

The Landscape

News from the Nebraska Land Trust

2009 Annual Report

Easement preserves on-farm conservation

When George Krueger first discussed a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust, he pointed with pride to stewardship of his 438-acre farm in Seward County. He was particularly fond of the riparian woodlands along Lincoln Creek, which served as a haven for wood ducks and other wildlife. He also sought to improve water quality, by planting grass in the waterways leading to the creek. To prevent erosion, steep hills had been restored to pasture and terraced.

With no heirs to continue this tradition of on-farm conservation, George wanted to make sure that his legacy of good stewardship would not be undone. He achieved this goal through the donation of a conservation easement to the NLT in 2009. To support the NLT's expense of holding his and other easements in perpetuity, George also donated a separate parcel of land with a Life Estate, to someday endow the work of the NLT. Through these two gifts, good stewardship will be assured on George's farm, and the NLT's capacity to preserve other lands will be enhanced as well.



Lincoln Creek and riparian woodlands provide a haven for wood ducks and other wildlife on the Krueger Farm in Seward County.



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NLT seeks consensus on land preservation in lower Platte Valley



Platte River State Park from the Lied Bridge

It has been more than a decade since a vision of preservation for the "Bluffs Region" of the lower Platte Valley was articulated in a collaborative report from the Lower Platte River Corridor Alliance. Citing beauty, geology, productive farmland, and biological diversity, the report called for "a balance between economic expansion and the preservation of rural character" in this unique region below Ashland.

Supported by Cooperative Agreements with the Lower Platte South and Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources Districts, the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) sought to sharpen the focus of this vision in 2009.

Seeking consensus on the types of resources that people wanted to preserve, and on specific areas where land preservation should focus, the NLT formed the Lower Platte Valley Conservation Working Group (LPVCWG). With representation from a variety of interests, the group provided input from diverse perspectives including Cass and Sarpy County government, conservation organizations, developers, farmers, the Nebraska State Historical Society, recreation, gravel mining, and youth camps.

(See *Lower Platte* on page 3)

Donated easement to preserve restored grassland

On the eastern fringe of the Sandhills in Boone County, prairie is interspersed with rolling cropland but recently, a variety of factors have been increasing the conversion from grass to corn.

When Ted and Ramona Thieman purchased 160 acres west of their hometown, Petersburg, they wanted to restore the land to a healthy blanket of prairie. With their donation of a conservation easement to the Nebraska Land Trust in 2009, they have made sure that the prairie blanket will never be removed.

This is especially important to the couple because their grassland represents a prairie restoration since the property was previously cultivated. The land was returned to grass in the 1950s, but it was then subjected to overgrazing. Blue grass and brome replaced the native, warm season grasses and according to Ted, the land looked like a "pool table" when they bought it.

There was a bright side however. Prior to the mid-1950s, when the land was cultivated, the widespread use of herbicides was rare, so there was still a diverse "seed bank" in the soil, including many native species just waiting to emerge under better land management. (See *Thieman Easement*, page 3)



Looking west from Thieman Ranch in Boone County



Wild Thoughts

From Dave Sands, Executive Director

We've all been there -- chatting with some acquaintance who expresses an opinion that Nebraska is topographically challenged and devoid of anything but agriculture. When I hear such remarks, it typically rankles me and I've been known to respond by asking if they prefer the view of our state from 30,000 feet or through a windshield on I-80.

This response stems from experience, because I've seen a lot of Nebraska and know that the opposite is true; Nebraska is a place of diverse beauty, unique geology, pristine rivers, world-class wildlife, and important history. But to be fair, the skeptics are right about one thing; 97% of the land is privately owned, and the vast majority of that is in agriculture.

What they may not understand is that agriculture, beautiful landscapes, and wildlife often go hand in hand. When your livelihood is derived from the land, one tends to develop a strong conservation ethic. In Nebraska, one often hears, "I want to pass the land on to my kids in better shape than when it was passed to me."

However, the continuance of agricultural stewardship is not a given, especially in our most scenic areas. As more people discover Nebraska's virtues, agricultural lands are being sold to recreational and often absentee buyers. This really hit home when a Pine Ridge rancher told me that he had three new neighbors; from California, Colorado, and Florida.

