

MEMORANDUM

To: Programs, Projects and Operations Subcommittee
Subject: Nebraska Land Trust Agreement
Date: 11 May, 2021
From: Jim Becic

The Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) is a 501 C (3) nonprofit organization that has been actively involved in land conservation in Nebraska since 2001. Rather than duplicating efforts with a P-MRNRD (NRD) conservation easement program that was contemplated over 20 years ago, the NRD decided to partner with the NLT in this endeavor.

The NLT is a fully accredited land trust in Nebraska by the National Land Trust Alliance. With only two employees, they have completed 50 individual easements and amassed over 32,500 acres under permanent conservation easement protection in 22 counties. Seventeen of those easements (34%) are in the Lower Platte Valley in Douglas, Sarpy and Saunders Counties. As detailed in the Lower Platte Valley Preservation Partnership (attachment), early easements were donated but subsequent ones have been purchased with the NLT raising over \$7.5 million dollars in this effort from federal, state and private sources.

The NRD, is a charter member of the diverse NLT Board and in 2009, entered into a three-year Cooperative Agreement with the NLT, to provide a financial contribution of \$30,000.00 per year to assist in their operations. This Agreement was extended in 2012, 2015 and 2018 to continue the original Agreement for additional three-year periods. The NLT is now requesting that this partnership continue with a Fourth Addendum. (Attached: original 2009 AGREEMENT; A Proposal For Lower Platte Valley Preservation Project; Spreadsheet of NLT Conservation Easements through 2020 and a copy of the Nebraska Land Trust: *The LANDSCAPE – 2020 IMPACT REPORT*.)

To this end, management is proposing that the District continue to assist the work of the Nebraska Land Trust to develop land protection and easement acquisition strategies; develop fund raising plans, develop conservation easement templates; hold public meetings, provide easement education for the general public as well as elected officials and other conservation easement activities for specific areas within the Lower Platte Valley as well as other locations within the District for an additional three year period beginning in Fiscal Year 2022.

Management recommends that the Programs, Projects and Operations Subcommittee recommend to the Board that the General Manager be authorized to execute the proposed FOURTH ADDENDUM to the 18 March, 2009 “AGREEMENT BETWEEN PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT AND NEBRASKA LAND TRUST FOR COOPERATIVE ASSISTANCE” that allows for an additional three year District commitment in the amount of \$30,000/year, commencing in fiscal year, 2022 subject to changes deemed necessary by the General Manager and approval as to form by District Legal Counsel.

**FOURTH ADDENDUM
TO
AGREEMENT BETWEEN
PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT
AND
NEBRASKA LAND TRUST
FOR
COOPERATIVE ASSISTANCE**

This Addendum ("THIS ADDENDUM") is intended to further extend the AGREEMENT BETWEEN PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT and NEBRASKA LAND TRUST FOR COOPERATIVE ASSISTANCE ("THE AGREEMENT") that was executed by the PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT ("the DISTRICT") on March 18, 2009 and by the NEBRASKA LAND TRUST ("the TRUST") on March 16, 2009, and extended by the FIRST ADDENDUM entered into by the parties in March 2012 for a term terminating on December 31, 2014 and the SECOND ADDENDUM entered into by the parties in March 2015 for a term terminating on December 31, 2017 and the THIRD ADDENDUM entered into by the parties in March 2018 for a term terminating on December 31, 2020.

By executing THIS ADDENDUM, the parties hereby agree that the term of THE AGREEMENT should be extended for an additional period of time beginning June 1, 2021 and continuing until December 31, 2023, thus also extending the DISTRICT's commitment made therein to pay the sum of \$30,000 annually during the three years of 2021, 2022 and 2023 to the TRUST for the purpose of partially funding the activities of the TRUST undertaken pursuant to THE AGREEMENT.

Except as so extended, THE AGREEMENT is ratified and confirmed in all respects.

THIS ADDENDUM is executed by the TRUST on this ____ day of _____, 2021.

NEBRASKA LAND TRUST

By: _____

Title: _____

THIS ADDENDUM is executed by the DISTRICT on this ____ day of _____, 2021.

PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT

By: _____

JOHN WINKLER, General Manager

AGREEMENT BETWEEN
PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT
AND
NEBRASKA LAND TRUST
FOR
COOPERATIVE ASSISTANCE

THIS AGREEMENT is made and entered into by and between the PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT (hereinafter referred to as the "NRD") and the NEBRASKA LAND TRUST (hereinafter referred to as "the TRUST").

WHEREAS, The TRUST is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization that has adopted Standards and Practices promulgated by the Land Trust Alliance and actively acquires or stewards conservation lands and conservation easements, with the goal of land conservation in Nebraska.

WHEREAS, the mission of the TRUST is to accept conservation easements or gifts of land to preserve lands that remain essentially in their natural state; are ecologically, historically, or archeologically significant; serve as wildlife habitat, and/or are used for low impact agriculture; and,

WHEREAS, the authorities of the NRD include prevention of damages from floodwater and sediment, development and management of fish and wildlife habitat and recreational and park facilities, and forestry and range management, and the NRD wishes to increase its focus on protecting these resources in the lower Platte and Missouri River corridors (hereinafter referred to as "the Corridor"); and,

WHEREAS, the TRUST provides independent oversight to ensure public confidence in voluntary land conservation; and,

WHEREAS, the NRD desires to utilize the expertise and experience of the TRUST to explore the opportunities for acquisition of conservation easements within the Corridor; and,

NOW, THEREFORE, for and in consideration of the foregoing recitals and their mutual covenants hereinafter expressed, the parties agree as follows:

1. The TRUST has prepared A Proposal For The Lower Platte Valley Preservation Project, attached hereto as Exhibit "A" and incorporated herein, and agrees that it shall:

- a. Conduct educational programs with landowners, public officials and others within the NRD for the purpose of explaining conservation easements and the multiple advantages thereof; and,
- b. Develop a land protection strategy and easement templates for the acquisition of conservation easements in the Corridor; and,
- c. Develop a fund-raising plan, target lists and grant writing, record keeping and communications templates specific for the acquisition of conservation easements in the Corridor; and,
- d. Assist the NRD in negotiations and acquisition of conservation easements over priority properties.

