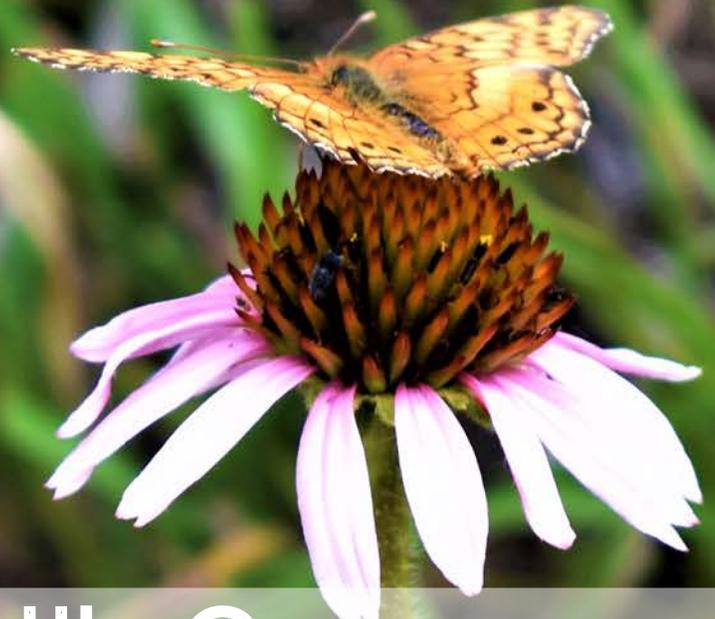




— THE LANDSCAPE —

“Preserving Our Agricultural, Historical And Natural Resources”

2020 IMPACT REPORT



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wild thoughts

from Dave Sands, Executive Director



Will the ground ever stop shifting beneath our feet? That seems like a fair question for 2020 as the very bedrock of our existence turned to pandemic quicksand, swallowing everything from entertainment to a normal education for our children. At times, it seemed like everything had changed overnight and not for the better.

At the Nebraska Land Trust, we work with private landowners to create permanence in a changing world. Like our pre-pandemic lives, cherished landscapes, habitat, wild rivers, clean water, historic sites and agriculture can also be taken for granted and changed over-night. Fortunately, some landowners want permanence and the NLT helps them to achieve it, which benefits us all.

Tamara and Taylor Wohlers ranch in the Pine Ridge on land homesteaded by their family in 1884 and they wanted permanence for their young children, who are the sixth generation of Wohlers at the top of West Ash Creek. Southwest of Fort Robinson State Park, Marie and Jack Kreman ranch along the White River on 2,892 acres of sweeping prairie beneath soaring buttes frequented by golden eagles and bighorn sheep. After more than five decades spent building the ranch, they want to keep it whole.

Most of the prairie that Willa Cather exalted in her novels has been converted to cropland, but one can still experience unspoiled prairie vistas at the 612-acre Willa Cather Memorial Prairie south of Red Cloud. These vistas are greatly enhanced by an adjacent 1,147-acre never-plowed grassland that will stay unplowed because Kami and Brandon Meyer recognized its importance to family, community and wildlife. A virgin tallgrass prairie in Gage County also achieved permanence thanks to the University of Nebraska Foundation, who honored the original donor's wish that a "bit of this great inland empire be preserved." This statement could also apply to Mel and Rosemary Thornton's motivation to protect their prairie in the Niobrara River Valley.

The NLT's supporters and partners are another key to permanence. They make the process of protection possible and we are deeply grateful for their support. The end result is permanence in this changing world – for agricultural land, prairies, wildlife, rivers, woodlands, wide-open spaces and scenic beauty. It's bedrock that won't shift beneath our feet, in 2020 and beyond!

