Hay acres	Corn acres	Soybean acres	Wheat acres
Arthur	68	6,617	33,000	23,000			
Grant	84	5,899	63,000	40,000			
Hooker	58	5,190	40,500	14,900			
Keith	398	1,461	72,000	21,000	91,500	13,100	46,200
Lincoln	1,053	1,521	307,000	93,000	208,000	47,200	29,200
Logan	152	2,391	52,000	21,400	22,300	4,900	
McPherson	143	3,793	62,000	19,600			
Thomas	103	4,125	46,000	8,500			
<b>RC&amp;D totals</b>	<b>2,089</b>	<b>3,556</b>	<b>675,500</b>	<b>241,400</b>	<b>321,800</b>	<b>65,200</b>	<b>75,400</b>
Nebraska	47,712	953	6,576,950	2,563,515	9,192,656	383,435	1,964,302



## Platte River Restoration Project Continues in Lincoln & Keith Counties

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

Within the Platte River, an invasive species called *Phragmites* has out-competed native vegetation thus reducing biodiversity. This plant is an aggressive invader and 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.



*During 2008, 2009 and 2010, over 5,150 acres of the invasive Phragmites were treated on the Platte Rivers in Keith and Lincoln Counties*

In 2008, over 2,700 acres of the invasive *Phragmites* were treated and during the fall of 2009, over 950 additional acres were sprayed in Lincoln County and Keith counties. Early season cold and frost halted the 2009 fall treatment progress, so additional treatments were performed in the fall of 2010 primarily in Keith County.

Approximately 1,500 acres were treated in the fall of 2010, completing the initial application of the river channel from Columbus to the State-line west of Big Springs.

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 various conservation program incentives to

landowners to implement grazing in the riparian zone, long-term sustainability can be achieved to control this invasive plant.

## *Sandhill Ranchers* **BEEF Co.**

### Assistance for Value Added Production

Sandhills RC&D assisted Sandhills Ranchers Beef Co. in the application for a Value Added Agriculture grant through the State of Nebraska's Rural Development Commission. The grant award of \$10,500 will help purchase processing equipment used in the beef slaughter facility.

Sandhills RC&D will collaborate with the company and a network of service providers to present educational opportunities for business development and direct marketing purposes. It is exciting to have a new business come along that will utilize production that is already grown locally and is a perfect fit for the area.

## USDA Assists Hooker County With New Library Roof

In 2010, the Hooker County Library received a new roof with help from USDA Rural Development through the Community Facilities Assistance program. The project was eligible for 55% grant funding and received financial assistance in combination with local matching funds.



## Bonus Ranching Seminar Provides Useful Information

Over thirty people attended the Bonus Ranching Seminar held at the State 4H Lodge near Halsey on Dec. 17<sup>th</sup>. The seminar was sponsored by the UNL Extension, Nebraska Department of Economic Development, NW Nebraska High Country, Sandhills RC&D and the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway.

The first speaker was Jim Lees of the Ox Yoke Ranch who is a partner with Northwest Nebraska High Country. Northwest Nebraska High Country is an organization of more than twenty ranchers and farmers who are offering their private property for tourism in the Pine Ridge area of Nebraska. He gave a presentation on "Ranchers Working Together to Develop Enterprises". Lees stressed that enterprises such as these are selling a slice of their own lifestyle. "We are selling them country roads, night sky and beautiful sunsets," he said. "We want to show them we are not just another motel, we want to grab them and keep them as long as we can and show them a good time."

Mike Kesselring, of High Plains Homestead near Crawford, gave a humorous talk on "Can I Run a Second Business with My Wife and Still Live with Her?" The Kesselring's operate a successful business which includes a mock frontier town complete with cook shack and cabins. Kesselring stressed the importance of pleasing the guest. "You have to have your guests feel like this is the best place to stay in their entire life," he said. He gave important tips on how to survive running a business with your spouse or partner. "You have to understand the dynamics of power struggles," he stated. "Trust your partner to make right decisions and share your expectations with each other."

"If you go away with anything from this seminar," said Karen Kollars the next speaker at the seminar, "Go away with this...education is so important. Create an experience for your guest."