2. The NRD agrees that it will cooperate with the TRUST in the Proposal incorporated as Exhibit "A" and will assist the TRUST to develop land protection and easement acquisition strategies for the Corridor; will pay the sum of \$30,000.00 annually, to the TRUST for the purpose of partially funding the activities of the TRUST undertaken pursuant hereto; and, will work with the TRUST to identify prospective donors of conservation easements, additional funding sources and partnership opportunities.

3. The term of this Agreement shall commence upon execution thereof by both parties; and this Agreement shall terminate on December 31, 2011, unless sooner terminated as provided below.

4. The following personnel shall represent the parties in carrying out the terms of this Agreement and are designated to receive notices hereunder:

For the NRD:	For the TRUST:
James Becic, Environmental Coordinator	David Sands, Executive Director
John Winkler, General Manager	John Ellsworth, Chairman

5. This Agreement may be terminated by either party with or without cause on 60 days written notice delivered to the other party. If the NRD terminates the agreement without cause, the TRUST shall not be required to refund the current year's grant.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties have executed this agreement on the dates hereinafter indicated.

Executed by THE NEBRASKA LAND TRUST, on this 16th day of March, 2009.

NEBRASKA LAND TRUST

By David Sands
David Sands
Executive Director

Executed by the PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT on this 18th day of MARCH, 2009.

PAPIO-MISSOURI RIVER NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT

By John Winkler
John Winkler
General Manager

Exhibit "A"

A Proposal For The Lower Platte Valley Preservation Project

Purpose

It has been 10 years since a vision for the Lower Platte River "Bluffs Region" was first advanced in a collaborative report from the Lower Platte River Corridor Alliance (LPRCA). Citing the region's beauty, geology, productive farmland, and biological diversity, the report called for "a balance between economic expansion and the preservation of rural character."

More recently, this concept of balance has been echoed and amplified by the Nebraska Innovation Zone Commission (NIZC). With a mission to bring economic development to the Interstate-80 Corridor, they have been told by experts that "natural amenities" like the Lower Platte River can be an attractor for families and businesses. In a web survey by the NIZC, 62% of respondents listed "Preservation of environmentally important areas, such as the Platte River valley, hills, streams, and woodlands" as their top priority in developing the I-80 Corridor; more than 20 % higher than any of the other 18 options.

As a result, the NIZC's Draft Regional Comprehensive Plan called for "Limited development south of Exit 432 [essentially the Bluffs Region], with a primary value placed on preservation of views and environmental quality." There are also areas upriver that have high conservation values, like the Yutan Bottoms with large remnants of tallgrass prairie, or Pahuk bluff which has ecological and historical significance. With such valuable resources located in a region projected to have 2,000,000 people by 2050, land protection efforts are a pressing need.

Of course land preservation in the Lower Platte Valley presents significant issues. An expansion of public land is one option, but realistically, a large impact through land purchase is unlikely as the cost would be too high, funds for purchase are scarce, political consensus is very difficult to obtain, willing sellers can be hard to find, and ongoing land management is a financial drain. However, there is one land preservation tool that can avoid or mitigate many of these obstacles – voluntary, permanent land preservation agreements with private landowners.

Commonly known as "conservation easements," these agreements lower the price of land preservation as they typically cost 40% to 60% less than full value and there are currently exceptional tax incentives for the donation of easements. In addition, land stays on the tax rolls and in productive use such as agriculture, while avoiding the ongoing expense of management. For the landowner who would prefer to preserve their land and keep it in agriculture or wildlife habitat, conservation easements can offer an attractive financial option. Because these agreements are voluntary, they avoid controversy and conflict. With a phased approach that includes Education, Prioritization, Preservation, Partners, and Funding, significant land protection in the valley is possible.

Exhibit "A"

Education

In Nebraska, where conservation easements are relatively unknown compared to other states, a broad education program is needed for an effort to succeed. While easements have garnered some attention in the media and the Nebraska Land Trust (NLT) has made progress in raising awareness, much still needs to be done.

A number of strategies should be employed, starting with a simple tri-fold brochure that would be distributed widely through direct mail, events, and other venues. Informational meetings throughout the corridor would be necessary and the LPRCA "Coffee Shop" meetings would be an ideal venue. For landowners with significant interest, detailed information and individual meetings must also be made available. Ultimately, informed landowners will self-select themselves as potential candidates for easement purchases.

Information would be provided to public officials as well, since municipal and county governments must approve easements according to state statute. Any educational effort should also reach out to developers and other real estate professionals, especially since conservation developments are mandated in certain areas of Douglas and Sarpy Counties. Presentations to civic groups would be valuable in building community support.

Prioritization

Conservation easements are not about stopping development; they are about preserving special places as development occurs. This means it is essential to identify special places, so that our limited human and financial resources can be focused in those areas.

There are a number of data sets in existence that could be used to identify "Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs)." Biological data relating to the needs of wildlife and existing native plant communities is available from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC). The Natural Resources Districts also have similar information, in addition to GIS departments and hydrologists. The Platte River Cumulative Impact Study (CIS) will show us what has been lost and what can still be saved. The Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS) has information on historic and cultural sites. The NIZC has recommendations from an economic development perspective.

There may be some holes to fill, such as an assessment of scenic viewsheds, but mostly, existing information could be pulled together by a group with various interests and expertise, that can provide a holistic look at potential priority areas. Such a group might include NRDs, counties, the NLT, LPRCA, NGPC, USFWS, NSHS, NIZC, and others.