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Kreman Cattle Company

Home on the range for trout, bighorns, elk and family

West of Fort Robinson State Park, the White River in Nebraska's Pine Ridge seems misnamed. With crystal clear water and trout darting for the shadows amid expansive grasslands, pine savannah and towering buttes, it is like a mountain stream on the high plains. At its heart, encompassing more than four miles of the river and 2,892 acres is the Kreman Cattle Company. With a strong desire to conserve their working ranch and its considerable natural resources, Jack and Marie Kreman completed a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) in 2020.

In addition to creating a legacy for future generations, Jack and Marie share their stretch of this premier trout stream with current generations. Through the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) Open Fields and Waters program (OFW), the public is welcome to cast a fly for brown, cutthroat, brook and rainbow trout, so long as they are willing to close the gates and be mindful that they are on a cattle ranch! In fact, conserving the land as a working ranch was a primary motivation for the conservation easement. It prevents subdivision into ranchettes that would fragment ownership and end ranching forever. It is an all-too familiar story in the west and scenic ranches with trout streams are particularly at risk.

Fortunately, there are ranchers like Jack and Marie who see permanent conservation as an alternative to permanent ranchettes. In part, this is born from Jack's deep roots in the Pine Ridge and appreciation of its history. Jack's grandfather Henry, was a soldier at Fort Robinson that homesteaded on the river and knew Red Cloud, who would stop to buy produce from him. Jack has a book of historical photos that shows a number of teepees beneath one of the ranch buttes. There is also a stone foundation from an old cabin and cistern mysteriously built atop the cliffs.

The couple's history began when Jack was working in Oregon and met Marie. Coming from the Pacific Northwest, Marie was not impressed when Jack first showed her the semi-arid Pine Ridge and 160-acres he had purchased to start a ranch on the White River. "To get there, we had to ford the river and navigate around a dead cow blocking the road" Marie explained. Undeterred, they spent the next 57 years building the ranch to its current size and today, they can think of no better place to live.

Jack and Marie wanted to assure that future generations have the same opportunity as they did to make a living from the land. As Marie put it, "You can't make a living off of small parcels" so the conservation easement will assure that their life work of assembling an economically viable ranch will not be undone by subdivision. This is why 50% of the conservation easement's value was provided by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through their Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program. ALE is a Farm Bill program that attracts bipartisan support to fund the permanent conservation of working farms and ranches throughout the country.



Rocky escarpments like these found on the Kreman Ranch provide unique bighorn sheep habitat.

*“When we look at the rest of the world,
we feel so lucky to live here.”*

As is the case with many ranchers, Jack and Marie's love of the land extends to the wildlife that share it with them. This includes bighorn sheep that find refuge in lofty buttes looming over the valley like a fortress. According to Todd Nordeen, NGPC Big Game Program Manager, Kreman Ranch "is the only suitable bighorn sheep habitat within the entire White River drainage." Part of the original Fort Robinson herd spends about 50% of the year there, including documented lambing on an annual basis. Bighorns are classified as an "at-risk species" in Nebraska and 19 other at-risk species have been documented on or within a three-mile radius of the ranch, from mountain short-horned lizards to golden eagles.

A pile of antlers in the ranch yard also attests to the area's reputation for elk, including some of the largest bulls in the state. This isn't surprising given the water, grass, cover and wide-open spaces the ranch provides. When it comes to unfragmented habitat needed by elk and other wildlife, the sum is greater than the parts. In this case, Kreman Ranch adjoins the 2,741-acre Peterson Wildlife Management Area, which adjoins 22,000-acre Fort Robinson State Park and 7,794-acre Soldier Creek Wilderness. When added to the 1,121-acre Chief Dull Knife College Easement just a mile away, two NLT conservation easements have increased this large contiguous block of permanently conserved land by 12%.

Just as the ranch attracts diverse wildlife, its ecological significance attracted a diverse group of funding partners in addition to NRCS. Through a grant to conserve native grasslands in the northern plains, the Conservation Fund and Cargill Foundation provided 25% of the funding needed for the easement's purchase. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Nebraska Big Game Society and Nebraska chapter of Trout Unlimited were important contributors as well, along with annual supporters who make the process of protection possible. In addition, Jack and Marie generously donated a significant portion of their easement's value through a "bargain sale" where it was sold for less than appraised value.

