



“Making the Sandhills a Better Life”

Resource Conservation and Development

Area Plan

2006 ~ 2010

Prepared by the Sandhills RC&D
July 25, 2006

Assisted by
The United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

And other
Federal, State, Local Agencies and Groups



Dave Heineman
Governor

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August 25, 2006

R. Ed Sowders
Sandhills RC&D
P.O. Box 28
Mullen, NE 69152

Dear Mr. Sowders,

It is my pleasure to endorse the Sandhills Resource Conservation and Development Council's area plan for 2006-2010.

Please accept my thanks and encouragement for the work that the Sandhills RC&D has undertaken. Your efforts are important to the success and future of this region.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave Heineman".

Dave Heineman
Governor

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Message from the Council President

The Sandhills RC&D Area Plan is the product of citizen volunteers and community leaders coming together to mold a vision that sets goals and objectives intended to benefit their communities, area wide. These goals and objectives were created as a result of numerous hours of analyzing and evaluating the area's needs in resource conservation, water and land management, agriculture, and community development.

The following plan provides a step toward the development of resources and, although it must be flexible, this plan will serve as a firm foundation upon which to build and strengthen our future.

The next five years promise to be an exciting and challenging time for the Sandhills RC&D. We look forward to being an active participant in our area, and to helping address the challenges facing our area and its people. The continual need for stewardship of our natural resources, the aging infrastructure in our communities, and the constant need for economic development in our communities are issues we pledge to respond to through partnerships and collaboration with communities, service providers and the private sector.

Please join us in making the Sandhills RC&D Area an even better place to live, raise a family and do business.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "R. Ed Sowders".

R. Ed Sowders, President
Sandhills RC&D Council



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Vision

Citizens of the area collaborating to create a healthy rural economy along with sustainable communities and environment.

Mission

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.

The Sandhills RC&D Area consists of eight counties in west central Nebraska.

Arthur, Grant, Hooker, Lincoln, Logan, Keith, McPherson, and Thomas

USDA Nondiscrimination Statement

The U.S. Department of agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs). Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at 202-720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination write: USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964 (voice or TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Preface

The purpose of the strategic planning process is the development of organizational goals and an action plan that will drive the activities of the Sandhills Resource, Conservation and Development Council (RC&D). The area plan will provide a roadmap for the organization to determine its future in a proactive and decisive manner.

The Sandhills RC&D is named for the largest stabilized area of sand dunes in the Western Hemisphere. The area is generally referred to as the Nebraska Sandhills. Our natural resources are at the heart of the local economies and life in the Sandhills. The Sandhills RC&D will work to serve the communities and improve the lives of those who live and work in the eight county area of Arthur, McPherson, Grant, Thomas, Hooker, Keith, Lincoln, and Logan Counties. The communities in this region rely on volunteers for assistance with projects. An important role of the RC&D is to coordinate volunteer efforts in these communities, to offer guidance, and to obtain technical assistance from outside sources. Members of the Sandhills RC&D will continually solicit broad-based public input. Council members will keep abreast of regional and state needs and mandates through membership in the Nebraska RC&D Association, Western Association of RC&D, and National Association of RC&D; and through participation in regional groups. Partnering with other developmental groups will be paramount to the success of the Sandhills RC&D 5-Year Area Plan. No other regional agency, organization, or entity currently exists to serve this region with economic development or has the flexibility to address the problem areas that have been enumerated and further described in the body of this plan. Coordination of efforts requires the sustained presence of a coordinator that can provide the leadership necessary to assist residents in solving common issues and needs in the area. Continued support of the Sandhills RC&D is an investment in the social capital necessary to keep rural agricultural communities alive.

Historical Overview of Sandhills RC&D

On August 13th, 2001 the formal decision to pursue the authorization was made. Individuals and groups from the area were determined and committed to establishing a RC&D that will meet many of the essential needs in the eight counties. On July 21, 2003 the Sandhills RC&D was announced for authorization and support by the USDA.

- 2001 *Steering Committee was formed, and decided to make request for authorization.
 - * Area: Arthur, Grant, Hooker, Keith, Lincoln, Logan, McPherson and Thomas Counties
 - * Submitted application for USDA RC&D Authorization
 - * By-Laws and Articles of Incorporation developed

- 2002 * Board of Directors formed
 - * Re-submitted application for USDA RC&D Authorization

- 2003 * Awarded USDA RC&D Authorization

- 2004 * Moved into permanent location in Mullen
 - * USDA-NRCS RC&D Coordinator and Program Support Assistant assigned to assist Council
 - * Received 501c3 non-profit status with IRS

- Present * Numerous partnerships have been formed to accomplish the goals and objectives defined by the local people.

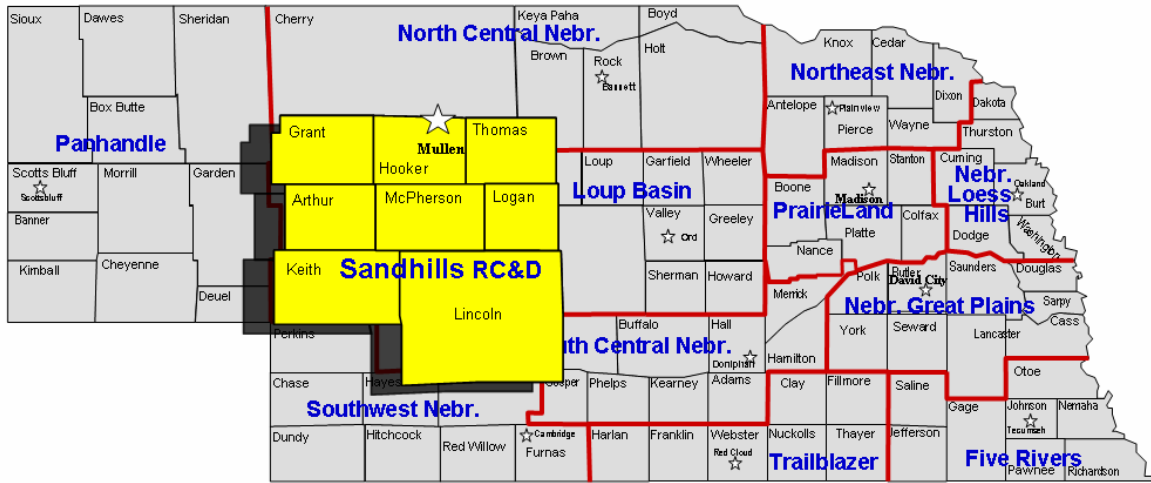


*Sandhills RC&D
Open House and
Ribbon Cutting
Ceremony at the
new office in
Mullen, July
2004.*