Now, there is nothing inherently bad about recreational or absentee landowners. I know some that are exceptional conservationists and to be honest, who hasn't entertained the thought of a cabin in a pretty spot. But I've also heard recreational owners defend the cedar trees invading their prairie, because the trees provided cover for more deer.

In my view, such comments reflect a lack of understanding about the land, its history, its uses, and its ecology; knowledge that farmers and ranchers typically have in spades. Recognizing the important conservation legacy of agricultural stewardship, Congress recently increased funding for the purchase of conservation easements that preserve agricultural lands, through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Farm and Ranch Protection Program (FRPP).

With a goal to preserve agricultural, historical, and natural resources, the FRPP mission mirrors our own, so the NLT is using this program to preserve working farms and ranches throughout the state. The past year marked a milestone for the use of this program in Nebraska, as the NRCS approved \$1,442,870 in support for multiple NLT projects, including two farms in Sarpy County and a scenic ranch on the Niobrara River.

However, FRPP can only fund up to 50% of an easement's value, so we are fortunate to have the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) as another partner, who has approved matching funds for each project. In the end, agricultural land is preserved along with the wildlife, woodlands, prairies, rivers, historic sites, and scenic views that come with it. This benefits us all, even those that only see our state from 30,000 feet.

The mission of the Nebraska Land Trust is to foster the protection of agricultural, historical and natural resources on land in Nebraska, through education, partnering, and permanent conservation.

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For information, please call the Nebraska Land Trust at (402) 438-5263; email dsands@nelandtrust.org; or mail to 233 S. 13th St., Suite 1712, Lincoln, NE 68508.

(Lower Platte, from page 1)

Initially, participants discussed the various resources that are found in the area, from oak/hickory woodlands to archeology. Based on these discussions, they identified criteria to be used in determining where land preservation would achieve the greatest benefits. Since there are limited financial resources for land preservation, the identification of Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs) will steer efforts to land that matters the most.

Consensus criteria for the selection of CFAs included wildlife habitat, native plant communities, the absence of habitat fragmentation, rare species, scenic views from public places, steep slopes, natural river banks, streams, and wetlands. There were cultural criteria as well, including development potential, county comprehensive plans, working farms, public attractions, and historical or archeological sites.

Based on these criteria, the NLT produced maps to identify areas where each exists. For example, scenic views from public places were mapped by assessing the views from the observation towers at Mahoney and Platte River State Parks, as well as the I-80 and Lied Bridges that cross the river. Once each criteria was mapped, a Composite Map was produced to identify "hot spots" where multiple resources overlapped.

Using this information, the group identified four areas that appeared to have the most value for conservation. In mid-October, a tour was arranged to "ground truth" impressions of these areas. Ultimately, the group agreed that in addition to the Schramm Bluffs (an ongoing CFA for the NLT), future land preservation in the region should focus around Mahoney State Park, Platte River State Park, Cedar Creek, and Girl Scout Camp Maha.

In 2010, the NLT will contact landowners in these areas to assess their interest in land preservation. When interested landowners are identified, individual properties will be screened and funding will be sought if needed for easement purchases. This follows a process that has already worked to preserve land near Schramm State Park. While it will still take years to realize the vision of significant land preservation in the Bluffs Region, that vision became more focused in 2009.

(Thieman Easement, from page 1)

The Thiemans were intent on providing this management and they started by resting the pasture for two years. They also understood the importance of proper grazing in prairie health so that when cattle returned, the land was fenced to facilitate rotational grazing, which also improved habitat for wildlife. "We're very fortunate that at our age, we don't need...a maximum return," explains Ted, "That is unless, 'maximum return' can mean ...land that allows nature to re-establish itself and thrive."

"All kinds of wildlife... love the land like we do," Ted says, "and the land loves us in return when we simply allow symbiotic relationships to exist. We didn't always know this, but we're having a lot of fun learning."

Today, one might mistake the Thiemans' prairie for one that had never been plowed, with at least eight native grasses, and wildflowers like shell-leaf penstemon, purple coneflower, and butterfly milkweed. Ted concluded that "we can't control all of the land around us, but we can control this little piece of ground which we think is a paradise in its own right. Through the Nebraska Land Trust and a conservation easement, we are able to assure ourselves that future owners of our pride and joy won't use and abuse the land in a way we would hate to see."

Thank you!

The Nebraska Land Trust wishes to express our sincere appreciation to the following individuals, businesses, and organizations who contributed to our success in 2009:

Individuals
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