As a result, a sixth generation of the Kreman family will be able to walk the ranch, play in the river, explore the buttes, enjoy the wildlife, appreciate its history and someday, make a living from ranching. "We want future generations to have the same life we do," Marie explained. "When we look at the rest of the world, we feel so lucky to live here."

Wohlers Homestead

Five Generations of Stewardship lead to Permanent Conservation of Historic Family Ranch



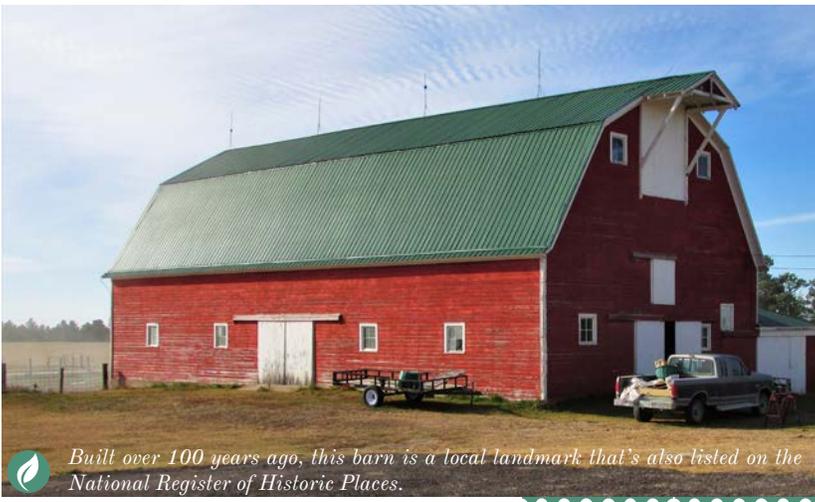
Taylor Wohlers, fifth generation rancher, with his wife, Tamara and children, Jack and Dutch

In the summer of 2012, much of Nebraska's ponderosa pine forest was ablaze. From the central Niobrara Valley to the western reaches of the Pine Ridge, historic drought, heat and wind created perfect conditions for the most destructive wildfire season in Nebraska's recorded history.

In late August, a wildfire tore through West Ash Creek Canyon near Crawford. As the fire closed in on Wohlers Ranch, homesteaded by Henry "Dutch" Wohlers in 1884 on 640 acres at the head of the canyon, a strange thing happened. The flames dropped from the forest crown to the ground and burned through the woodlands as a grassfire, sparing a large grove of ponderosa pine that now provide a "seed island" that could eventually help to repopulate the scorched watershed.

While it might have seemed like divine intervention, it was actually human intervention that spared the forest. Prior to the fire, the family had worked with the Nebraska Forest Service to thin and limb ponderosa pines on their land, earning the designation of Stewardship Forest. In addition, as part of a working ranch the grass had been grazed, further reducing fuel for wildfire. The result is striking as burnt trees now surround an oasis of living pines. It is a testament to effective forest management that can make western pine forests more resilient to wildfire.

Forest stewardship is just one example of a conservation ethic that has been with the Wohlers family through five generations in the Pine Ridge, 135 years and counting. Taylor Wohlers is the fifth generation to steward the land with his wife Tamara and two young children, Jack and Dutch. As with previous generations, their family's past and future on the land is a part of who they are, so they decided to take stewardship to another level by placing a conservation easement on their ranch with the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT).