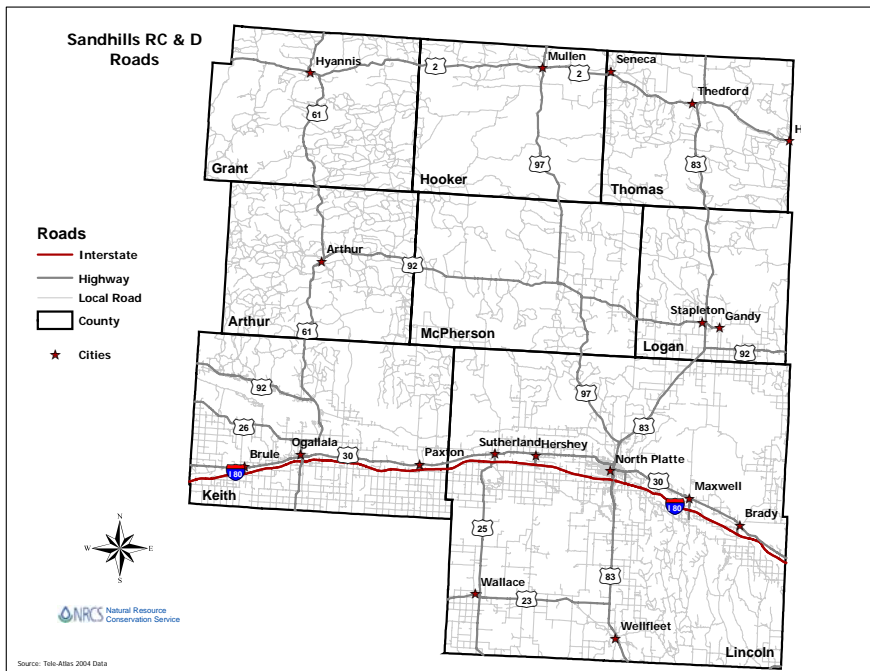
Sandhills RC&D Partners

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
USDA Rural Development
USDA Forest Service
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service
Upper Loup Natural Resources District
Twin Platte Natural Resources District
Nebraska Natural Resources Commission
Nebraska Department of Economic Development
Nebraska State Historical Society
Nebraska Department of Roads
Nebraska Division of Travel and Tourism
Nebraska Forest Service
Nebraska Game & Parks Commission
Nebraska Pheasants Forever
Mullen Commercial Club
Thomas County Development Corporation
Village of Hyannis
Village of Stapleton
Village of Tryon
Village of Gandy
Community Development Services, LLC
Seneca Historical Preservation Society
Consolidated Telephone Company
Sandhills EDGE Coalition
Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway, Inc.
Mid-Nebraska Community Foundation
Lincoln County Convention and Visitor Bureau
Udell Consulting, Inc.
Nebraska Community Foundation
Thedford Community Foundation
Hyannis Community Foundation
Loup Basin RC&D
North Central Nebraska RC&D
Nebraska Association of RC&D Councils
Western RC&D Association
National Association of RC&D Councils

Description of Sandhills RC&D Area



The Sandhills RC&D is located in central Nebraska in the heart of the Sandhills. The area includes the eight counties of Arthur, McPherson, Grant, Hooker, Thomas, Keith, Lincoln, and Logan. This is a large region physically consisting of over 8,000 square miles with an area larger than the three combine states of Delaware, Connecticut and Rhode Island. The area is crossed by US Highway 83 running North to South and by Nebraska Highway 2 running East to West. Other highways across the area include Nebraska Highways 97, 92, 30, 23, 25 and 61. Interstate 80 cuts through the south side of the region connecting the two population centers, North Platte and Ogallala. Unpaved roads serve as transportation links across the remainder of the area.



Within the region, there are two profoundly different landscapes and environments. One region is defined by the North and South Platte Rivers which cut across the region from west to east and join at North Platte, this region is defined by its extensive river valley environment. The other region is north and south of the Platte River, and is the internationally unique region of the Sandhills (only other similar area is found in China). Vast sand dunes now stabilized by grasses, running in a series of ridges and hills oriented with the prevailing winds when deposited eras ago, provides rich grazing for cow/calf operations. The valleys often connect with the vast Ogallala Aquifer creating lakes, marshes and sub-irrigated hay meadows. Another feature of this region is its system of reservoirs and irrigation canals. This region is part of the Central Nebraska Irrigation System with Lake McConaughy, Sutherland Reservoir and Maloney Reservoir.



Vast sand dunes now stabilized by grasses occupy over 13 million acres in Nebraska.

Agriculture is the lifeblood of the area. Livestock grazing is the primary source of income within the rural Sandhills region. This area is one of the world’s premier cow/calf production regions. In the cropland areas corn, soybeans, and alfalfa are the major crops. Industry is minimal except in the large population centers.

Nebraska Sandhills are home many of the nation’s premier cattle ranches.



The total population is 45,134 with the largest population centers being North Platte and Ogallala, the two largest cities in the region, having about 61% of the total population of the area. The remainder of the Sandhills RC&D area is sparsely populated with less than one person per square mile. By national standards, the Sandhills qualifies as a frontier area (U.S. Census Bureau defines a Frontier area as having 6 or fewer residents per square mile).

Income is a key indicator of economic well being. The income profile is divided into three groups to estimate the number of low, middle and upper income households. The Sandhills RC&D area averages 25 percent more people in poverty than the Nebraska average. Over 36 percent of the households in this region fall into the low-income category. When compared to Nebraska averages, the region has significantly more low income households – 36% to 27% for Nebraska, or 37% more low income households. The higher number of lower income households reflects three important realities for the region. First, the region has a large number of fixed income elders. Second, agricultural incomes have struggled during this period. Finally, there are relatively few wage and salary jobs within the region and most of these jobs tend to pay below state averages.

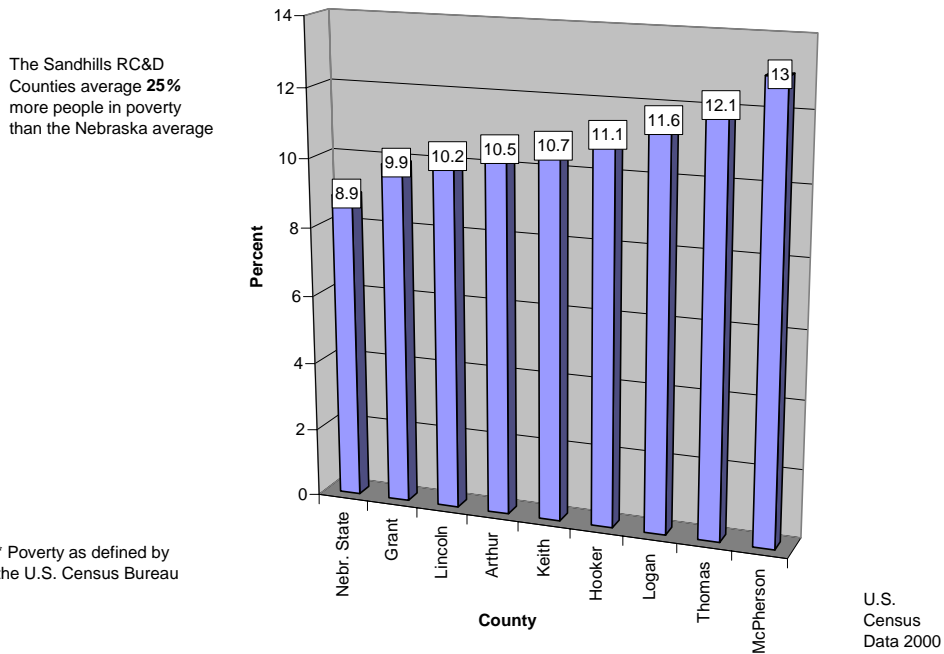
However, the region has slightly more middle income households – 50% compared with 46% for Nebraska. This information strongly suggests that the region continues to have a strong middle class rooted in ranching operations, agri-businesses and main street enterprises. Jobs within government, whether a teacher at the local school, a forester at Halsey or a county official, also contribute to a stronger middle class.

Finally, the region has considerably fewer upper income households – 15% compared with 27% for the state of Nebraska or 45% fewer upper income households. Most of Nebraska, particularly rural Nebraska, has fewer upper income households. In Nebraska, upper income households tend to be concentrated in the metropolitan counties of Lancaster, Douglas and Sarpy Counties.

