



THE LANDSCAPE

2023 IMPACT REPORT

Conserving Our Agricultural, Historical, and
Natural Resources

Photo: Graham Crowe Ranch

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Wild Thoughts



By: Dave Sands, Executive Director

For the past decade or so, I've had license plates that proclaim, "Nebraska, The Beef State." When people ask why, I joke that it allows me to travel the state incognito, so I'm not immediately identified as a city guy. It's also one of our most attractive plates, depicting a pastoral scene of cattle in a green meadow that looks like a postcard from the Sandhills. But in truth, my reasons go much deeper than that.

One is nostalgia. It was the slogan on our plates throughout my childhood, a slogan my dad taught us to be proud of. The beef industry is economically vital to Nebraska and my family was a part of it for over 100 years. Beef literally put food on our table. But my main reason for these plates boils down to just six words; "Love the prairies? Thank a rancher."

Roughly half of our state is still covered by grass, and we should all be thankful for that. Prairies are Nebraska's natural heritage, which transform grass into human food through cattle. Grasslands provide critical habitat for wildlife, from pollinators to pronghorns. They protect water quality by filtering runoff, while acting as a sponge that replenishes groundwater supplies. Prairies can even lessen climate change, by sequestering a huge amount of carbon in roots underground.

Since 97% of land in Nebraska is privately owned, ranchers top the list when it comes to conservation of our grasslands. Most have a passion for "keeping the grass right-side-up" and "leaving it better than they found it." A few take this commitment to another level, through a conservation easement that keeps the grass right-side-up forever.

Les and Jan Graham are two of these rare people. Their ranch has been in the family since 1890, conserving 8,244 acres of prairie along the lower Niobrara River in northeast Nebraska (page 6). It is a region where large, unfragmented grasslands are increasingly rare, making the ranch a magnet for wildlife from threatened butterflies to breeding leks for prairie chickens and sharp-tail grouse. Riverine woodlands and wetlands draw songbirds and waterfowl. It is a family and natural treasure and thanks to years of persistence by the Graham family, it is now a permanent legacy that benefits us all.

Brent and Janet Steffen pursued the same goal for their H Bar Ranch along the Dismal River, a few miles west of the Nebraska National Forest at Halsey (page 8). They wanted 5,959 acres of this historic Sandhills ranch to remain a ranch, when cabin sites or even a golf course were other options. As Brent put it, "The Dismal is the most mis-named river in America...It isn't heaven, but it's in the same zip code." Thanks to the Steffens, four miles of this iconic Sandhills river valley are now in that same zip code permanently.

So, to me it's crystal clear. Love the prairies? Thank a rancher. Especially ranchers like the Grahams and Steffens, who wanted permanence for their prairies and the benefits grasslands provide for us all.

Land Trust Alliance Senior Staff Visit Nebraska



The Land Trust Alliance (LTA) is a national nonprofit dedicated to saving the places people need and love. They accomplish this by empowering and mobilizing land trusts in communities across America to conserve land - and connect people to the land - for the benefit of all.

As an organization that operates on a national scale, they understand the importance of seeing the work of land trusts they support first-hand. In an effort to better understand the needs of land trusts focused on western agriculture, CEO Andrew Bowman, Senior Director of Government Relations Lori Faeth and Board Chair Michael Polemis made the trip to Nebraska.



While in Nebraska, they had the opportunity to visit three protected farms and meet with landowners in the Lower Platte River Valley. These landowners gave important feedback to LTA staff, who lobby the farm bill on behalf of their members.

The Alliance works alongside their members, most notably the 100+ members of their Farm Bill Working Group, to develop a series of targeted recommendations to streamline program administration and implementation while ensuring that critical conservation dollars are available to conserve farmland, ranchland and forested land across the country.

We are thrilled to announce that Nebraska Land Trust is now a certified entity through the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). Currently, only 32 land trusts in the US have certified entity status with NRCS. Certified entities have an established track record with the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program and a long-term commitment to conservation of agricultural lands.

As a certified entity, we will be able to expedite our ALE applications, allowing us to better serve our state's landowners who wish to leave a legacy of working agriculture on their land.





TURKEY CREEK PRESERVE ADDITION

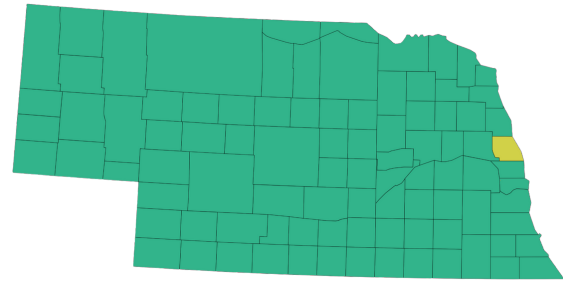
317 Acres | Washington County

Nebraska Land Trust engaged with the Turkey Creek Preserve Foundation for the second time to conserve an additional 317 acres in the existing Turkey Creek Preserve.