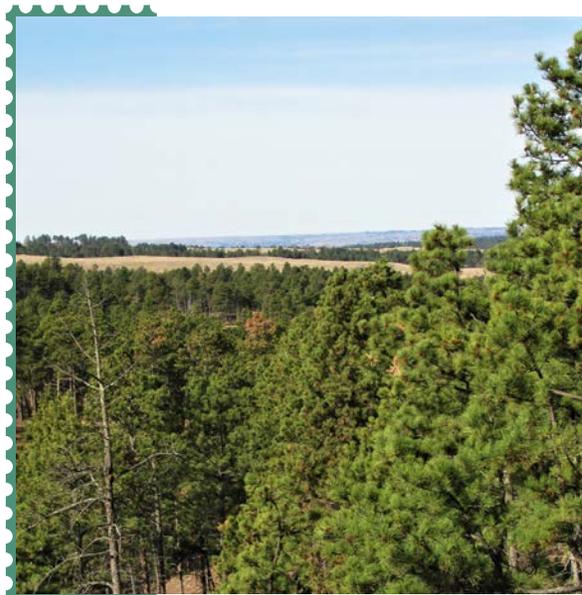
Built over 100 years ago, this barn is a local landmark that's also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"With the history of the property and having been in the family for so long, it was a unique opportunity and definitely something worth protecting."

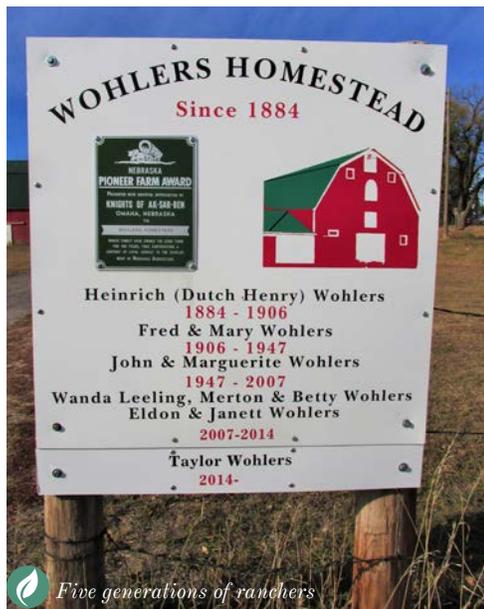
"Our land is livelihood," Tamara explained. "So our land means everything to us...we would take any measure to preserve the land so it continues to provide for us. With the history of the property and having been in the family for so long, it was a unique opportunity and definitely something worth protecting. Ranchers who actually run a true ranch instead of a hobby ranch are finding it harder and harder to find land sections of more than 100 acres, so with the amount we have we want to protect the ranch, preserve the land and make it so our kids can ranch on the family homestead as well."

When Tamara speaks of the “family homestead” she means it quite literally, as their family lives on the actual site homesteaded by the Wohlers family in 1884. A large red barn built without blueprints nearly 100 years ago is a local landmark. It also has national significance, as it and several other buildings from the original homestead are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Tamara also referenced the challenge young ranchers face in competing with out-of-state buyers who want recreational land for a “hobby ranch.” This competition for land is real in the Pine Ridge. According to the 2017 Nebraska Farm Real Estate Market Survey, 45% of land buyers in northwest Nebraska were not farmers or ranchers – the highest percentage of non-agricultural buyers in any region by far. Northwest Nebraska also led the state in out-of-state buyers, who accounted for 36% of land purchases. By comparison, northern Nebraska was runner-up with 4%. When ranching is replaced by recreation, land can change from a family livelihood to an asset; an asset that can be maximized through subdivision for recreation.



 Wohlers Homestead, Pine Ridge



 Five generations of ranchers

Recognizing this threat to ranchland, the Natural Resources Conservation Service provides funding to purchase conservation easements through their Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program. Fifty percent of the funding to purchase this easement came from the ALE program, with the remainder coming from the Nebraska Environmental Trust, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Nebraska Big Game Society. Transaction costs were supported by the Sterns Charitable Foundation and the Wohlers family who generously endowed their easement. The NLT’s Pine Ridge Advisory Committee also played a role by recommending the project to the NLT Board of Directors after scoring 14 properties, totaling more than 17,000 acres.