Income Profile

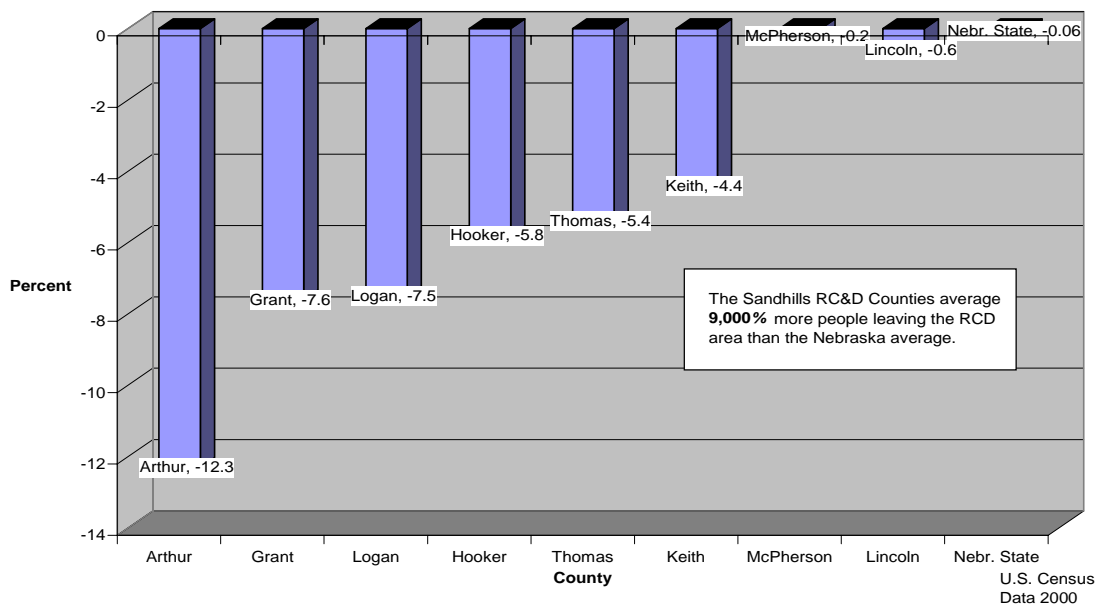
<i>County</i>	<i>Low Income</i>	<i>Middle Income</i>	<i>Upper Income</i>
Arthur	36%	53%	11%
Grant	37%	50%	14%
Hooker	39%	49%	12%
Keith	29%	54%	17%
Lincoln	35%	42%	23%
Logan	34%	55%	12%
McPherson	42%	39%	19%
Thomas	38%	54%	9%
Region Average	36%	50%	15%
Nebraska	27%	46%	27%

People in Poverty *
Sandhills RC&D Counties



One alarming trend for the counties in the Sandhills RC&D area is population loss due to out migration. The Sandhills RC&D area average 9,000 percent more people leaving the Sandhills RC&D area than the Nebraska average.

Population Changes Due to Out Migration
Sandhills RC&D Counties



Valuable natural resources in the eight-county area include: Lake McConaughy, Sutherland and Maloney Reservoirs, the Middle Loup, Dismal, North Platte and South Platte Rivers, the Sandhills mixed grass prairies, the Nebraska National Forest, excellent groundwater from the Ogallala aquifer, abundant wildlife, historical sites and cultural activities, and proud, independent people. Great potential exists to conserve, develop, and promote the area, its people, and its natural resources.



Lake McConaughy



Abundant wildlife



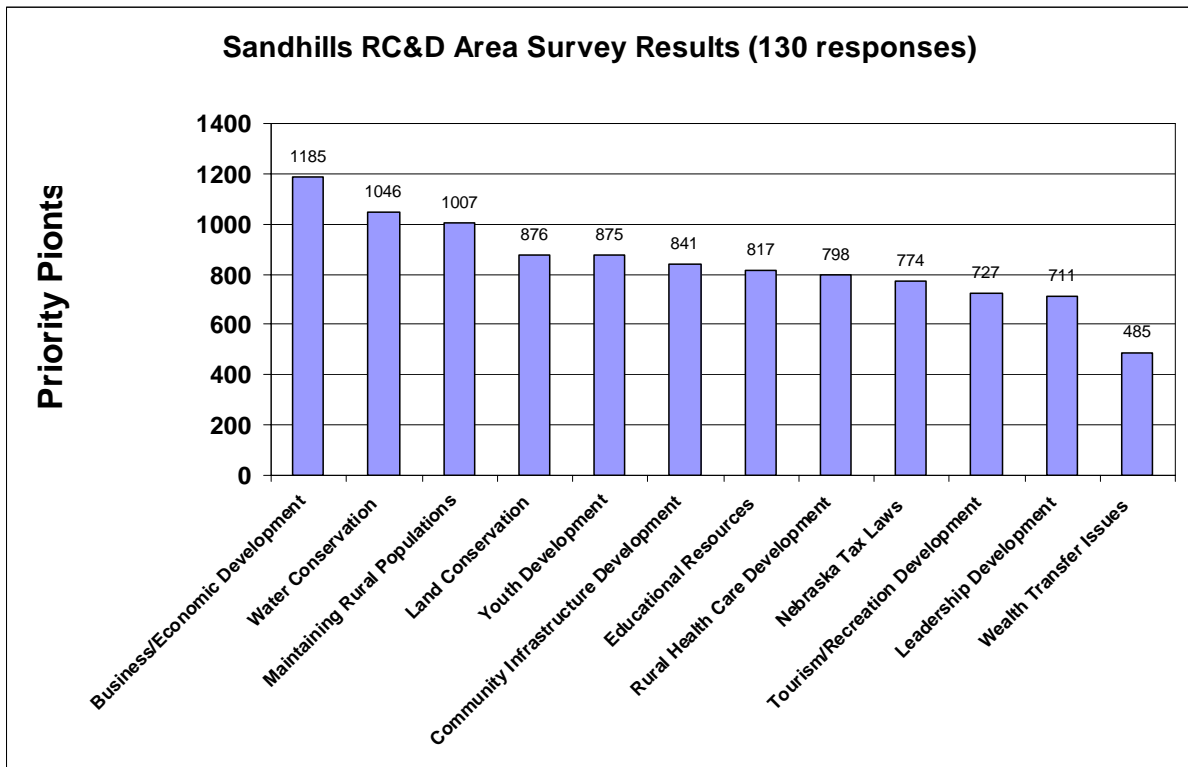
Hundreds of miles of spring fed rivers

Public Participation

The goals and objectives of the Sandhills RC&D reflect the interests of the public. The Sandhills RC&D will continue to seek input from the public through planned outreach activities. Conservation and protection of our natural resources, economic development for the small communities, infrastructure and community services, and tourism development have all been identified as priorities for the Sandhills RC&D.

In order to discover the needs and opportunities of the area the Sandhills RC&D continued to work with the partnerships they have developed in the past. Ten public meetings were publicized and conducted with an even distribution throughout the Sandhills RC&D area in 2004 and 2005. Public input was recorded to gather local participation regarding needs and opportunities for the area planning process.

In early 2006, a Regional Planning Survey was developed with input from Nebraska Department of Economic Development and Sandhills RC&D Council members. The survey was mainly conducted online with hardcopies distributed to participants without internet access. An invitation to participate in the survey was sent to over 200 individuals, with over 65 percent return rate, which is an excellent return rate for public surveys in this region. Hardcopies of the survey available at county clerks and treasurer offices or were mailed following press release notifications of survey availability. The survey was tabulated and the respondent’s data results are represented in the following table.



A total of 1560 possible points were available if a topic was always picked as the highest priority in the survey.

The highest priority was identified as economic/business development with 1185 points out of a possible 1560 total points. Following closely for the second and third ranked priorities were water conservation and maintaining rural populations. Clustered in a tight points grouping were land conservation, youth development, community infrastructure, educational resources, rural health care, Nebraska tax laws, tourism/recreation development, and leadership development. The lowest priority points were given to wealth transfer issues.

Planning Process

A planning committee was formed to use the survey information and other resources to develop the Sandhills RC&D needs assessments for the basic Area Plan Elements: Land Conservation, Water Management, Community Development, and Land Management. The needs information was used to formulate a set of current Goals, Objectives and Strategies which will guide the Sandhills RC&D Council over the next 5 years.

Pertinent information and insight for the Sandhills RC&D Area Plan was also gleaned from other recent documents that have been developed using local input and current data. Documents reviewed during development of the Sandhills RC&D Goals, Objectives and Strategies for 2006 through 2010 included: Upper Loup Natural Resources District Long Range Master Plan, the Twin Platte Natural Resources District Ground Water Management Plan, Nebraska National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, Lincoln County TARGET Report Prepared by the Nebraska Division of Travel and Tourism, and the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway Corridor Management Plan.

The goals, objectives and strategies of this plan have been developed through consensus of the RC&D Council members and their partners. This, plan will be monitored and adjusted as the RC&D Council works with partners and local citizens to conserve and develop the natural and human resources in the Sandhills RC&D area. The Sandhills RC&D Council will monitor this Area Plan annually and will determine if any changes or revisions are needed as it reflects the problems and concerns of the people living in the area. These changes will be made according the RC&D Program Manual.

