

Allies in Conservation

Rancher Mike Kelly has forged an alliance with government agencies and conservation groups who share a vision for his ranch, the environment and open space.

by Troy Smith

When the first waves of settlers staked claims on the western plains, most shied away from the Nebraska Sandhills. Early homesteaders thought the 19,600-square-mile expanse of rolling dunes too inhospitable for habitation, let alone cultivation. Those accustomed to the woodlands and black earth farther east, called it “the Great American Desert.” Eventually, sodbusters did claim parcels of property in the Sandhills, finding the fragile soils would not easily tolerate the plow.

While the Sandhills prairie balked at the original intent of the Homestead Act, it did respond to the settlers who sought to blend its native grass and abundant water with cattle. Those who built the Sandhills ranching culture and found prosperity, or at least longevity, held respect for the land. They practiced “environmental stewardship” before it had a

name. Their culture’s creed: Take care of the land, and the land will take care of you.

That dictum isn’t unique to Sandhills ranchers. Across America, wise stewards of grazing lands apply practices to conserve precious resources, including water and wildlife habitat, as well as to enhance forage production for livestock.

Threats to resources

Particularly in Western states, urban encroachment and development pressures are considered to be the greatest threat to those resources. During the last decade, an estimated 1.6 million acres have been removed from grazing, much of it due to development. In Colorado, commercial, residential and recreational development has claimed approximately 270,000 acres per year since 1992, according to that state’s Department of Agriculture.

The Nebraska Sandhills might

not seem a likely site for urban sprawl. To the unappreciative eye, they don’t offer the same vistas as the Rocky Mountains’ snow-capped peaks. But Nebraska rancher Mike Kelly says he believes the waving grasslands, with their spring-fed streams and rivers, countless lakes and abundant prairie wildlife, will attract development. In a small way, it already has begun.

“It has started up along the Niobrara [River] in the northern part of the state. And we’re seeing some residential development in this area, along the North Platte River,” Kelly says. “If the trend continues, I have to wonder if, in 15 or 20 years, we won’t be facing something similar to what’s been going on in Colorado and Wyoming.”

Kelly is a third-generation cattleman who runs a cow-calf and yearling operation near Sutherland. Like many

conscientious Sandhillers, he is more than a little interested in resource conservation, believing properly structured and implemented conservation plans can benefit the environment and wildlife while making the ranch more productive and less susceptible to the ravages of drought.

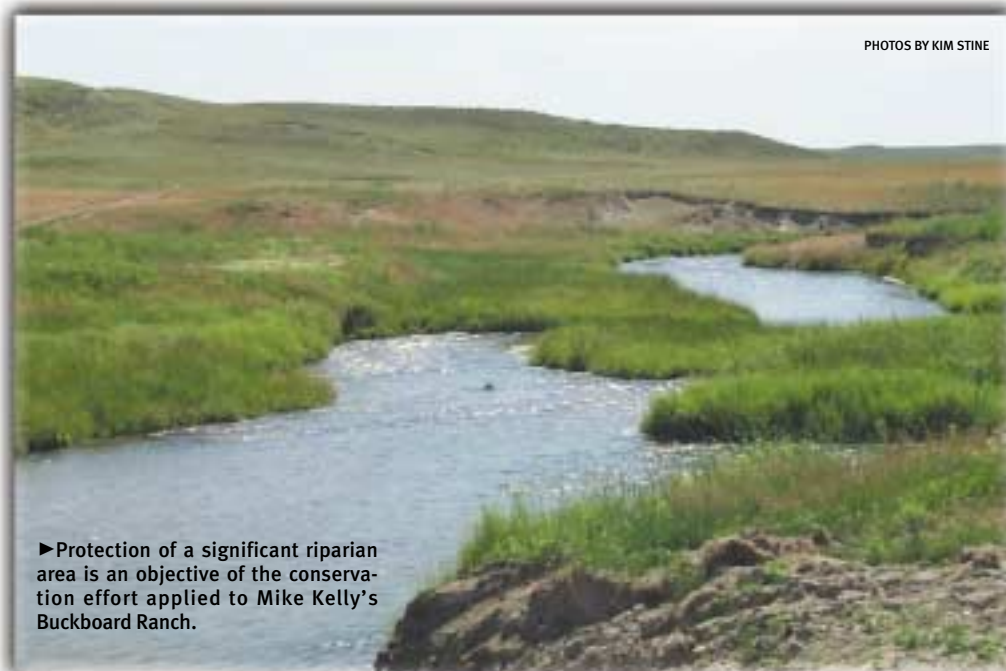
Government programs offer cost-share assistance for some conservation projects, but private property owners generally are responsible for the lion’s share of the expense. Unfortunately, rates of return for many ranch operations won’t foot the bill for costly conservation measures.