This new "Deer Creek" addition is a continuation of the vision of Mary Lou Chapek that is nearly 25 years in the making. Mary Lou's affinity for nature and desire to conserve it for the future has created a contiguous parcel of nearly 1,000 acres previously fragmented by subdivision into smaller parcels.

"I have devoted over 20 years of my life and much of my hard earned resources to preserving this beautiful place for the generations to come."

Thanks to Mary Lou's kind donation, this easement will conserve another special piece of Nebraska's natural resources forever.



THREE SISTERS BERLET

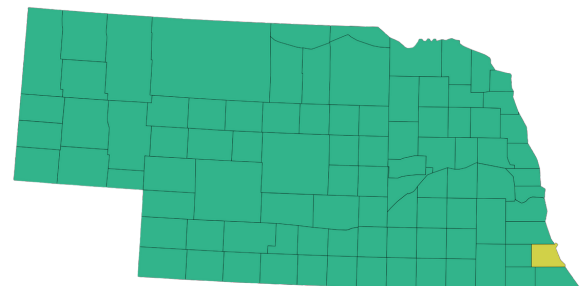
159 Acres | Nemaha County

Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) proudly partnered with Deborah Twombly, Victoria McGoldrick and Christina Robb to conserve their family farm.

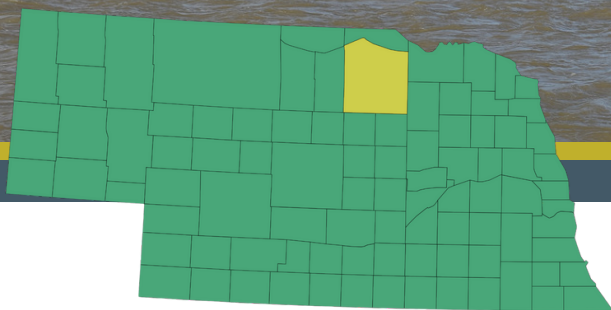
The farm has been in the family since the late 1800s when their grandfather, Peter Berlet, purchased the farm.

The farm boasts prime soils and two spring-fed streams that run into the Little Nemaha River.

"Our sincerest thanks to Deborah, Victoria and Christina for donating this easement and conserving yet another important piece of Nebraska's agricultural resources.



GRAHAM CROWE RANCH



8,244 Acres | Holt County

In June, Nebraska Land Trust completed an easement with Les and Jan Graham on their family ranch. Les and Jan are the 4th generation on the property, and they wanted to ensure that their family legacy of working agriculture remained intact. They also wanted to preserve the conservation value their ranch provides to the region.



Greater Prairie Chicken on Graham Crowe Ranch

Les and Jan explained: “We had a desire to see our grassland stay in its native state and the ranch to be operated as it has always been. A conservation easement seemed to be the option we found to hopefully fulfill that desire. The Nebraska Land Trust shared our vision and were very helpful in guiding us through the process.”

Graham Crowe Ranch is located within one of four core areas of the Great Plains Grassland Initiative through the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). This initiative is part of a landowner-driven program conserving the remaining grasslands in the Great Plains.

Graham Crowe Ranch is one of the largest grasslands in northeast Nebraska under one owner, with significant conservation value. It's also considered a biologically unique landscape under Nebraska's State Wildlife Action Plan. With over 4 miles of Niobrara River frontage, this ranch is part of a network of 22 miles of protection between the ranch and the Niobrara's confluence with the Missouri River.

The combination of the ranch's ecological diversity, location and size make it significant to conservation efforts in northeast Nebraska.



Prime habitat for numerous species of conservation concern were identified on the Graham Crowe Ranch by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and the following species were observed on the property:

Greater Prairie Chicken
Sharp-tailed Grouse
Bald Eagle
Trumpeter Swans

Wild Turkey
Northern Bobwhite Quail
White-tailed Deer

Here's what the Nebraska Game and Parks had to say about the significance of the ranch to wildlife conservation:

“The uniqueness of this tract and appropriateness for protection is, we believe, pretty easy to see. There is a long list of considerations which contribute to the ecological value of any given tract of land: size, location within a conservation priority area, diversity of habitats, species richness, presence of at-risk species, proximity and connectivity to other habitats and protected lands, and so on. Not only does the Graham Crowe easement application shine in these categories, its location and the intentions of the landowner make it possible for this property to contribute significantly to larger landscape conservation efforts.”

Conservation of the grassland will also prevent additional center-pivot irrigation development in a region plagued by high nitrates in groundwater, a result of conversion of grassland to cropland. The rare combination of the ranch's ecological importance, location, size and positive impact for water quality make it one of the most significant conservation projects NLT has ever completed.