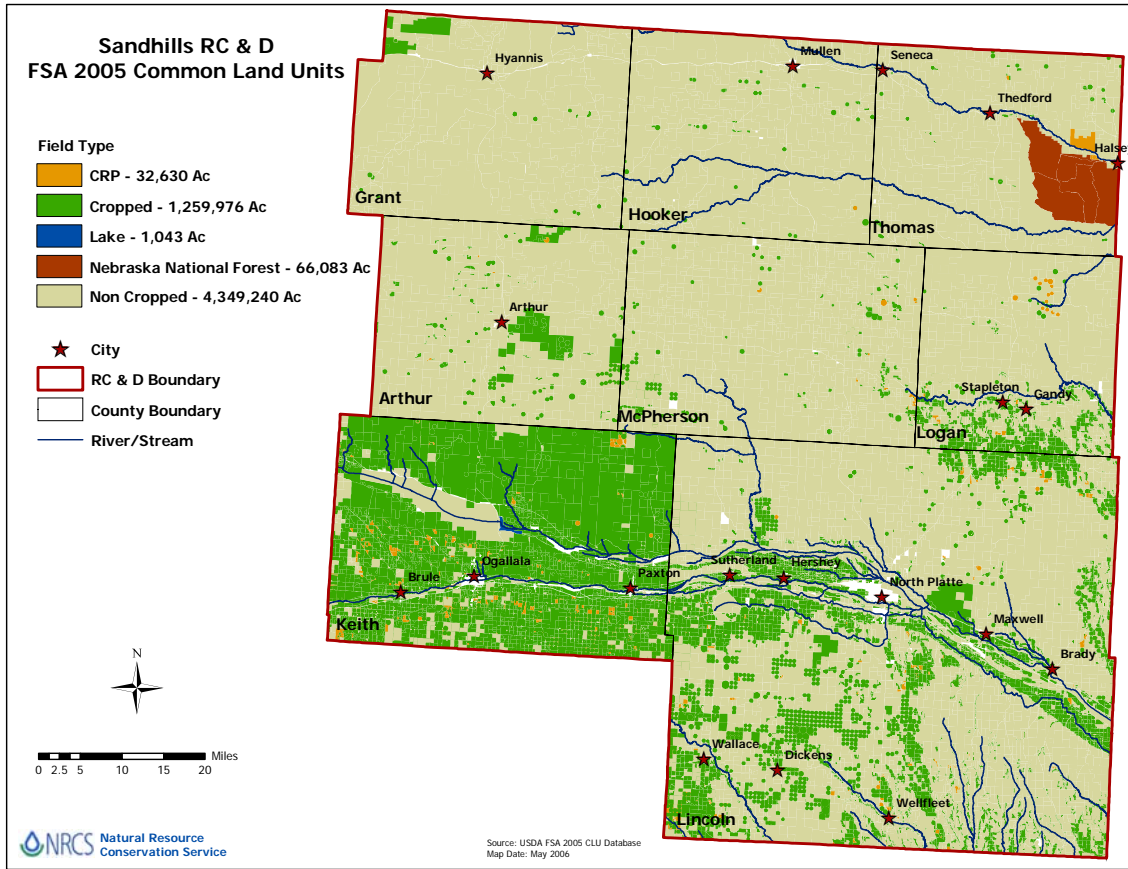
Needs and Opportunities

Throughout the planning process the Sandhills RC&D was aware of the four major elements that should be focused on. These include:

- Land Conservation
- Land Management
- Water Management
- Community Development

Land Conservation

The RC&D area is composed of three Major Land Resource Areas (MLRA), the Central High Tableland (MLRA 72) in the southwest and the Rolling Plains and Breaks (MLRA 73) in the southeast and the remainder composed of Nebraska Sandhills (MLRA 65).



Soil Erosion

Rangeland is a major resource of the RC&D area both in terms of land area and economics. Approximately 47 percent of the area is classified as rangeland. Agriculture income derived from rangeland and livestock generally accounts for a significant amount of the area's total. Over the past 5 to 7 years low amounts of precipitation has occurred in the area. This has increased the grazing pressure on the rangeland area. In many cases this increased pressure has decrease the condition of the rangeland vegetation in the area, thus impacting the resources in years to come. The evidence of changing range condition can be seen as "blowouts" in the sandy soils appear on the range landscape. Application of range management tools and proper planning are imperative to sustained rangelands.

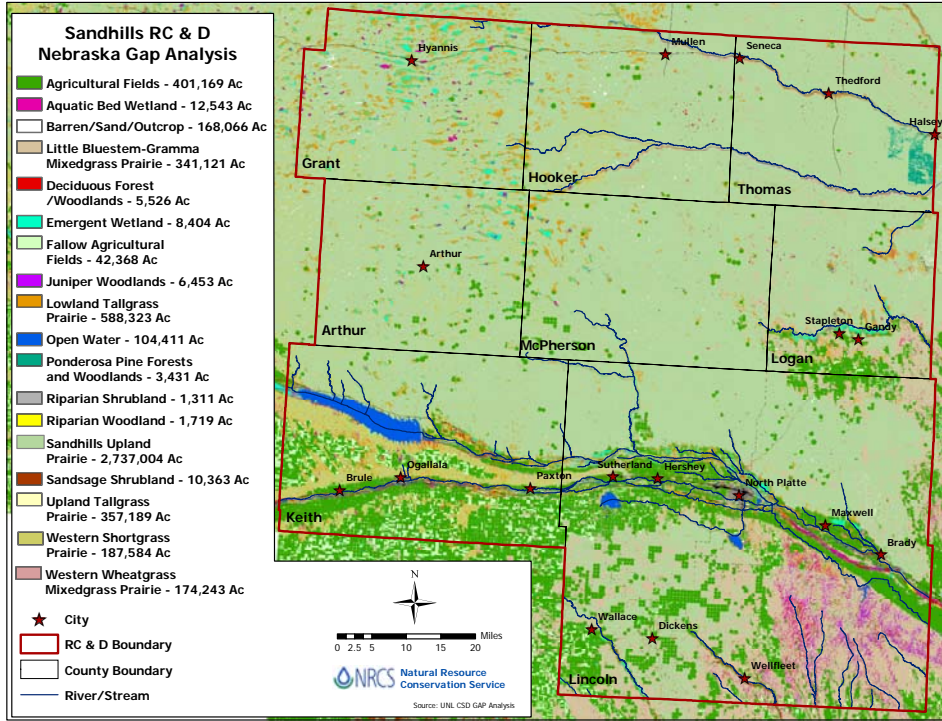
Top soil depletion, and limited seasonal rainfall (16-20 inches) are hazards in using and managing the soils on all land uses. Application of no-till and other high residue cropping systems are vital to sustaining the soil resource base in the Sandhills RC&D

cropland areas. There is a continual need to educate local landowners and managers of the need reduce soil erosion on range and cropland acres and increase awareness of opportunities to participate in long term soil conservation programs. Natural Resources Districts, Irrigation Districts, and the local citizens have shown strong interest in working together to reduce soil erosion and address many resource issues.

Forest Resources

Sandhills RC&D ranchers, farmers and landowners have long demonstrated a strong tree-planting heritage and have completed establishment of many impressive windbreaks and other tree plantings. Many of these older shelterbelts are in need of renovation and replacement to restore their value for windbreaks, living snowfences, wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, erosion control, bank stabilization and other uses.

Additionally, the Bessey Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forest is located in the Sandhills RC&D area and encompasses over 90,000 acres in Thomas County. This portion of forest is unique to the Nation as it is the largest human-made forest in the United States with over 20,000 acres of hand-planted trees. Annually the forest draws over 10,000 visitors to this portion of the Sandhills RC&D area which has a strong economic impact to the region. A working committee of the Sandhills RC&D has been identified to make locally-based forest partnerships which seek to build ecological, social and economic sustainability.