Once conservation focus areas are identified, a second filter will be needed to prioritize individual properties within that area. Whether there are two interested landowners in a given landscape or 20, there should be a transparent, on-the-ground process that provides guidance on individual land protection priorities. The NLT has a model for such a process, which has been used to score prospective easement properties based on agricultural, historical, and natural resources in the Schramm Bluffs of Sarpy County.

Exhibit "A"

Preservation

The actual acquisition of conservation easements will happen in three ways: 1) a complete donation of the easement that results in tax benefits; 2) a "bargain purchase," where a portion of the easement's value is donated while the balance is paid for; or 3) a full purchase of the easement's appraised value.

At the heart of each conservation easement are the Reserved Rights and Restrictions. Understandably, landowners want to play an active and informed role in designing these provisions and they should; it is one of the things that make these agreements attractive. While every easement must be true to the conservation values it is intended to protect, a "building envelope" for a new home or barn, farming, grazing, hunting, and other conservation compatible land uses may be part of the bargain.

Like any real estate transaction, the path to a conservation easement can involve unforeseen twists, turns, and a few dead ends. Success improves with experience and consistency in negotiations, appraisals, easement documents, baseline reports, transaction costs, enforcement, county approvals and more. Consistency and experience also breeds familiarity with the organization and the process, for landowners and county officials.

Partners

The Lower Platte South (LPSNRD) and Papio-Missouri River (PMRNRD) NRDs are potential anchors for this effort, as they share jurisdiction and responsibility for natural resources in the Bluffs Region. For example, in **Phase One**, the NLT created a successful model in the Schramm Bluffs of Sarpy County and the PMRNRD was an early supporter, by executing a Cooperative Agreement with the NLT in 2006 to pursue conservation easements in this area. **Phase Two** would start a similar effort on the west side of the river downstream from Ashland, at which point the LPSNRD would become an invaluable partner. **Phase Three** would extend the effort upstream to Fremont (and possibly beyond), at which point the LPNNRD may wish to become a partner.

The NLT's experience in the Schramm Bluffs makes it a good candidate to take the lead in implementing the various phases of this effort, as it has been implementing **Phase One** in this area since 2006 with good results. It also has a track record of land protection in the Lower Platte Valley, including:

- Nearly 2,000 acres of donated and purchased conservation easements, with:
 - Over four miles of Lower Platte River frontage.
 - 20 individual wetlands and several lakes used by migratory waterfowl.
 - Mature oak/hickory woodlands at the very western edge of its range.
 - Mature riparian woodlands along the river used by bald eagles.
 - Grasslands that provide habitat for declining species like bobolinks.
 - Some of the highest rated farming soils in the state.
 - Scenic views from public parks, roads, and places.
 - Two sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- Receipt of a \$1.1 million NET grant to purchase Schramm Bluffs easements.
- Receipt of \$128,000 from the NRCS Farm and Ranch Protection Program and a \$78,000 NET grant to purchase a Platte Valley easement in Saunders County.

Exhibit "A"

- Receipt of more than \$50,000 in grants from foundations to support these efforts.

Other potential partners include the **LPRCA, NGPC, NSHS, USFWS, agricultural interests, and conservation organizations**, all of whom (including the three lower Platte NRDs) serve on the NLT Board of Directors.

Financial Incentives for Conservation Easements

There should be no illusions that permanent land conservation is cheap or quick. Over the course of many years, millions of dollars would be needed.

While the challenge seems daunting, there is good news in the form of a large increase in federal funding for the purchase of easements through several Farm Bill programs. At the head of this list, the NRCS Farm and Ranch Protection Program (FRPP) will pay up to 50% of the appraised value for a conservation easement. National funding for this program has been doubled, increasing from \$96 million in 2009, to \$200 million in 2012. It allows the landowner to donate up to 25% of the easement's value, which would lower the amount needed from a non-federal source like the NET to 25%. In fact, this is the basic formula the NLT employed to purchase a conservation easement on "Pahuk Hill."

The full donation of conservation easements is another route that will be pursued whenever feasible. For landowners who can utilize a substantial income tax deduction, donation is a faster way to realize a financial benefit, as the Farm Bill also contained a two-year renewal of significantly enhanced federal income tax deductions for these donations. In fact, of the five easements held by the NLT on the lower Platte, four were acquired through donation.

Funding for the Work of Conservation Easements

The Nebraska Land Trust is uniquely positioned to tackle a Platte Valley Preservation Project. Based on their experience in the Schramm Bluffs, the NLT could:

- Design and implement a comprehensive education initiative.
- Convene an advisory group to access existing information on conservation values in the corridor and identify Conservation Focus Areas.
- Identify prospective easement properties through meetings with landowners.
- Implement on-the-ground assessments of prospective easement properties and identify the highest priorities for permanent conservation.
- Obtain funding for the purchase of easements from FRPP, NET, and other sources.
- Negotiate with landowners who wish to sell and/or donate an easement.
- Perform all functions needed to complete the easement process.
- Facilitate media coverage when easements are completed, if appropriate.
- Monitoring and enforcement of easements in perpetuity.

What the NLT cannot do is tackle this effort with its current financial and human resources. It would necessitate the hiring of additional staff and require a large share of the Executive Director's time. Expenses associated with the project would escalate as

Exhibit "A"

well, such as legal fees, travel, printing, appraisals, title commitments, closing costs, surveys, and more. As the attached budget shows, **at least \$90,000 would be needed to fund Phase Two** of the project, and more would be needed to implement **Phase Three**. It should also be noted that **Phase One** is ongoing and will continue as **Phase Two** is implemented. Multi-year commitments from partners would be essential for success. If funding was reasonably assured, the NLT could begin **Phase Two in 2009**.