This easement was made possible by the following donors and funders:

- Les and Jan Graham
- NRCS
- Plum Creek Wind, LLC
- Prairie Breeze Wind Energy, LLC
- Sholes Wind, LLC



HORSESHOE-BAR RANCH

The following feature was published on the Land Trust Alliance national blog “The Dirt”.



5,959 Acres | Thomas County

The sandhills of Northcentral Nebraska. Many have never heard of them, despite being the most intact temperate prairie ecosystem in the world. Comprised of nearly 20,000 square miles of sand dunes stabilized by native prairie, it’s one of the largest intact grasslands in North America. It’s immensely ecologically diverse. Nearly 700 plant species, 300 bird species and over 55 species of mammals call the sandhills home.

Nestled in the heart of the sandhills is the Horseshoe-Bar Ranch, also known as “H-Bar Ranch”. This ranch has historic origins, being initially homesteaded by a friend of Buffalo Bill. The ranch is also the subject of a book titled *The Horseshoe Bar Ranch: Remembering a Prairie Childhood*. With 4 miles of frontage on the Dismal River, the property spans nearly 6,000 acres. Despite its name, the Dismal River offers some of the most beautiful scenery in the state. It’s what drew in H-Bar Ranch owners Brent and Janet Steffen.

“It’s our little piece of heaven” says Brent. “It’s not heaven, but it’s in the same zip code. Dismal River country is pretty special” Brent continued. “The Dismal River is probably the most misnamed river in the country.”

Brent and Janet knew they weren’t the only ones who appreciated the beauty and scenic views on their ranch. There is an increasing trend for buyers to purchase parcels of ranches and turn them into “ranchettes”, or even golf courses. These subdivisions carve up the land into small pieces that are no longer viable for ranching. Once divided, it will never be a working ranch again. This is why the Steffens chose to work with Nebraska Land Trust to conserve their ranch through a conservation easement. They wanted to be sure their ranch would remain a working ranch – forever.

The environmental benefits of keeping grasslands in working agriculture, like the H-Bar Ranch, are both numerous and substantial. The sandhills sit atop the Ogallala Aquifer, one of the largest aquifers in the world. It supplies drinking water to many people in the great plains states, and sources water for agricultural uses such as irrigation. The grasses above the aquifer help to capture and filter the water, before descending into the permeable rock layers below.

Although we often think of forests sequestering carbon, grasslands sequester carbon too. While grasses don’t store the same volume of carbon as trees, the carbon is stored in the biomass underground, which protects the carbon stores in the event of fire.



Pictured L-R: Dave Sands, Janet Steffen, Brent Steffen, and Jacob Alishouse

The easement will also help maintain the impressive ecological diversity on the ranch. Unlike most of Nebraska Land Trust’s easements, this easement contains a cedar management plan. It’s important to remove cedars in this area, as they spread quickly and can rapidly turn native grasslands into cedar forests. With the proceeds from the easement purchase the Steffens were able to implement more efficient methods of cedar tree removal, thereby maintaining native grasslands thereby preserving the ecological diversity on the ranch.

Perpetuity is a word that gives most people pause. It should. The decision to determine the future of your land forever is both significant and deeply personal. At Nebraska Land Trust, the advice given to landowners is to always take their time, consult with their family, and NEVER pursue an agricultural land easement solely for the financial benefit.

“Our major objective entering into this conservation easement was that we didn’t want to see it developed” said Brent. “We wanted it to stay as close to how God made it as it could be. And we wanted it to stay in agriculture.”

The private landowners that land trusts work with belong to a remarkably small cohort in our world. An incredibly small percentage of people in the global population own land. Of those in the world who own land, an exceedingly small percentage of those choose to conserve it through an easement. This means land trusts working with private landowners have the pleasure of working with a wonderfully unique and visionary group of people. NLT has served 47 families who wish to conserve their land in perpetuity.

Land conservation is far from free. Nebraska Land Trust relies on the ALE (Agricultural Land Easement) program through the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) to fund many of its easements. The ALE grassland program funded a large portion of the H-Bar Ranch easement. ALE is a farm bill program that provides funding for crop land and grassland easements. This program paid 75% of the value of the easement directly to the Steffens. The remaining 25% of the easement’s value was donated by Brent and Janet. Landowners also agree to give a stewardship endowment donation to the land trust. Since Nebraska Land Trust is promising to enforce the easement forever, these donations are a vital resource for staff to monitor and enforce these easements in perpetuity. While the majority of the easement is funded by ALE, the landowners are making a significant personal investment as well.

Nebraska Land Trust has conserved nearly 48,000 acres to date. 26,815 of these acres were conserved using funding from the ACEP program. This funding is an integral part of Nebraska Land Trust’s ability to help farmers and producers reach their goals for their farms and ranches, and NRCS has been NLT’s most valuable partner in conserving these properties. NLT takes great pride in the number of acres it’s conserved. However, the greatest accomplishments and measure of success lies in the number of families, like the Steffens, that they’ve helped achieve their vision for the future of their land.



DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Jennifer and Bill Pospichal

Jennifer and Bill are both Omaha-area natives who are long-time supporters of a wide variety of conservation efforts. According to Jennifer, she and Bill both have a passionate interest in the environment and conservation.

“Bill remembers the campaign decades ago to stop littering, which changed attitudes about the environment and protecting nature. And I have been involved in recycling efforts for years.”

Their list of memberships in conservation and environmentally-focused organizations is extensive, including the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, Nature Conservancy, Crane Trust, Loveland Garden Club, Extension Master Gardening, Fontenelle Forest, Lauritzen Gardens, and Nebraska Land Trust. In fact, their commitment to Nebraska Land Trust goes beyond an annual donation. Jennifer and Bill decided to make a bigger commitment - making a legacy gift to NLT.

“We feel that the Trust is doing fabulous work with conservation easements and making friends with farmers, ranchers and property owners throughout the state.”

Jennifer and Bill heard about NLT through a talk at the Loveland Garden Club given by Executive Director Dave Sands. Over time, their personal investment in NLT grew to a new level. Not only are Jennifer and Bill generous donors to NLT, Jennifer now sits on the NLT board as an at-large member.

“After some wonderful conversations with Dave we felt this was a great opportunity to contribute and get involved.”

Jennifer and Bill have a positive outlook on land conservation in Nebraska. They believe firmly in the investment of time and resources specifically in rural areas of Nebraska.

“Our hope for the future of land conservation is that there is continued outreach for our rural communities.”

We want to thank Jennifer and Bill for their dedication to land conservation throughout our great state!

Planned giving is a wonderful way to leave a legacy that extends beyond your lifetime. If you are interested in learning more about a planned gift through NLT, please contact Hannah Sidel at hsidel@nelandtrust.org.

You can be a Partner in Permanence!

Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) supporters are partners in achieving permanence for agricultural, historical and natural resources. Whether it is an annual donation that supports ongoing projects or an Endowment Gift that supports future projects, please consider the NLT in your charitable giving. For more information, contact Hannah Sidel at hsidel@nelandtrust.org or call 402-438-5263.

We are deeply grateful for the following partners who helped to create permanence for land in a changing world during the past 12 months:

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Claire M. Hubbard Foundation
Ethel S. Abbott Charitable Foundation
John and Jane Ellsworth Family Foundation
J.A. Woollam Foundation
Julie Morsman Schroeder Foundation
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Brent & Janet Steffen
Turkey Creek Preserve Charitable Foundation
Deborah Twombly

In Memory Of Clint Johannes

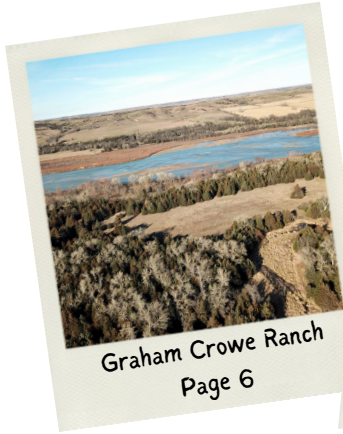
Shirley Johannes

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Graham Crowe Ranch
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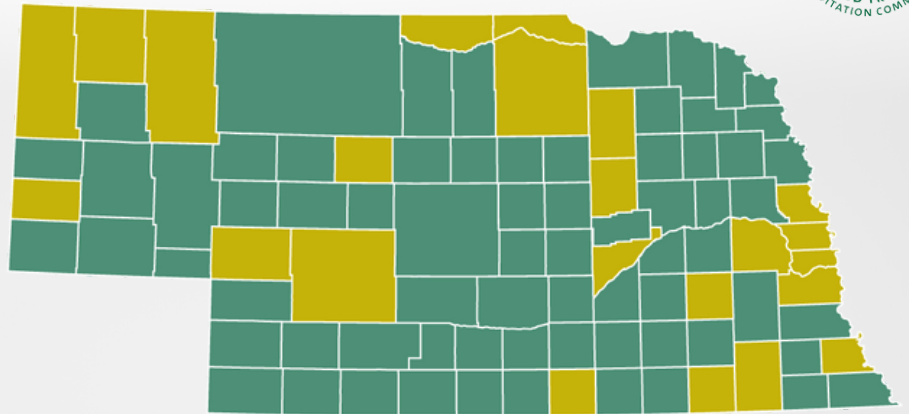


Horseshoe-Bar Ranch
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SNAPSHOTS OF SUCCESS

47,372
ACRES

Conserved
for
future
generations



23 COUNTIES



47 FAMILIES

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easement holders.

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