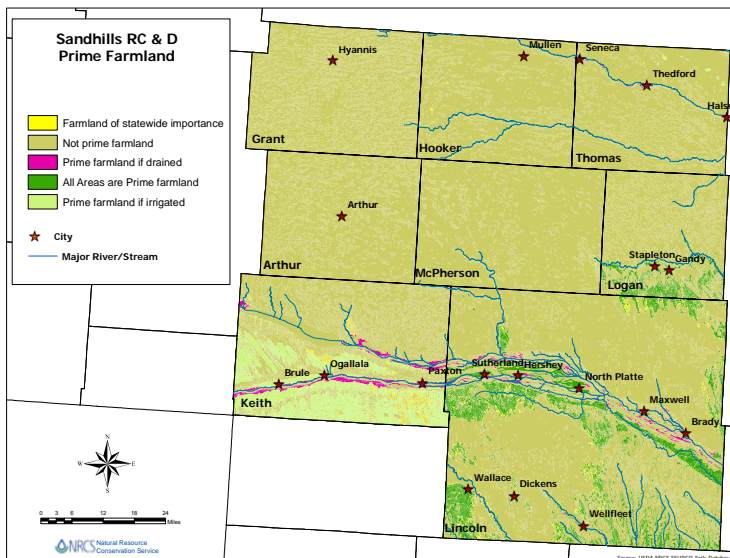
Land Management

Energy conservation

Energy conservation has been identified as a critical element to the sustainability of the region. Utilization of corn for ethanol production can be made much more cost-effective by widespread adoption of no-till planting systems. When the much higher energy requirements for a conventional planting system are considered, ethanol production from corn is not very economical. More widespread adoption of continuous no-till planting systems would save tremendous amounts of energy and reduce erosion rates dramatically. Sandhills RC&D will work to increase the use of residue management techniques that reduce energy consumption and increase soil cover on crop land.

Invasive Weeds

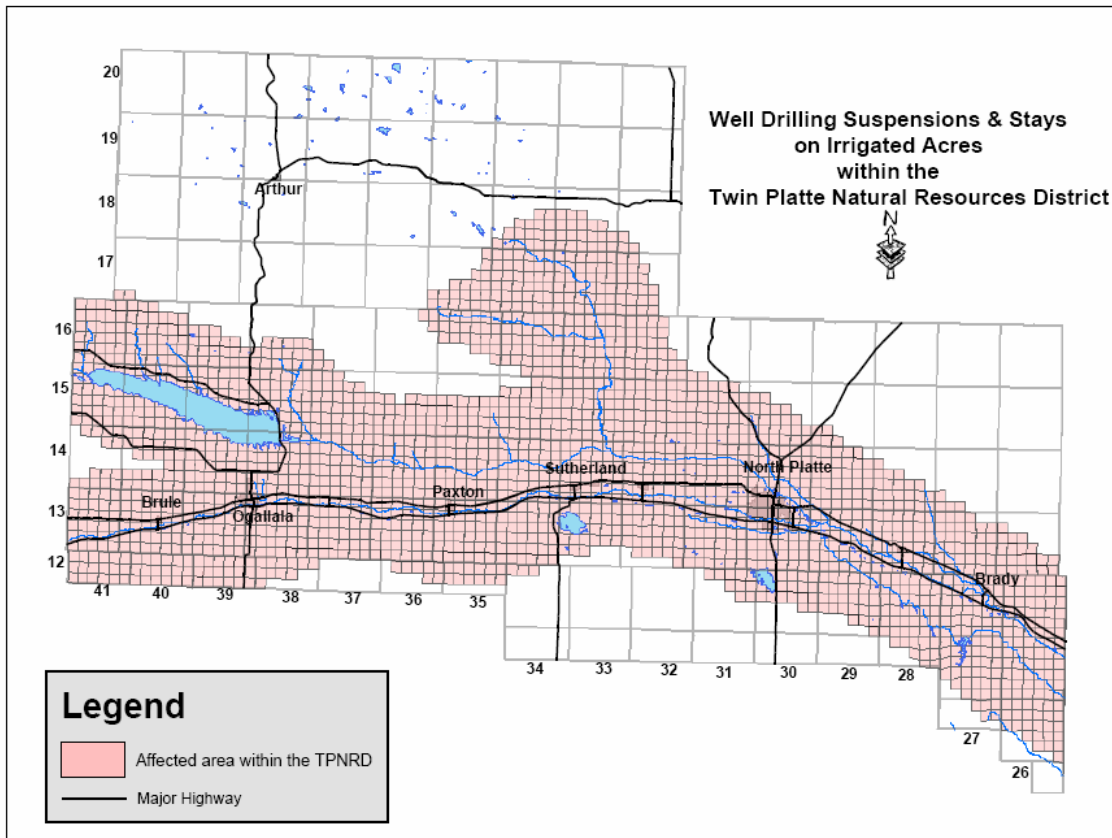
Noxious and invasive weed species such as Canada thistle, purple loosestrife, leafy spurge, and musk thistle continue to be a growing concern in the Sandhills RC&D area. Efforts are underway to educate citizens about the need for control of Phragmites, Purple Loosestrife, Saltcedar and other problem species in the reaches of the Platte River Basin which includes Lincoln and Keith counties. There is also a need to organize additional weed management efforts in the Loup Rivers and Dismal River basin areas of the Sandhills RC&D. Reducing the threat of invasive plants in rangeland and riparian areas is a priority within the Sandhills RC&D area.



Water Management

Groundwater

Ground water supplies are associated with the Ogallala Aquifer which underlies the RC&D area. Groundwater supplies for domestic use are generally adequate. Sandhills RC&D is blessed with an abundant supply of high quality ground water and the Council is committed to sustaining this valuable resource. There are 471,000 acres of irrigated cropland in the Sandhills RC&D area that require proper management to insure the aquifer is protected from over utilization and contamination by pollutants. Local Natural Resources Districts have used their ongoing water quality testing programs to identify isolated areas of pollutant concern. Twin Platte Natural Resources District has imposed regulations restricting irrigation development in certain areas of potential over-use. Land-users need education and technical assistance to achieve proper management of irrigation water, crop nutrients, livestock waste, and pesticides.