Phase Two Operating Budget

(Includes ongoing costs for Phase One. Does not include cost of easement purchases)

Projected Annual Expenses

Staff Salaries*	\$55,000
Legal Fees**	9,000
Appraisals***	12,000
Title & Closing Costs	2,000
Printing	2,000
Travel/Mileage	5,000
<u>Administrative Expenses</u>	<u>5,000</u>
TOTAL	\$90,000

* 50% of Executive Directors time and 80% of new staff member's time.

** Based on three easements at \$3,000 each.

*** Based on three appraisals at \$4,000 each.

Projected Annual Revenues

LPSNRD Cooperative Agreement	\$30,000
PMRNRD Cooperative Agreement	30,000
<u>Grants and Individual Donations</u>	<u>30,000</u>
TOTAL	\$90,000

Exhibit "A"

Three-year Timeline

2009

- Continue implementation of **Phase One** in the Schramm Bluffs, which has moved into the Preservation stage with a \$1.1 million NET grant to purchase easements.
- Hire new staff to begin implementation of **Phase Two** on other side of the river.
- Schedule informational meetings and implement other aspects of education program, focusing on the west/south side of the valley, possibly as a part of the LPRCA "Coffee Shop" meetings.
- Convene working group to gather data and identify Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs) downstream from Ashland on west/south side of the river, as well as the addition of any new areas (besides Schramm) on the east/north side of the valley.
- Apply for NET grant to fund easement purchases in newly identified CFAs.

2010

- Through group and private meetings with landowners, identify those with land in CFAs who are interested in conservation easements.
- Begin prioritization of prospective properties with on-the-ground assessments.
- Begin negotiations with landowners of priority properties downstream from Ashland if NET funding is obtained.
- Submit a new NET request (if needed) and/or FRPP grant to fund easement purchases in CFAs on both sides of the valley.
- Continue to acquire easements in Schramm area as funding allows.
- Begin implementation of **Phase Three** as funding allows, with educational meetings upstream from Ashland, identification of CFAs in this area, and identification of interested landowners.

2011

- Ongoing negotiations and easement purchases with landowners involved in **Phase One** and **Phase Two**.
- Begin negotiations with priority landowners in CFAs upstream from Ashland, subject to available funding.
- Submit additional funding requests as needed.

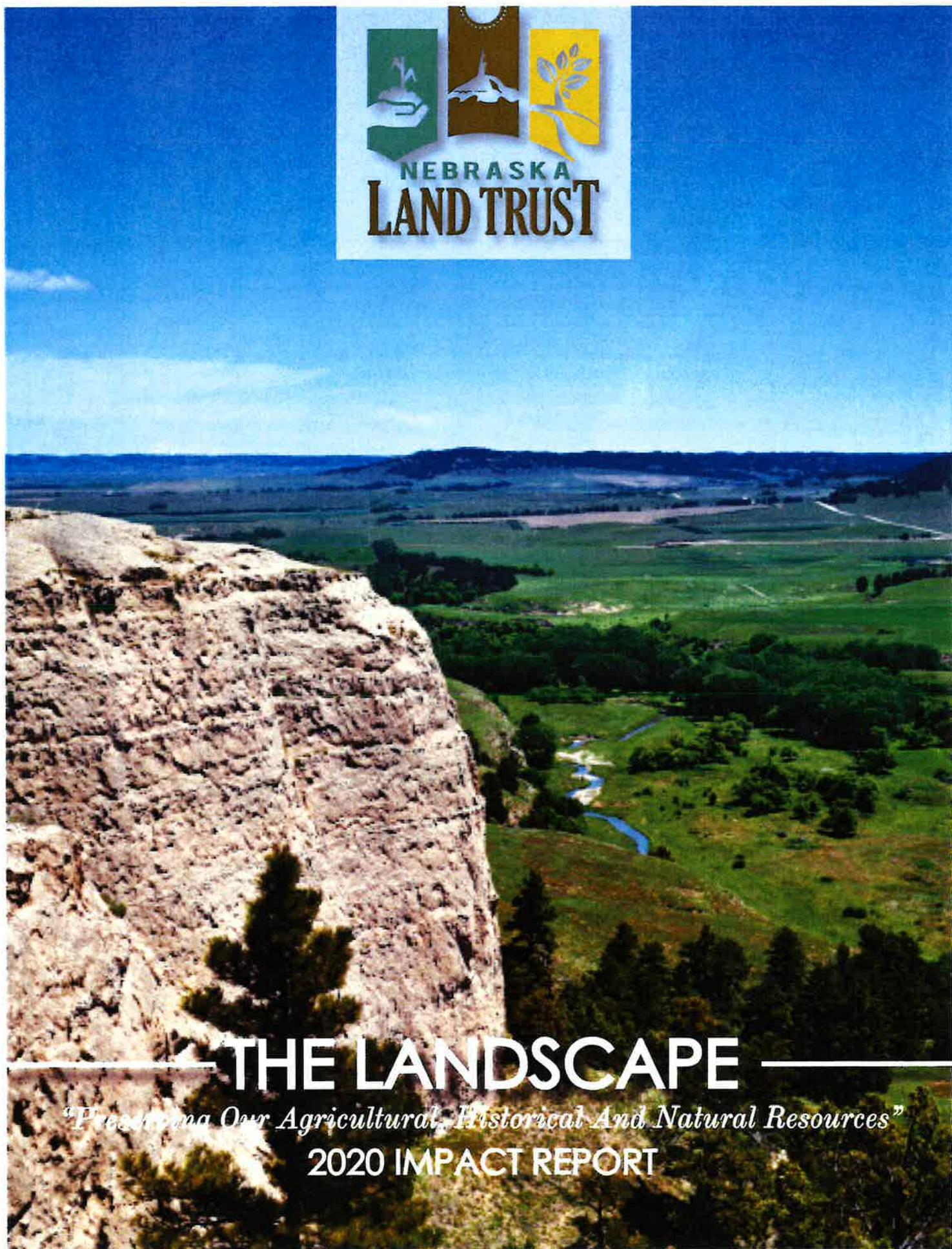
Ongoing

- Education
- Performance of all duties necessary to implement easements, including negotiations, document drafting, appraisals, baseline reports, title reports, press coverage, county approvals, acquisition of Stewardship Funds for monitoring and defense of easements, and more.
- Fundraising for operating costs.
- Monitoring and defense of existing lower Platte conservation easements.

