

Our Neck of the Woods

Insider News From and For NFS Staff



Thursday, May 18, 2023

Vol. 4 No. 3

A note from your state forester . . .

And fire season begins!

It's a situation that even Hollywood's best screenwriters couldn't drum up: Wildfires, propelled by unrelenting seasonal winds, incessantly bearing down on thousands of people. Folks are left helpless as their livelihoods and possessions literally go up in smoke. Unfortunately, this is not a work of fiction. It's a recurring reality in the state.

Whatever happened to the saying April showers bring May flowers? Honestly, what happened? Wildfire season started early again in 2023. Once again, our headlines read:

- Wildfires ravage Nebraska
- Fire jumps the Missouri River
- Kilgore evacuated
- Aviation ordered to save your community

We thought bringing on the SEAT plane on April 29th was a fluke last year; instead, the SEAT Plane started this year on April 12th. Fire season in Nebraska has undoubtedly changed. It is longer and more intense than in the past, we are losing more and more homes and outbuildings than ever

before, and we burned over 263,125 acres last year (second most on record). This year too, could be very challenging for our VFDs and firefighters if the weather patterns don't change.

The hope comes from our friends at Predictive Services. They anticipate shifting from La Niña to an El Niño cycle, which should bring equal chances of above-normal precipitation to average precipitation over the Central Plains. There is also an equal chance of below-normal to near-normal temperatures. If this pattern emerges, maybe we can work out of this drought.

To help keep you all informed, we anticipate sharing relevant information about the drought in the leadership team meeting notes. As many of you noted, Adam sent news about fire activity last month as the fires were burning. We will continue to share this information to help you stay on top of what is happening in the state. Please remember, our fire personnel are on those fires, which must remain their focus during these events. But we will try to get information to you as soon as possible.

In this issue . . .

Staff Spotlight: Pages 2-3

*Bryce Gerlach and Aron Lewis
Brad Kindler and Darla Huff*

Each issue meet some of our NFS employees from around the state. We are a diverse and amazing bunch!

NFS at Work—Pages 3-6

See the latest updates from every corner of the state. This month, we feature Rural Forestry, Sustainable Landscapes, Forest Products Utilization, and Forest Properties.

Just for You—Page 5

- *Nebraska Natives* takes a look at our state tree, the mighty cottonwood.
- *Staff Picks*: Remember to check out Pam's favorite show!
- *Training Opportunity*: Ben will be offering online training in Canva.

Planting Trees in the Pine Ridge

by Bryce Gerlach

As I write this from my home in Chadron, I'm looking out the window at blizzard conditions. It's hard to imagine that we are only days away from starting our pine reforestation program, as the weather does not feel like tree planting season. The prediction for this storm is up to 26 inches of snow followed by warm temperatures. This will pose some challenges with muddy roads and the two-wheel drive passenger vans hauling the tree planting crew. However, muddy roads mean we have soil moisture, something we have not seen the last few years. We are very thankful for this moisture. Soil moisture = seedling survival!

We have over 98,000 ponderosa pine seedlings stored in Chadron. These trees are high quality, container-grown seedlings, from the Bessey Tree Nursery in Halsey. To qualify for this program, the land must be recently impacted by a wildfire and previously forested. Many landowners lost most or all of their tree cover. Without natural seed sources, their land may take hundreds of years to reforest. We cannot replant every burned acre of Nebraska but we can create pockets of future seed sources.



We have 24 excited landowners across the Pine Ridge committed for this spring and ready to see pine trees back on their properties. All of these landowners have different motives for wanting trees again (wildlife, cattle shade, aesthetics, recreation) but they all share a common desire and love for the trees. This is an encouraging sign for the future of trees in Nebraska!

District Forester Doak Nickerson is proud of the project's success. "Since the Pine Reforestation Project's beginning in 2017, the NFS has helped 55 ranches hand plant over 270,000 seedlings on 900 acres," he says. "Modern tree growing technology has increased seedling survival from 25% (bare-root) to well over 50% with high quality, container grown seedlings. The project has been a huge success and this bodes well for the dedicated ranchers that call this land home."

Editor's note: We asked Bryce to provide this preview of the 2023 planting effort because the newsletter deadline precluded an after-the-fact article. We understand that, as usual, this exceptional team experienced tree-mendous success.





Staff Spotlight

Brad Kindler shares his creativity, broad experience

I'm the new Sustainable Landscape Specialist in Forestry Hall. I work with communities and partners statewide on planting, green infrastructure, and garden projects. My favorite part of my job is the opportunity for creativity and visual communication. I'm tasked with recording complex project ideas and visually arranging them in a way that is coherent and approachable.