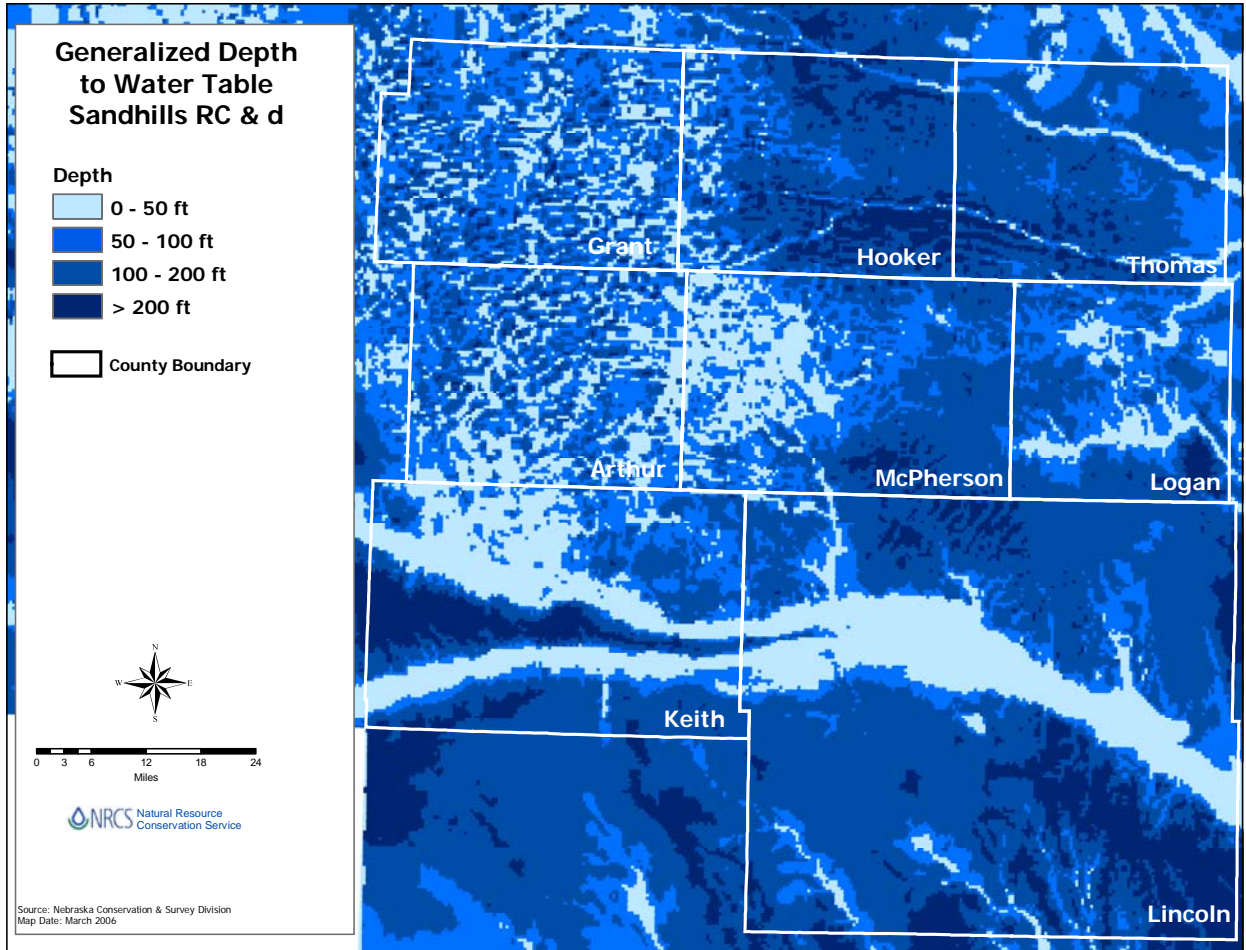


Surface Water

The Platte and Loup rivers are the major river systems and watersheds for the area. The North and South Platte Rivers converge at North Platte to form the Platte River and are located in the southern two counties of the Sandhills RC&D area. The Middle and South Loup Rivers and the Dismal River dissect the northern portion of the Sandhills RC&D area and provide the area with abundant natural resources.

Potential opportunities to store water and maintain aquifer recharge have been identified on the Middle Loup River. Sandhills RC&D has partnered with Upper Loup Natural Resources District to investigate the feasibility of this opportunity.

Occasional serious flooding is also a concern in the South Platte watershed. Protection of the quality and quantity the area's water supply is a high priority of the Sandhills RC&D.



Community Development

The Sandhills RC&D Area encompasses 5,134,720 acres with 20 incorporated towns with a total population of 45,134. Small town survival is vital to the area as 40% of the residents live in communities with populations less than 2,000. The RC&D area has experienced a decline in population over the past four decades with projections that similar trends will continue in the future.



One of the Sandhills RC&D area's greatest assets is its residents - their work ethic, visions for the future and strong family values provide the basis for the exceptional quality of life experienced in the Nebraska Sandhills.

Agricultural Economies

Constantly fluctuating commodity prices, steadily increasing input costs, and periodic severe drought can have a devastating impact on the agricultural economy. University of Minnesota data shows that family farmers account for nearly 50% of business sales in small rural towns, while larger corporate farms tend to purchase many inputs outside the community. As farm and ranch numbers continue to decline and farm size continues to increase, more agricultural inputs will be purchased from larger communities. Efforts need to be made to encourage and assist young people getting started in production agriculture to preserve more small family operations and communities. Agricultural producers and small rural communities need to support each other if either is to survive.

Sandhills RC&D council recognizes that agriculture profitability would have a great impact on the region. Potential opportunities exist promote the production and marketing of alternative crops, livestock or other rural enterprises. To address this opportunity, the Sandhills RC&D will continue to support the Sandhills Enhancing, Developing and Growing Entrepreneurs (EDGE) coalition and offer EDGE business training.



Students at the Youth Range Camp learn range management techniques during one of the outdoor class room sessions. This is an example of one of the many projects adopted by the RC&D Council.

Community Infrastructure

The RC&D Council has identified a widespread need for infrastructure improvement and development in most of the area's rural towns. Several communities mentioned a need for more affordable housing and improvements to supporting infrastructure. Attracting and retaining viable downtown businesses is also an ongoing concern for rural communities. Sandhills RC&D understands the value of current relationships with Nebraska Department of Economic Development and other funding providers and will continue to support programs that support community infrastructure needs.

Tourism/Recreation

The Sandhills RC&D area has great potential to expand and publicize its tourism and recreational development to bring visitors from neighboring counties and states into the area. The RC&D area is blessed with some recreational sized lakes, such as Lake McConaughy near Ogallala, Sutherland Reservoir near Sutherland, and Lake Maloney near North Platte. Also, the Sandhills RC&D area has many smaller lakes which offer some excellent fishing and other outdoor activities. The Dismal, Middle Loup, and Platte Rivers offer several miles of excellent canoeing, fishing and other water recreation activities that are currently underdeveloped and underutilized. The Sandhills RC&D counties have several thousand acres of land that provide excellent habitat for wildlife and upland game. With limited public lands, such as the Nebraska National Forest, abundant private land exists throughout the Sandhills RC&D area to offer great bird watching, hiking, hunting and other outdoor activities that often go unused.

The Sandhills RC&D area has rich and interesting history that the RC&D can help local residents to share with visitors from across America. The Nebraska National Forest, the Cowboy Capital in Ogallala, and Dancing Leaf Cultural Learning Center offers a unique blend of educational and recreational opportunities and are examples of some of the historic sites in this area that need promoting. There are many established local festivals and other events that can be better utilized to bring tourists into the RC&D area. Some communities are also creating new events, celebrations and attractions, such as the Remote Rendezvous at Thedford or Windmill Country Days at Hyannis that can be promoted by the RC&D Council.



Nebraska National Forest – Halsey, NE

Leadership

Too often in small communities, the same people are continually recruited to serve in a leadership capacity without any specialized training, and quite often we see leadership burnout. The Sandhills RC&D Council recognizes that leadership was not identified in the planning survey with high priority points, leadership programs can provide local civic and business leaders with skills to better the community in which they live. The programs also provide leadership skills training to prepare participants for advanced leadership roles. While North Platte currently has their Leadership program, there are very few formal programs in place to provide adult leadership training to the smaller rural communities across the Sandhills RC&D area.

Retaining youth in rural communities and getting them involved in community activities and local economic development is a key priority across the Sandhills RC&D Area. Past research suggests that when youth are involved in community service and leadership roles they are more likely to return to their community and remain active in local business and government as adults.

Goals, Objectives, & Strategies

Needs and opportunities were identified through public input and were grouped into four categories. These included protection and enhancement of natural resources, revitalization of rural economies, improved infrastructure and community resources, and increased tourism. The description of the goals and objectives which follow are those identified and prioritized through public input.

GOAL 1: PROTECT AND ENHANCE THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF ALL NATURAL RESOURCES

***OBJECTIVE 1.** The Sandhills RC&D Rangelands Resources Committee will educate 50 agricultural producers in the management of sustainable rangeland.*

Strategy 1: Develop a plan of action with appropriate partners to offer three Range Management Workshops for ranchers in the west central Nebraska region in 2008.

Strategy 2: Support the SRM Youth Range Camp at the 4-H Camp at Halsey by developing grant proposals for funding assistance to the camp (2007-2010).

***OBJECTIVE 2.** The Sandhills RC&D will educate 200 land owners regarding potential threats to natural resource sustainability.*

Strategy 1: Facilitate the formation of a Weed Management Area in the counties of Lincoln, Keith, Arthur, McPherson and Logan in 2006-2007.

Strategy 2: Partner with the North Central Nebraska RC&D and the Loup Basin RC&D to assist the newly formed Sandhills Weed Management Area to inform land owners concerning invasive plant threats in Grant, Hooker, Logan and Thomas counties (2006-2007).