Original Owner(s)	Current Owner	Acres	Date Acquired	How Acquired	Location	Township/Range	Zip Code	Primary Conservation Values Protected	Monitored	Time on Property
Dave Janke	Barry James	227.71	12/6/2002	Transferred	Douglas	T-14N/R-10E	68069	About 3/5 mile of natural Elkhorn River shoreline, hydrologically connected oxbow wetland, pond, grasslands, riparian woodlands, scenic views from Q St.	12/27/2019	1.25
Clarence Werner	Same	577	12/20/2002	Donation	Douglas	T-16N/R-9E	68064	Over 1 mile of Platte River shoreline along dike, cropland, 18 delineated wetlands, pond, slough, grasslands, and woodlands.	12/20/2019	0.75
Ginger Woods Reserve, L.P.	Luke Janke	213.66	6/24/2003	Donation	Douglas	T-16N/R-9E and T-15N/R-9E	68064	About 2 miles of natural Platte River shoreline, wetlands, ponds, scenic views, wet meadows, grasslands, riparian woodlands.	12/20/2019	0.5
William Hanley (S&B Part.)	Pete Hanley	37	12/10/2004	Donation	Saunders	T-15N/R-9E	68070	About 1/3 mile of natural Platte River shoreline, seasonal pond, wetland, grassland, historical site, scenic views, adjoins wetland mitigation bank.	11/22/2019	0.5
Wanda Clark/Monica Dunse	John and Erin Woods	644	12/28/2007	Donation	Lincoln	T-11N/R-28E	69151	Critical habitat for elk and endangered American burying beetle, virgin mid-grass prairie, scenic views, ranching, adjoins Wapiti WMA.	6/25/2020	0.25
Pat and Nancy Shanahan	Same	257.6	4/11/2008	Bargain Sale using FRPP and NET funds	Saunders	T-17N/R-7E	68015	One-half mile of natural Platte River shoreline, oak/hickory forest at western extreme of range, Pahaku cultural site, scenic views, prime farmland, adjoins Gilbert CE land and Scout Camp.	5/22/2020	0.5
John and William Walz	Jarel Vinduska	90.38	10/21/2008	Bargain Sale using NET and mitigation funds	Sarpy	T-12N/R-10E	68028	One-half mile of natural Platte River shoreline, one-half mile of a Platte River tributary, riparian woodlands, farming, scenic views, adjoins Schramm State Park.	5/29/2020	0.5
John Dunse	Steve and Shelia Markley	343	11/17/2008	Bargain Sale using NGPC funds	Lincoln	T-11N/R-28W	69151	Critical habitat for elk and endangered American burying beetle, virgin mid-grass prairie, scenic views, ranching, adjoins Clark/Dunse CE land.	6/25/2020	0.25
George Krueger	Jo Jean Preuit - Trustee	438.9	6/23/2009	Donation	Seward	T-12N/R-28W	68439	Riparian woodlands along Lincoln Creek and conservation farming practices such as terraces and grass waterways.	11/25/2019	1.75
Theodore (Ted) and Ramona (Mona) Thielman	Same	160	7/17/2009	Donation	Boone	T-22N/R-7W	68652	Native grassland habitat on the eastern fringe of the Sandhills and ranching.	11/13/2019	1
Nine Penny Ranch -- Kris Fischer and the L. Wayne Davidson and Chestyne K. Davidson Revocable Living Trust	Kris Fischer	949.05	5/20/2010	Full Purchase using NET and FRPP funds	Lincoln	T-12N/R-28W	69151	Critical habitat for elk and endangered American burying beetle, virgin mid-grass prairie, scenic views, ranching.	6/24/2020	1
Ron and Carol Patterson	Same	56.62	6/15/2010	Bargain Sale using NET and FRPP funds	Sarpy	T-13N/R-10E and T-12N/R-10E	68028	Oak/hickory woodlands, flowing stream, significant archeological sites, farmland in an urbanizing county, and scenic views from Hwy 31.	6/4/2020	1.5
Sunny Brook Ranch, FLP (Roy and Steve Breuklander)	Steve B.	1,124.57	8/11/2010	Full Purchase using NET and FRPP funds	Keya Paha	T-33N/R24W	68778	Ranching: 4 of the 6 ecosystems found in the Niobrara Valley (ponderosa pine forest, eastern deciduous forest, mid-grass prairie, & tallgrass prairie); 1.3 miles of river front on the Niobrara NSR; contiguous to TNC Niobrara Valley Preserve; scenic views from the river and River Road; recreational uses: 9 archeological/historical sites.	7/23/2020	1.5
OPM Partnership	Same	830.8	8/23/2010	Transferred from Fontenelle Forest	Saunders	T-16N/R-9E	68025	Extensive wetlands, 1.5 miles of river frontage, riparian woodlands, grasslands.	12/27/2019	1.25