Finding assistance

However, Kelly has entered a partnership that provides more dollars for conservation of ranch resources while addressing his concern for unbridled development. Admittedly, certain attributes of the Kelly property make the arrangement appealing to a variety of conservation partners.

“Our ranch includes approximately five miles of Birdwood Creek, one of two major tributaries of the North Platte River,” Kelly explains. “Birdwood Creek is significant in that it is one of the most steadily flowing streams in the world. Ninety-five percent of its flow comes from groundwater discharge in the form of springs and seeps, which are controlled by barometric pressure.”

Kelly acquired this property for his ranch about three years ago. While previously it had been well-tended, he felt it would benefit from some different management practices. The pastures were big, some as large



PHOTOS BY KIM STINE

►Protection of a significant riparian area is an objective of the conservation effort applied to Mike Kelly’s Buckboard Ranch.



► NRCS Range Management Specialist Jeff Nichols assisted with development of cross-fencing and alternative watering sites that accommodate a rotational grazing system.

as three sections, and didn't lend themselves well to rotational grazing. In addition, Birdwood Creek was the primary source of water for cattle.

"Generally, the range was in good to excellent condition. But in the heat of summer, cattle liked to congregate in the creek bottom, near the water. We wanted to promote optimum forage utilization, overall, and take pressure off the creek," Kelly says.

Those objectives, along with Kelly's desire to ward off development, led to an alliance with The Nature Conservancy, Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition, Sandhills Task Force, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Twin Platte Natural Resource District. Jeff Nichols, an NRCS range management specialist, says it's probably the largest cooperative effort he has known.

Cooperative effort

"We helped design improvements that would enhance management of natural resources on Kelly's Buckboard Ranch, including wells and pipeline for alternative stock-water sites. Fences were established to complement rotational grazing and to relieve livestock pressure on Birdwood Creek and other areas that might be subject to erosion," Nichols says. "And we provided assistance to relieve the pressure financially."

The Nature Conservancy and Sandhills Task Force also teamed up to purchase an easement on acreage encompassing the riparian corridor along the

creek. That helped defray construction costs associated with implementing the plan. FWS biologist Gene Mack serves on the Sandhills Task Force, whose mission is to bring landowners and government entities together for joint conservation efforts and to seek funding to aid rancher participation.

"We believe the environmental and economic strength of the Sandhills depends on keeping ranchers on the land," Mack states, adding that the group's membership is weighted heavily with ranchers. "We try to help landowners who want to develop strategies to improve range condition and utilization, restore streams and wetlands. We identify sources of funding for such projects and help landowners apply for it. To date, we've assisted about 60 Sandhills ranchers. And in April of last year, we established our

nonprofit status and became a land trust capable of holding conservation easements."

According to Mack, The Nature Conservancy and Sandhills Task Force asked FWS to contribute toward an easement on Birdwood Creek. He calls the spring-fed stream unique and still relatively undisturbed. However, with some nearby residential and recreational development underway, Mack feels it is only a matter of time before people seek to build along the Birdwood.

Doug Whisenhunt represents The Nature Conservancy in this alliance. He says the organization's objective is to preserve natural plant and animal communities by protecting them from pavement and the plow. He admits that some landowners' perceptions of the organization have hindered its work in certain areas.

"We want people to understand that our objectives and our methods can be compatible with family ranching. We want to maintain intact natural landscapes, and one way is to keep families on the ranch and ranching for profit," Whisenhunt states. "It's clear that Mike (Kelly) wants to improve the condition of the riparian area along the creek, and he wants to keep the land

intact — not subdivided or developed."

So what is the net effect on Kelly and his ranch?

"On the easement property, there aren't any mandated restrictions. We did sign an agreement with EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program; NRCS) and a Conservation Practice Agreement to implement a rotational grazing system on the entire ranch," Kelly explains.

"Jeff Nichols, Doug Whisenhunt and I worked out the plan for fencing and development of alternative water sites. And we agreed to a strategy utilizing most of the area along the creek for winter grazing, when forage in the riparian area is dormant. The lay of the land lends itself to that, since the canyons near the creek offer good protection. And the easement preserves the property as grazing land. It can't be developed," he adds.

"This partnership helped me, financially, to do things I couldn't afford to do by myself. Improving the ranch by enhancing forage production and utilization, improving wildlife habitat and protecting the water quality of the stream are things I wanted to do. I think they are the right things to do."



► Mike Kelly says the conservation partnership will improve the production potential of the ranch while protecting the property from development.