In explaining the benefits of a conservation easement to their family, Tamara pointed out that it “helped us to get on our feet a bit more and further our ranch. We hope to acquire more land and as Taylor says, ‘run the biggest ranch in Nebraska.’ Really what it all boils down to is your passion and what you want to save for your kids so they can

hopefully develop similar passions. Without land conservation, ranching in the Wohlers Family could become a thing of the past. Conserving the land more or less ensures that there will always be a bit of land to continue the tradition on.”

“Without land conservation, ranching in the Wohlers Family could become a thing of the past.”



 Sound forest management saved these pines during the 2012 wildfire

Meyer Grassland

Large Prairie Forever Protected next to Willa Cather Memorial Prairie

Inspired by seemingly endless grasslands near Red Cloud, Willa Cather captured the beauty of Nebraska's prairies in words like no other. Although the prairie is no longer endless, a visitor to the 612-acre Willa Cather Memorial Prairie south of Red Cloud can still capture that experience, especially when they gaze at the adjacent 1,147-acre never-plowed prairie owned by Brandon and Kami Meyer. Thanks to the Meyer family, this prairie view will remain as timeless as Cather's novels, since it will now be conserved forever through a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust.

Kami's grandfather started this prairie on the road to conservation when he purchased it over 50 years ago with a goal to improve the grassland for wildlife and livestock. "Our family grew up with a very strong passion and respect for this particular pasture," Kami explained. "Not only is it ideal for grazing, it serves as an exceptional refuge for wildlife, fish and birds. With the rolling hills, heavily wooded creek, numerous ponds and springs, it would be a shame for this ground to not be protected for future generations to enjoy and appreciate."

In the side-hills of the Republican River Valley where the prairie is located, most of the native grasslands have been converted to cropland. "In the past decade," said Brandon, "farming and developments have taken such a large part of the countryside that we feel it is extremely important to do our part to protect some of the grassland that is left."

Ashley Olson, Executive Director of the Willa Cather Foundation, helped to identify the prairie as a conservation opportunity. "When visitors arrive at the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie," she said, "they have the rare opportunity to see a 360-degree view of undeveloped land" described so eloquently in Cather classics like *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers*. "We are pleased to have played a small role in facilitating this conservation easement," she continued, "and are certain that future generations will also marvel at the unbroken horizon and unplowed prairie described in Cather's writing."

To Wayne Mollhoff, author of *The Nebraska Breeding Bird Atlas*, the Meyer grassland's location is important for another reason. "If you can protect the Meyer Prairie and add those acres to the Cather Prairie, it will be a much more important resource [for wildlife] than if the same properties were several miles apart," he explained. In addition, he pointed to the diversity of habitat which attracts an array of birds. Whereas a person might find prairie chickens and meadowlarks in the grassland, they might also see four species of woodpeckers in the woodlands, wood ducks on the wetland and variety of raptors surveying it all from above.

Dave Sands, Executive Director of the Nebraska Land Trust, appreciated the Meyer's patience and commitment to conservation, as it took nearly three years to assemble the funding to purchase the conservation easement. Half of the funding was provided through the Natural Resources Conservation Service Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program, which is designed to permanently conserve working farms and ranches under private ownership. The effort was initiated by funding from the Cottonwood Wind Project in Webster County and the remainder was provided by the Nebraska Environmental Trust. "I joke that forever shouldn't be rushed," Sands said, "and in this case, it certainly wasn't."

When asked about her thoughts on forever, Kami responded, "It is our hope that this pasture can be a part of our legacy that is passed down to our children and someday grandchildren, and that they will be able to enjoy it in the same natural state that we do." The same natural state that inspired Willa Cather.