Dean and Wayne Fedde	Same	157.8	3/30/2011	Bargain Sale using FRPP and NET funds	Sarpy	T-12N/R-10E	68028	Oak/hickory woodlands, flowing stream, archeological site, farmland in an urbanizing county, adjacent to Schramm State Park, currently an organic farm, and scenic views from Hwy 31.	6/4/2020	2.5
Ron and Carol Patterson	Same	178.99	4/7/2011	Bargain Sale using FRPP and NET funds	Sarpy	T-13N/R-10E	68028	Oak/hickory woodlands, flowing stream, significant archeological sites, farmland in an urbanizing county, and scenic views from Hwy 31.	See Patterson	See Patterson
Paul, Lori, and Gregory Hosford	Same	546	12/27/2011	Bargain Sale using wind mitigation funds	Boone	T-20N/R-5W and T-19N/R-5W	68620	Farming, Native American lodge sites, Native American mounds, potential burial sites, riparian woodlands along the Beaver and O'Neill Valley Creeks, meandering unchanneled portions of these creeks, unplowed and restored tallgrass prairie, and educational use by local schools.	11/13/2019	1.75
Gary and Nancy Fisher	Same	546.51	12/29/2011	Full Purchase using NET, FRPP, and	Dawes	T-31N/R-51W	69339	Ranching, key wildlife habitat between two large parcels of public land, key bighorn sheep habitat, a large stocked pond and a portion of West Ash Creek (a trout stream), scenic views from public lands and W. Ash Creek Rd. Adjacent to Ft. Robinson State Park and the Petersen WMA; critical lambing habitat for bighorn sheep; historical significance as the site of the Cheyenne Breakout of 1879; has a locally rare wetland, scenic views from public lands and Hwy 20; continued ranching; potential for	7/24/2020	2
Chief Dull Knife College	Same	1,121.36	3/27/2012	Full Purchase using NET, FRPP, and other funds	Sioux	T-31N/R-53W	69346	Oak/hickory woodlands, significant archeological sites including trail ruins, farmland in an urbanizing county, demonstration plot for cedar removal, and scenic views from 204th St.	7/25/2020	0.5
Stan Swanson and Connie Anderson-Swanson	Same	36.44	7/26/2012	Bargain Sale using NET funds	Sarpy	T-12N/R-10E	68028	Oak/hickory woodlands; unhardened Platte River shoreline, farmland in an urbanizing county; scenic views from Hwy 31, the MOPAC Trail (which crosses the land), and Platte River State Park; habitat for endangered pallid sturgeon, least terns, and threatened piping plovers; some archeological sites; rare oak woodland on the river with Chinquapin oaks, the first documented in Sarpy	6/4/2020	0.25
Francis and Margaret Kennedy	Same	262	7/3/2013	Bargain Sale using FRPP, NPPD, and USFWS	Sarpy	T-12N/R-11E	68028	Oak/hickory woodlands; unhardened Platte River shoreline, farmland in an urbanizing county; scenic views from Hwy 31, the MOPAC Trail (which crosses the land), and Platte River State Park; habitat for endangered pallid sturgeon, least terns, and threatened piping plovers; some archeological sites; rare oak woodland on the river with Chinquapin oaks, the first documented in Sarpy	6/4/2020	0.5
Ron and Carol Patterson	Same	174.84	7/5/2013	Bargain Sale using FRPP and NET funds	Sarpy	T-12N/R-10E	68028	Oak/hickory woodlands; flowing stream; pond; significant archeological sites; farmland in an urbanizing county with soils of statewide importance; some native prairie; and scenic views.	See Patterson	See Patterson
Brent and Mary Boerkircher	Same	1,038.31	12/9/2013	Donation	Lincoln	T-11N/R-28W	69151	Habitat for the endangered American burying beetle; habitat for wild elk; native prairie; historical marker; cattle ranching; adjoins John Dunse Easement.	6/24/2020	1
John and Julia Schutz	Same	80	12/26/2013	Donation	Merrick	T-14N/R-8W		Grassland with some native components; grassland habitat in a farming area; native woodlands; hay	11/25/2019	1
Claudeen Penry	Same	160	12/27/2013	Donation	Holt	T-30N/R-15W	68713	Native grassland habitat in a farming area; some virgin prairie; fruit trees and honey production; hay production and grazing; potential outdoor classroom for education.	11/14/2019	0.5
Ken and Diane Hansen	Same	67	6/19/2014	Donation	City of Blair	T-18 & 19 N/R-11E	68008	High quality native oak-hickory woodland on Missouri River bluffs and productive terraced farmland in an urbanizing area.	5/22/2020	0.25
Robert and Cheryl Robart	Same	80	12/29/2014	Purchase using wind funds	Jefferson	T-1N/R-3E	68516	Virgin tallgrass prairie in Sandstone Prairies BUL with intermittent stream and associated native woodlands	12/29/2019	0.75
Terrance and Karen Waite	Same	685	12/30/2014	Donation	Lincoln	T-18N/R-33W	69101	Native Sandhills prairie and portions of Birdwood Creek	6/25/2020	1.75
Todd and Laura McWha	Same	720	2/10/2015	Donation	Lincoln	T-16N/R-33&34W	69101	Native Sandhills prairie and portions of Birdwood Creek	See Waite	See Waite