Kirk Nelson, the Western Region Manager for the Nebraska Game & Parks, was also on hand to provide additional information Agri-tourism. "There are great partnership opportunities with the parks," he said. "Get to know your Nebraska Parks people; we are all in this together".

In the afternoon sessions, Sioux County Rural Extension Educator Jenny Nixon gave an interesting presentation on "Getting Your Project on the Web". She spoke of how important social networking is in promoting a business. "Being online is the first step to getting found online," she said.

Twyla Witt of Thedford, the Scenic Byways Consultant for the Nebraska Division of Travel & Tourism, gave many excellent suggestions on how to get a tourism business listed in various magazines and websites for free. She also stressed the importance of

joining local chambers, byways and regional groups,

Scott Cotton, the UNL Extension educator in Chadron, organized the Bonus Ranching Seminar and was pleased with its success. "The interesting part of all this is if we just get four or five people to start a business through a seminar like this it adds so much to our rural communities," Cotton said. "Seminars like this give the attendees opportunities to learn, ask questions, stay informed and hopefully stay sustainable."

## Upper Loup NRD Recycling Project

The recycling efforts and plans the Upper Loup NRD developed will have lasting impact in the region for future generations. As a project partner, Sandhills RC&D is involved in the planning process with the Upper Loup NRD to develop the most efficient recycling program possible for the central Sandhills area. Grant funds were awarded by the Nebraska Environmental Trust. As an important component of the plan, Sandhills RC&D assists in outreach efforts to spread the word about recycling opportunities in this region of Nebraska.

General recycling was not



*New recycling trailers funded in part by a grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust are currently in place in Thedford, and Stapleton*

available in most villages in the NRD. The materials that are being collected by the Upper Loup NRD are plastic, tin, aluminum, and newspaper. The project would supplement and/or provide recycling service to all residents of the district. These materials will be collected in the trailers and then transported to the nearest recycling center.

NRD communities of: Mullen, Thedford, Hyannis, Stapleton and Dunning are the primary project partners. The responsibility of the Upper Loup NRD is to provide insurance for the trailers and transport the recyclable materials to the end markets. The responsibility of the villages is to maintain and upkeep the collection site and its surroundings.

The plan includes an objective to place trailers in every community that has a population of 50 or more. The strategy within the plan is to make recycling easy and convenient for area residents to gain the best possible participation in the program.

# Sandhills RC&D Facts

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

The purpose of the Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) program is to promote conservation development and utilization of natural resources; to improve the general level of economic activity; and to enhance the environment and standard of living in all communities.

Many RC&D projects focus on the protection and improvement of natural resources or community facilities. Still others work on improving a community's quality of life. All projects are intended to make rural communities more viable places to live.

"Communities know what communities need" sums up the philosophy of Resource Conservation and Development Councils. Each local council establishes policies and develops projects to address local needs.

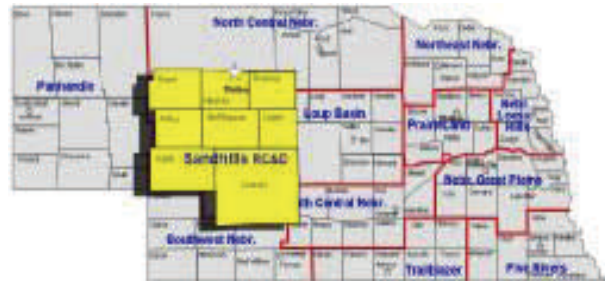
The Sandhills RC&D program office is located on Highway 97 in Mullen and was established in April of 2003. The RC&D is sponsored by eight counties and two Natural Resource Districts, and includes the counties of Arthur, Grant, Hooker, Keith, Lincoln, Logan, McPherson, and Thomas.

The Sandhills RC&D is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization that allows the organization to secure grants and to receive individual donations that are tax deductible by the donor.

The Sandhills RC&D is a member in the National RC&D Association's Circle of Diamonds Program. Circle of Diamond Councils exemplify positive impacts in the quality of life within their local areas. The program highlights Councils that have produced quality programs within their local communities. Primarily, membership in NARC&D's Circle of Diamonds show the honesty, integrity and strong commitment of Councils to the RC&D mission.



**In 2010, more than 105 Sandhills RC&D volunteers contributed over 2,772 hours toward Sandhills RC&D projects**



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