 *Brandon and Kami Meyer with their children, Kasey and Kyra*





Dalbey Prairie

University grants donor's wish in conserving tallgrass prairie

It is rare when a property deed tells a story, much less an eloquent one. But when Dwight Dalbey decided to gift his never-plowed tallgrass prairie in Gage County to the University of Nebraska Foundation in 1944 to benefit University research, his words were chosen carefully. As a result, he conveyed more than acres in the deed; he also conveyed a bit of history, his family's attachment to the land and his wishes for conservation. Seventy-six years later, these words guided the University of Nebraska Foundation's decision to do something the original deed did not -- protect this native grassland forever, through a conservation easement that was donated to the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT).

Although Dwight did not require permanent conservation as a condition of his gift to the University, his words in the deed conveyed his thoughts; "The tract of land hereby conveyed is virgin prairie, untouched by the plow and now in the same state as it was at the time the sturdy pioneers came west in search of opportunity and began the building of a new empire in America. Among these pioneers, and sharing their vision, was Ford Lewis, the father of my beloved wife and helpmate down through the years, Hannah Virginia Lewis Dalbey. From her father she inherited his appreciation of the prairie, and it was her wish, as well as it is mine, that this bit of this great inland empire be preserved in its natural state."

For many years, the University utilized the prairie for grazing research, while surrounding grassland was increasingly converted to cropland, making this one of the largest remaining tallgrass prairies in Gage County. Overall, 98% of tallgrass prairie in Nebraska has been lost. As research at the prairie waned in recent years, the University leased the grass for grazing. So as part of an overall plan to conserve this prairie complex, it was decided that 503 acres should be returned to private ownership. Approximately 140 acres will be retained by the University and managed by the Center for Grassland Studies.

In implementing this plan, the University wanted to honor the intentions of Dwight Dalbey before any land was sold. This was accomplished through the conservation easement, which keeps the grass right-side-up along with a diverse assortment of forbs, including New Jersey Tea and Leadplant – indicators of good forb diversity. Grassland wildlife will also be sustained by the prairie, including numerous regal fritillary butterflies – a Tier-1 At-risk species – that have been observed on the property. By maintaining the availability of forage, local cattle production and agriculture will be sustained as well.

If one ever doubts the power of words, consider the words of Dwight Dalbey, which echoed across three quarters of a century, resulting in forever protection for his family's beloved prairie.

Thornton Prairie

Cherished prairie protected by couple in Niobrara Valley

Early in 2020, Mel and Rosemary Thornton started down the path toward permanent conservation of their beloved 120 acres in the Middle Niobrara River Valley. Sadly, Mel passed away before a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) could be completed, which made it even more important for Rosemary given the couple's passion for conservation. It was important for the NLT as well, since their land adjoins the NLT's 1,124-acre Sunny Brook Ranch conservation easement next to Rocky Ford in Keya Paha County. Below, in Rosemary's own words, is the story of their journey on the path to permanence:

We hadn't yet moved into our partly built log cabin and were still camping in our truck near the edge of a hill amidst the buckbrush and overlooking the Sandhills. It seemed like the Sandhills we were seeing went on forever. Our view of the Niobrara River was blocked by trees, but we knew it was about a mile away. As Mel and I gazed at the scene, he remarked, "I feel like we own our own state park." I agreed.

Mel was referring not only to the view but to our land covered with historic, virgin prairie that had grown before our time and never been plowed. Some of the prairie grasses include little bluestem, sand bluestem, switchgrass, needle and thread, gramma grasses and a host of others. Two unique yet plentiful wildflowers are bush morning glory and shell-leaf penstemon. Also, several species of cone flowers, four kinds of milkweed, yucca and more can be found among the grasses. Large and small sandstone rocks dot the hills and when Mel described our land to a professor at the University of Nebraska who knows the Lakota language, he suggested Wazi Oshki as a name for our place. It means "Land with rolling hills and trees, not good for farming."

The trees are mostly ponderosa pines that grow in groves scattered 'here and there' on the prairie. The ponderosa pines are survivalists on the very eastern edge of their range in North America. Mixed in with the pines are eastern red cedar, some of the trees being huge and attracting flocks of cedar waxwings in the winter. Cottonwood, bur oak and other deciduous trees grow down by the creek.