Armbrust Acres, Inc.	Same	282.93	9/24/2015	Bargain Sale using FRPP and NET funds	Sarpy	T-12N/R-10E	68028	Oakhickory woodlands; flowing stream; pond; significant archeological sites; terraced farmland in an urbanizing county with soils of statewide importance; and scenic views.	See Patterson I	See Patterson I
Dr. Delia "Dee" Burchfield	Gary Burchfield	983.56	10/27/2015	Full Purchase using ALE/GSS and NET	Banner	T-20N/R-53 & 54W of the 6th P.M.	69334	Ranching, haying, & grazing; native grasslands; wildlife habitat within Wildcat Hills BUL; important habitat for bighorn sheep; scenic views from public places, including the Williams Gap WMA.	7/27/2020	0.75
Gary and Laura Marshall	Same	261.5	11/18/2015	Full purchase using Crofton and Prairie Breeze wind mitigation	Boyd	T-32N/R-9W of 6th P.M.	68760	Grassland with some native components; grassland habitat in a farming area; native woodlands; grazing and hay production; lower Niobrara River frontage; wildlife habitat within the Lower Niobrara BUL; wetlands; the original Ponca Agency site which is on the National Register of Historic Places.	11/14/2019	0.75
Todd and Laura McWha	Same	303.5	12/22/2015	Full purchase using Broken Bow II wind mitigation funds	Lincoln	T-11N/R-27W of 6th P.M.	69123	Ranching and grazing, native grasslands within the Loess Canyons BUL, habitat for the endangered American burying beetle, elk, and other grassland wildlife, scenic views	6/25/2020	0.5
James and Christine Voeller Revocable trusts	Same	1304	12/31/2015	Bargain Sale using NET and partner grant funds	Sioux	T-32N/R-55&56W of the 6th P.M.	69346	Ranching and grazing, native wildlife habitat and plant communities within the Pine Ridge BUL, critical habitat for bighorn sheep and elk, Cold Water Class A trout stream in Sowbelly Creek, scenic views from two public roads and Coffee Park.	7/24/2020	1.25
Mary Lou Chapek	Same	595.83	12/21/2016	Donation	Washington	T-17N/R-12E	68023	Oak-Hickory woodlands in the Missouri Valley Bluffs; much of the Turkey Creek Watershed, including the creek itself, wetlands and marshes; productive farmland; restored tallgrass prairie; educational use; and scenic views from Hwy 75.	11/19/2019	1.5
Loy and Jean Baumann	Same	240	12/18/2017	Donation	Keith	T-15N/R-39W	69146	Ranching, native Sandhills prairie, habitat for grassland wildlife and scenic views from Hwy 92 and Lake McConaughy	7/27/2020	0.75
Curtis and Edna Anderson	Same	547.56	1/25/2018	Full Purchase using NRCS/GSS, NET and	Sioux	T-32N/R-53W	69339	Ranching, native grasslands and wildlife, habitat in the Pine Ridge BUL, elk habitat, riparian habitat on Cottonwood Creek and scenic views from Cottonwood and Rimrock Roads	7/25/2020	0.75
Riley, Melissa, Jacob and Megan Licking	Same	2,560	1/25/2018	Full Purchase using Grand Prairie Wind	Thomas	T-21N/R-53W	69166	Ranching, native Sandhills prairie, habitat within the Upper Loup Rivers and Tributaries BUL and wildlife habitat including the endangered American burying beetle	7/17/2019	2.5
Sisters of Mercy		22	3/28/2018	Donation	Douglas	T-15N/R-9E	68069	Natural habitat within the Lower Platte River BUL; ~ 700 feet of natural river shoreline; mature woodlands and songbird habitat; scenic views; potential educational opportunities;	11/22/2019	1
MJD Ranch, LLC	Same	2443.76	6/11/2018	Full Purchase using NRCS/ALE and NET funding	Dawes and Sheridan	T-33N/R-46 & 47W		Productive grassland and grazing for livestock; prime farmland; if irrigated; ponderosa pine forest; Year-round habitat for a large herd of elk; paleontological resources; natural habitat within the Pine Ridge BUL; springs, streams and riparian habitat; part of historic Sheridan Gates landscape; scenic views.	7/24/2020	3



THE LANDSCAPE

"Preserving Our Agricultural, Historical And Natural Resources"

2020 IMPACT REPORT



 *Variegated fritillary on a purple coneflower, Meyer Grassland*

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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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White River near Ft. Robinson State Park



Kreman Cattle Company

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

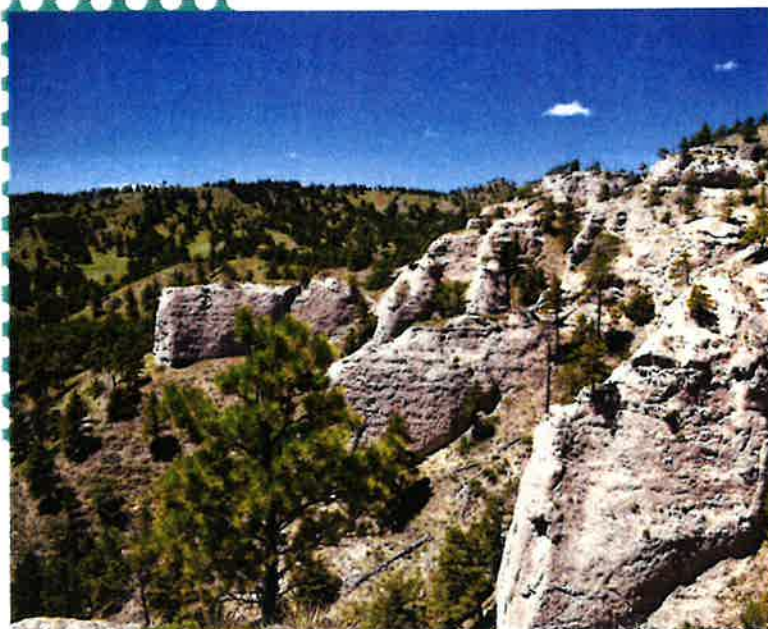
West of Fort Robinson State Park, the White River in Nebraska's Pine Ridge seems misnamed. With crystal clear water and trout darting for the shadows amid expansive grasslands, pine savannah and towering buttes, it is like a mountain stream on the high plains. At its heart, encompassing more than four 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



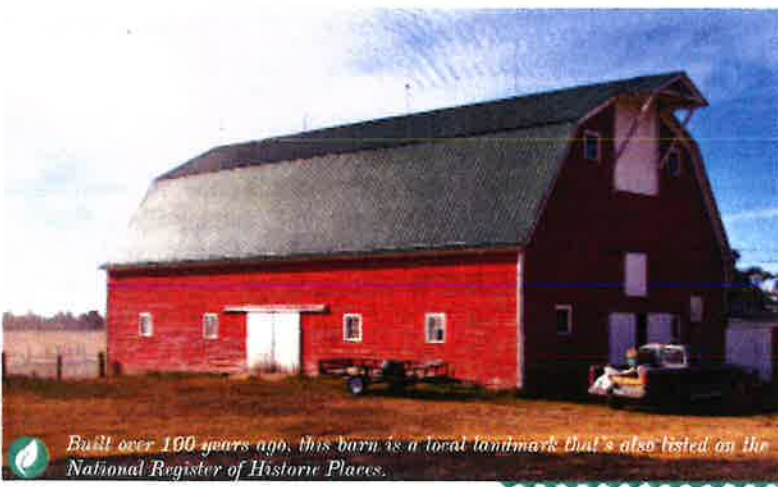
 Taylor Wohlers, fifth generation rancher, with his wife, Tamara and children, Jack and Dutch

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).