***OBJECTIVE 3.** The Sandhills RC&D will educate 100 producers on the economics of producing alternative agricultural commodities and adding value to current agricultural production.*

Strategy 1: Develop a plan of action with appropriate partners to offer educational opportunities about direct marketing and sustainable alternative agriculture in 2008.

Strategy 2: Develop a grant proposal for funding assistance with USDA Rural Development and Nebraska Department of Agriculture to promote the development of enterprises that add value to agricultural commodities (2008).

GOAL 1: PROTECT AND ENHANCE THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF ALL NATURAL RESOURCES

OBJECTIVE 4. *The Sandhills RC&D will increase the use of residue management techniques and practices on 5% more acres in the RC&D area.*

Strategy 1: Co-sponsor three workshops to educate agricultural crop producers about the benefits of increased residue farming practices (2007-2010).

Strategy 2: Assist our Natural Resources District sponsors to acquire no-till planting equipment for demonstration and producer use in 2008 through use of grant writing resources.

OBJECTIVE 5. *The Sandhills RC&D will increase the economic benefits to area citizens from the available water resources in the Sandhills RC&D area.*

Strategy 1: Develop and implement a plan of action with the Upper Loup Natural Resources District and the Middle Loup Reservoir Committee for the Middle Loup Reservoir Project through the use of grant writing resources (2006-2010).

Strategy 2: Initiate a Stakeholder Involvement Group working with Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality to develop a water quality plan for the lake project watershed (2007-2008).

OBJECTIVE 6. *The Sandhills RC&D will work to assure that recreational/tourism activities display high levels of stewardship on private and public lands.*

Strategy 1: Develop a program to train RC&D area educators in an interdisciplinary conservation ethics curriculum by partnering with Nebraska Pheasants Forever Chapters to bring The Leopold Education Project to the Sandhills RC&D area (2007-2008).

OBJECTIVE 7. *The Sandhills RC&D will initiate a forestry conservation program in its rural communities.*

Strategy 1: Implement a plan with the Nebraska National Forest Friends committee to develop their capacity to assist the U.S. Forest Service and engage the local community in forest management and conservation issues on and around Nebraska National Forest and Grasslands by assisting Nebraska National Forest Friends to obtain seed money and tax exempt 501 (c)(3) status (2006-2008).

Strategy 2: Develop a plan with community tree boards to strengthen community forestry programs by identifying funding sources appropriate to propose grant requests to inventory community forestry needs (2007-2008).

Strategy 3: Host community forestry tree health and maintenance workshops in three communities in 2009 based on Strategy 2 needs assessment.

GOAL 1: PROTECT AND ENHANCE THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF ALL NATURAL RESOURCES

***OBJECTIVE 8:** The Sandhills RC&D will promote the development renewable energy resources available in the RC&D area.*

Strategy 1: Develop a feasibility plan with Middle Loup River Lake committee and the Upper Loup NRD to generate hydro-powered electricity from the discharge of the Middle Loup River Lake (2008).

Strategy 2: Develop a feasibility plan with local entrepreneurs to manufacture products made from local resources such as grass, that can provide renewable energy for residences and businesses (2007).

GOAL 2: REVITALIZE THE RURAL ECONOMY WITH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

***OBJECTIVE 1.** The Sandhills RC&D will strengthen the regional economy by sponsoring business development programs.*

Strategy 1: Maintain fiscal sponsorship of the Sandhills Enhancing, Developing and Growing Entrepreneurs (EDGE) Coalition to offer EGDE business training annually in the central Sandhills region (2006-2010).

Strategy 2: Implement a plan with the University of Nebraska to host two trainings that promote advanced technology development, utilization of internet resources, and provide necessary instruction so citizens may more fully utilize its capabilities (2006-2008).

***OBJECTIVE 2.** The Sandhills RC&D will strengthen community development efforts in West Central Nebraska by assisting counties to accomplish community action projects.*

Strategy 1: Develop proposals to Nebraska Department of Economic Development through the Building Entrepreneurial Communities Program to provide assistance from the Old West Developers Network for community development organizations such as the Thedford Community Development Corporation, Mullen Commercial Club, and the Sandhills Chamber of Commerce to apply for and procure funding to hire community development personnel that work on projects of critical community needs (2007-2008)

Strategy 2: Provide funding resources list and technical assistance to McPherson Community Federal Credit Union to expand their scope of operations providing expanded financial services to individual within their field of membership (2006).

GOAL 2: REVITALIZE THE RURAL ECONOMY WITH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

OBJECTIVE 3. *The Sandhills RC&D will develop a plan of action to work with schools to inform youth about the rewards and benefits of small town and rural living.*

Strategy 1: Partner with NRCS and appropriate organizations to procure funding to promote business startups targeted toward youth entrepreneurs that may include invasive weed control services and natural resource related businesses (2007-2008).

GOAL 3: IMPROVE INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES.

OBJECTIVE 1. *The Sandhills RC&D will develop a resource network to assist communities with development needs.*

Strategy 1: Offer in-depth grant writers training to educate a minimum of 20 Nebraskans in the skills of grant proposal research, development and preparation (2006).

Strategy 2: Partner with the Mid-Nebraska Community Foundation to provide Western Nebraska with public access to the Foundation Center's FC Search database in the North Platte Public Library (2006-2007).

Strategy 3: Develop grant writing services for the RC&D area by initiating the Old West Developers Network to provide grant writing services to appropriate RC&D projects (2007-2008).

Strategy 4: Strengthen the Old West Developers Network by providing grant writing education to the RC&D area through two grant writing courses hosted by Sandhills RC&D (2009-2010).

OBJECTIVE 2. *The Sandhills RC&D will develop a plan of action with communities to offer safe and affordable housing within the RC&D area where these services are not currently provided.*

Strategy 1: Develop a feasibility plan with the Thedford Community Development Corporation to address housing planning in Thomas County (2006-2007).

Strategy 2: Continue housing rehabilitation project into Phase II by targeting \$200,000 for housing assistance in the communities of Stapleton, Tryon, Gandy (2006-2007).

Strategy 3: Initiate Phase III of housing rehabilitation for rural residences of counties that are not currently serviced by rural housing projects with \$150,000 of DED set a side funds (2006-2008).

GOAL 3: IMPROVE INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES.

OBJECTIVE 3. *The Sandhills RC&D will provide grant research assistance to communities utilizing forestry project funding to beautify and strengthen communities.*

Strategy 1: Assist the Halsey school to research funding opportunities to provide landscaping assistance for school projects (2006).

Strategy 2: Develop a plan of action with the Nebraska National Forest Friends to develop their capacity to provide assistance to communities around Nebraska National Forest and Grasslands through forest service programs (2006-2008).

OBJECTIVE 4. *The Sandhills RC&D will assist communities to develop funding strategies that address community infrastructure needs.*

Strategy 1: Initiate a project with the Thedford School board to build a school addition that will house a fitness and physical therapy room, two locker rooms along with a music room that doubles as a community meeting room (2006-2007).

Strategy 2: Develop a plan of action with the Thomas County fire department to build a new fire hall in Thedford (2006-2009).

Strategy 3: Develop a funding strategy with the Seneca Historical Preservation Society in obtaining funding for renovation of the Seneca Community Building (2006).

GOAL 4: INCREASE AND IMPROVE TOURISM AND RECREATIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

OBJECTIVE 1. *The Sandhills RC&D will assist the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway organization to improve awareness of the economic benefits of tourism in the central Sandhills region.*

Strategy 1: Develop a strategic outreach plan to increase membership from the current 74 members to 150 members by December 2007.

Strategy 2: Provide technical information and assistance to the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway organization to become the first Nebraska Byway to be designated as a National Scenic Byway in 2007-2008.

Strategy 3: Develop a grant proposal with Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway organization to receive marketing funds to promote the highway #2 byway and the uniqueness of the Sandhills region (2006).

GOAL 4: INCREASE AND IMPROVE TOURISM AND RECREATIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

OBJECTIVE 2. *The Sandhills RC&D will increase recreational opportunities within the RC&D Area.*

Strategy 1: Develop and implement a plan of action with the Upper Loup Natural Resources District and the Middle Loup Reservoir Committee on the Middle Loup Reservoir Project through the use of grant writing resources (2006-2010).