After the cabin was built we turned to the land. Its beauty was not completely unscathed: pockets of Canada thistle and eastern red cedar grew. We worked to get rid of the thistle and hired tree cutters to thin the cedars. Then, the unexpected happened: in 2012 a fire burned through the Niobrara Valley. We viewed the fire as a disaster that would surely ruin the land. However, the prairie grew back more beautiful than ever, both grasses and wildflowers.

Since most of our trees did not survive, we felt it was important to try and replace as many as possible, so we planted over 600 ponderosas in the years following the fire where the previous trees had grown. Then we bought about 7,000 more that were planted by contractors hired by the Nebraska Forest Service. The contractors were able to walk up the steep hills to plant in places we could not reach.

Many of our pines are now healthy and over waist high. One day they will gain the height of the trees that burned. Our log cabin was spared in the fire, which made us mighty thankful, but I still feel sadness and some jealousy when I pass the tall, beautiful ponderosas growing along the road to the cabin. Many of our trees that burned were over 100 years old.

In spite of the fire set-back, Mel and I still felt that our land was special and we started to think about saving it with a conservation easement. Mel's major goal was to keep the land from being subdivided into small parcels, should future generations of our family decide to sell it. I was equally determined to save the wonderful prairie and conserve everything. So, we talked to the Nebraska Land Trust and now our place will continue as is, in perpetuity.



Pasqueflowers found on Thornton Prairie

You can be a Partner in Permanence!

The Nebraska Land Trust's (NLT) generous donors are partners in achieving permanence for agricultural, historical and natural resources. Whether it is an annual donation that supports ongoing projects or a Planned Gift for the future, please consider the NLT in your charitable giving. For more information, contact Dave Sands at dsands@nelandtrust.org or call (402) 438-5263.



 *Bighorn Sheep, spotted in the Pine Ridge*

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The Nebraska Land Trust is deeply grateful for the following partners who helped to create permanence for land in a changing world during the past year.

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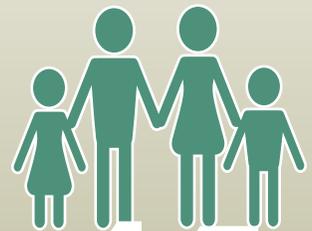
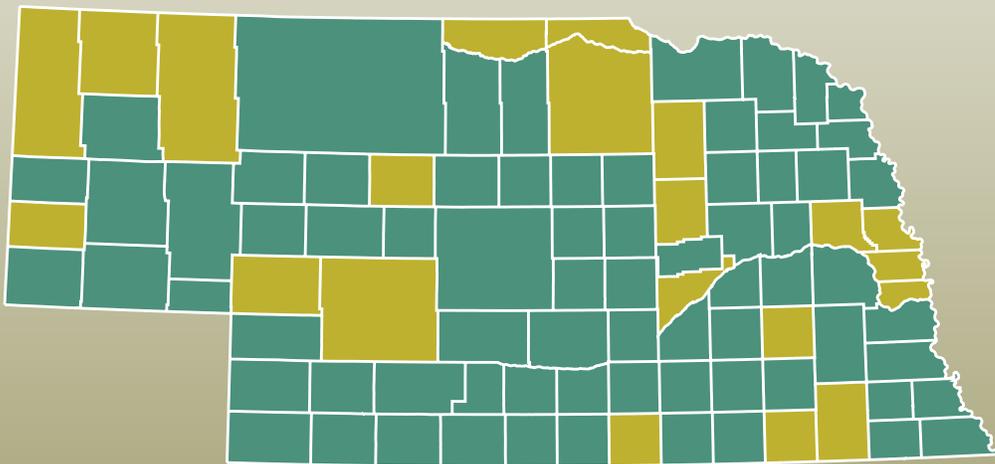
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