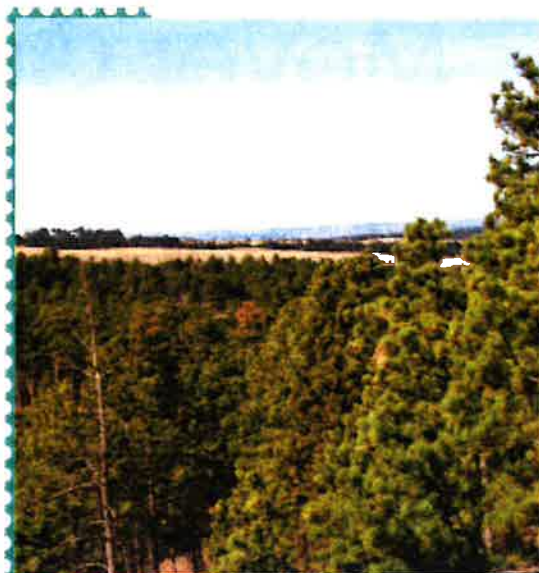
 Built over 100 years ago, this barn is a local landmark that's also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"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."

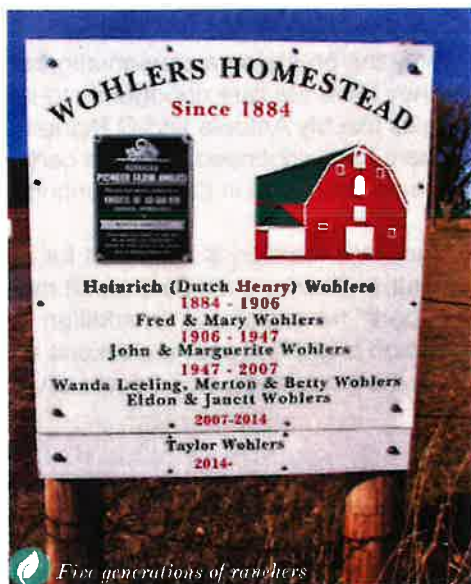
"Our land is livelihood," Tamara explained. "So our land means everything to us...we would take any measure to preserve the land so it continues to provide for us. With the history of the property and having been in the family for so long, it was a unique opportunity and definitely something worth protecting. 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



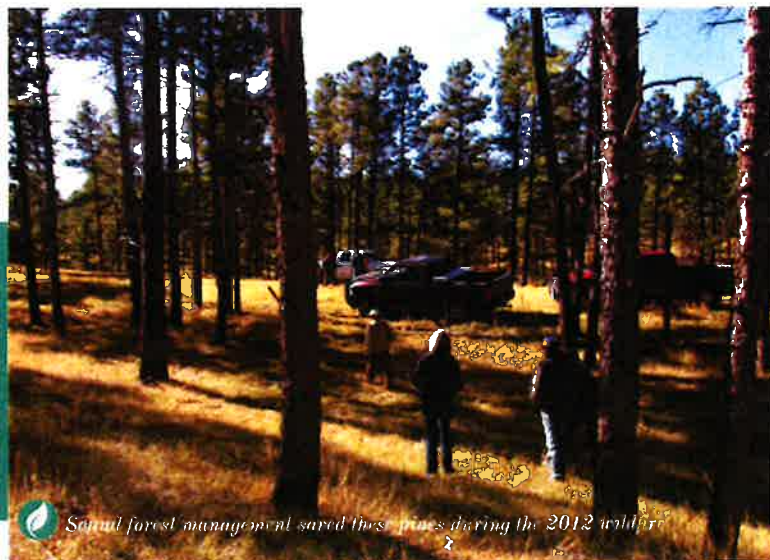
 Five generations of ranchers

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.”*



 Small 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.



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*

Partners in Permanence

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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John and Jane Ellsworth
Carmen and John Gottschalk
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Hod Kosman
Geraldine Lauritzen
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21
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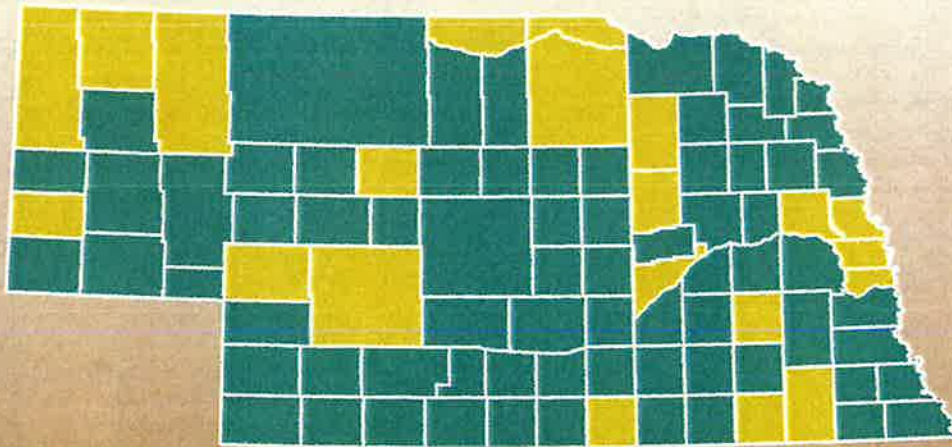
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41
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