Strategy 2: Develop an action plan with the Nebraska National Forest Friends to develop their capacity and to assist with the renovation/construction of the forest swimming pool by providing grant writing services through the Old West Developers Network (2006-2009).

Strategy 3: Develop an action plan with Nebraska National Forest Friends and the Thedford Community Development Corporation to develop potential ATV trails by providing grant writing services through the Old West Developers Network (2007-2009).

Strategy 4: Implement an action plan with the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission and Nebraska Department of Roads to improve canoe access to the Dismal River off Highway 97 and control erosion at the site (2007-2009).

Strategy 5: Create proposals with two communities to host the Tourism Assessment Resource Growth Evaluation Team (TARGET) that will put together a TARGET Report evaluating tourism potential (2007-2008).

OBJECTIVE 3. *The Sandhills RC&D will initiate a program to promote the development of historical and cultural activities within the RC&D Area.*

Strategy 1: Host an educational workshop to promote opportunities to create businesses that provide recreational/tourism services (2008-2010).

Strategy 2: Develop an action plan with appropriate organizations to develop nature based tours that may include bird watching, wild flower tours, or nature based photography education (2007-2008).

GOAL 5: STRENGTHEN RC&D PUBLIC RECOGNITION AND THE SANDHILLS RC&D PROGRAM

***OBJECTIVE 1.** The Sandhills RC&D will establish an outreach program that will increase awareness the RC&D program through strategic promotional campaigns and activities.*

Strategy 1: Make application to and become a member of National Association of Resource Conservation & Development Council's Circle of Diamonds Standards of Excellence Program (2006-2007).

***OBJECTIVE 1.** The Sandhills RC&D will establish an outreach program that will increase awareness the RC&D program through strategic promotional campaigns and activities.*

Strategy 2: Host in North Platte the 2007 Nebraska Association of RC&D Councils Annual meeting in conjunction with the Rural Institute working with the Partnership for Rural Development to coordinate the event.

Strategy 3: Develop a plan of action with the Mid-Plains Community Foundation to implement an affiliated fund that will build an endowment to support Sandhills RC&D future operations (2008).

Strategy 4: Maintain a council web site at www.sandhillsrcd.org to be available 24 hours per day promoting council activities and awareness of the RC&D program (2006-2010).

Strategy 5: Develop a list serve of Sandhills RC&D residences to network for strategic planning and needs assessment (2006-2010).

Strategy 6: Release press articles related to ongoing projects and completion of projects when appropriate (2006-2010).

Strategy 7: Develop the first Sandhills RC&D 5-Year Area Plan (2006).

Strategy 8: Develop the second Sandhills RC&D 5-Year Area Plan (2010).

Estimated Cost Projections & Staffing Needs

Goal 1: Protect and enhance the quality and quantity of all natural resources.

Project	Estimated Cost	Projected Staffing Needs
Range Management Workshops	\$5,000	0.25 FTE
Youth Range Camp	\$500	Contract labor
Twin Platte Weed Management Area	\$5,700	0.25 FTE
Sandhills Weed Management Area	\$13,500	0.50 FTE
Alternative Agriculture Education	\$2,000	0.10 FTE
Value Added Ag Grant	\$1,000	Contract labor
Soil Improvement Workshops	\$10,000	0.50 FTE
No-Till Planting Equipment Grant	\$1,500	Contract labor
Middle Loup Reservoir Project	\$ 7,296,000	Contract labor
Water Quality Plan For The Lake Project	\$3,000	0.15 FTE
Leopold Education Project	\$5,000	0.25 FTE
Nebraska National Forest Friends	\$15,000	Contract labor
Community Forestry Needs Inventory	\$4,000	0.25 FTE
Tree Health And Maintenance Workshops	\$2,000	0.10 FTE
Hydro-Power Feasibility Plan	\$20,000	Contract labor
Local Resources Renewable Energy Feasibility Plan	\$3,000	0.15 FTE
		6 Contracts
Sub-Total	\$7,387,200	2.50 FTE

Goal 2: Revitalize the rural economy with economic development activities.

Project	Estimated Cost	Projected Staffing Needs
Sandhills EDGE	\$22,000	1.0 FTE
E-Commerce Training	\$2,000	0.10 FTE
Old West Developers Network	\$5,700	Contract labor
McPherson Community Federal Credit Union	\$500	Contract labor
Youth Entrepreneurs Project	\$2,000	Contract labor
		3 Contracts
Sub-Total	\$32,200	1.10 FTE

Goal 3: Improve infrastructure and community resources.

Project	Estimated Cost	Projected Staffing Needs
In-Depth Grant Writers Training	\$11,000	0.50 FTE
Public Access To The Foundation Database	\$1,000	0.05 FTE
Grant Writing Courses	\$22,000	1.0 FTE
Thomas County Housing Planning Project	\$13,500	Contract labor
Housing Rehabilitation Phase II Project	\$200,000	Contract labor
Housing Rehabilitation Phase III Project	\$150,000	Contract labor
Thomas County Fire Hall	\$250,000	Contract labor
Theford School Addition	\$350,000	Contract labor
Seneca Community Building	\$30,000	0.10 FTE
		4 Contracts
Sub-Total	\$1,077,500	1.65 FTE

Goal 4: Increase and improve tourism and recreational development.

Project	Estimated Cost	Projected Staffing Needs
Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway Membership	\$1,000	0.05 FTE
Tourism Marketing Grant	\$10,000	Contract labor
National Byway Designation	\$5,000	0.25 FTE
Halsey Forest ATV Trails Project	\$10,500	0.50 FTE
Dismal River Canoe Access	\$20,000	1.0 FTE
Tourism Assessment Resource Growth Evaluation	\$1,000	0.05 FTE
		1 Contract
Sub-Total	\$47,500	1.85 FTE

Goal 5: Strengthen RC&D public recognition and the Sandhills RC&D program

Project	Estimated Cost	Projected Staffing Needs
Circle Of Diamonds	\$500	0.02 FTE
07 Nebraska Assoc. Of RC&D Councils Conference	\$2,500	0.10 FTE
Council Web Site	\$1,000	0.05 FTE
Sandhills RC&D 5-Year Area Plan (2006)	\$2,000	0.10 FTE
Sandhills RC&D 5-Year Area Plan (2010)	\$2,000	0.10 FTE
		0 Contracts
Sub-Total	\$8,000	0.37 FTE

Five Year Total	\$8,552,400	14 Contracts 7.47 FTE
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"The Sandhills RC&D Council agrees that the RC&D Program will be conducted in compliance with the non-discrimination provisions as contained in Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as amended, the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987 (Public Law 100-259) and other nondiscrimination statutes: namely, Section 504, of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title IK of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Age Discrimination Act of 1975 and in accordance with the regulations of the Secretary of Agriculture (7CFR-15, Subpart A and B) that provide that no person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, national origin, age sex, religion, marital status, or handicap/disability be excluded from participation in, or be denied the benefits of, or be otherwise subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial (or technical) assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture or any agency thereof."

The Sandhills RC&D Council agrees that the signing of this document constitutes agreement to comply with Federal laws concerning restrictions on lobbying, a drug-free workplace, and responsibilities for non-procurement, suspension, and debarment, and State review.

The Sandhills RC&D Council hereby adopts the RC&D Area Plan and agrees to use effectively the assistance provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to realize the goals and objectives outlined herein.

Sandhills RC&D Council, Nebraska

By:  Date: July 25, 2006
Chairperson

Attest:  Date: July 25, 2006
Council Secretary

This action authorized at an official meeting of the Sandhills RC&D Council on July 25, 2006.

U.S. Department of Agriculture – Natural Resources Conservation Service

The State Conservationist hereby acknowledges the attached Area Plan of Sandhills RC&D as meeting the requirements under Public Law 97-98 to receive assistance from USDA.

Acknowledged by:

 Date 9/12/06
State Conservationist