Background

I served in the Peace Corps from 2012-2014 in Malawi, in east Africa. While working there on community-based tree planting and other projects, I realized that there is demand for effective communication tools in project design and community organizing. This led to getting my MLA in Landscape Architecture at the University of Arizona in 2018. Back in Nebraska, I worked the hands-on side of horticulture, design and project management at the Arbor Day Farm

in Nebraska City. This put me in daily contact with tree planting, forest management, and project budgeting, all skills that are applicable to my work with NFS and the community-oriented green infrastructure design work that we do.

What do you do when you aren't working?

My family is from Ulysses, Nebraska. I have 3 acres near town with a shop and small orchard. When I'm not at work, I'm there gardening and working on creative projects. I'm an amateur beekeeper on the side.



What is your greatest accomplishment?

Accomplishing anything of value takes focus, hard work, and dedication. My greatest accomplishment is working every day to try and live in a good way. A highly successful mentor taught me that individual accomplishment is always connected to the community of people who support you. It's important to be appreciative of the people around us.

What are your goals and dreams?

After many hours of walking creeks and dry riverbeds in Nebraska, I would someday like to find a mammoth tooth!

The best advice you have given or received?

In Malawi, people often speak or respond in proverbs. One that I often think about in community work is, "When running through sand, it is best to begin together." For me, this means that when we are faced with something difficult, we should try and stay together.

Darla Huff is the glue that holds us together

Hello, my name is Darla Huff, the Nebraska Forest Service office associate in Forestry Hall. I'm immensely proud to be part of the NFS family and all that our staff conducts. I'm the one who orders the supplies, and I always think of myself as the glue that keeps everything together.

Background and Favorite Activities

I was born in Sterling, Nebraska during a blizzard on February 11, 1965. I was almost born at home that day, check this out: <https://www.3newsnow.com/weather/wether-history/omahas-largest-snowstorm>.

I've been at UNL since 1990, and it's been an interesting journey. Prior to starting with NFS in 2013, I worked in Purchasing, Accounting, and the College of Engineering. I've enjoyed all the people I have met along the way.

I married Cliff Huff in 1996. We both enjoy fishing around the Lincoln area in our little Smoker Craft boat. We also take an annual trip down to the Lake of the Ozarks. We stay busy with our dog, a miniature schnauzer named Beau, and with family. We have fourteen great nieces and nephews.

What is your greatest accomplishment?

I would have to say getting my bachelor's degree as an adult from Doane/Lincoln campus in Accounting.

What are your goals and dreams?

My dream is to move down to the Lake of the Ozarks when we retire.

What is the best advice you've given or received?

They may not remember what you said but they will always remember how you made them feel.





Staff Spotlight

Bryce Gerlach enjoys people, dogs, and birds

I'm Bryce Gerlach, rural forester in Chadron. My 3-year work anniversary is this month. My main work activities are ponderosa pine management, fuels reduction, windbreak design, partner relations and much more. My favorite part of the job is meeting with an individual or landowner who shares my same passion for trees. In a world where trees can sometimes be a bad word, there are people out there who deeply care for their trees or forest and care about the management. Meeting with these people can be a real joy.

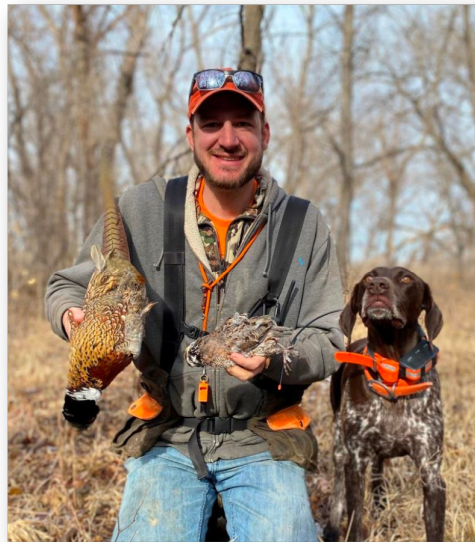
Background

I grew up on a farm in New Jersey, went to college in Texas, and eventually found my way to the great State of Nebraska. I worked as a forester for the National Wild Turkey Federation for several years.

What do you do when you aren't working?

Hunting and bird dog training are passions of mine. My wife and I, along with our three dogs,

spend much of our free time exploring the western states in search of upland birds and beautiful scenery.



What is your greatest accomplishment?

My wife and I recently trained our youngest puppy, Gus, and entered him in a versatile hunting dog test in Texas. We had the youngest dog there and still received the highest score of the test. We are very proud of this accomplishment.

What are your goals and dreams?

I have a goal of hunting every legal North American upland bird species over my dogs. This will involve a trip to Alaska at some point to hunt ptarmigan! Someday . . .

The best advice you've given or received?

When I transitioned from a public land management job to a position where I would be working with the general public, I was given a solid piece of advice: "If you don't know the answer, don't make it up." People will respect you more if you are honest and tell them that you will get back to them with the correct answer. I still have much to learn as a young forester and there is no shame with admitting that.

Aron Lewis: New NFS forester in Ord

I'm Aron Lewis, the conservation forester, based at the Lower Loup NRD in Ord. I've been with the NFS about six months. I work with private landowners to accomplish their forestry needs. Some of the activities include windbreak design and establishment, windbreak renovations, forest stand improvement, and wildland urban interface projects. I also help out with the fire program when I can. My favorite part of my job is getting to spend most days outdoors in the woods. I also enjoy working with private landowners, helping them with their projects.

Background

I graduated from the University of Nebraska with a degree in Fisheries and Wildlife back in 2013. I have worked many different fisheries and wildlife jobs for both state and federal agencies in NE, SD, and CO. My introduction to forestry started in the Pine Ridge when I worked with the Nebraska Game and Parks in 2019, helping with timber clearing in the wildlife management areas. I then took a job with the Upper Elkhorn NRD in 2020, where I ran their tree program and was in charge of windbreak establishment.

Greatest accomplishment?

One of my greatest accomplishments is graduating from college on the dean's list.

Another accomplishment for me was getting a permanent full-time job in the natural resource field. I worked seasonal and non-permanent jobs for seven years before finally getting a permanent full-time job.

What do you do when you aren't working?

When I am not working I enjoy hunting, fishing, golfing, and hanging out with friends and family.

What are your goals and dreams?

My goal is to become the best forester and person that I can be.

The best advice you've given or received?

The best advice I have received is to listen before you speak.



Rural Forestry Happenings

Focus on Partnering

by Rachel Allison

NFS is working with NRCS and NGPC partners to provide forestry and windbreak training for natural resources professionals in the NRCS, NRD and NGPC offices.

The focus will be on pine forests at Chadron on July 25-28, and on mixed hardwoods at Ponca State Park on September 26-28.

The May workshop at Kearney focused on riparian woodland management.

Upcoming windbreak training will be held separately, dates TBD.



Working together . . .

Partnering with Fire Shop to create a plant trailer

A big portion of Sustainable Landscape Specialist Sarah Buckley's job involves heavy lifting and multiple deliveries in a single day.

"And I'm not a very large person," jokes Buckley. "Loading and unloading pickup beds wears me out. By the end of the summer, I'm in bad shape."

Buckley noticed several local nurseries utilize large trailers for similar deliveries, reducing the need for several trips a day. She decided she'd plant the seed with department leads about possibly acquiring something similar, instead of just using a pickup truck.

Luckily, Fire Shop Manager Lew Sieber already had just the thing: a large trailer perfect for toting plant deliveries across Nebraska.



What's more, the scale and shape of the trailer provide opportunities for traveling plant sales – something NSA staff eyed for years.

"We have rolling nursery carts with six shelves. We'll roll six of those into the back of the trailer and fill them with plants," explains Buckley.

"Then Lew will also be adding a 'command center' at the front of the trailer. It will have a table we can write notes on. The idea is, this will be useful for delivering grant-funded plant projects, but also so we could hit the road for pop-up plant sales. The front of the trailer would then be our checkout area!"

The Fire Shop expects to have the trailer ready to go for NSA use in early May.

Looking back on a career: Woollen retires Aug. 1

District Forester Rich Woollen has seen many changes since he joined NFS in 1993 as a District Forester Assistant. The biggest leaps have been in technology such as digital photography, GPS, and computers, he says, but he also notes that today there is "more evidence of man's footprint."

Rich works out of the Lower Loup NRD in Ord. His early career experience with nursery management for Champion International and as a field forester for Louisiana Pacific in Montana prepared him well for his diverse duties with NFS, including coordinating the conservation tree planting program; providing rural and community forestry assistance; and development, implementation, and supervision of NFS programs in the North Central District. Some of his career high points:

- Helped NFS adopt a Windows/GIS based planning program (WinDET) and an internet based companion program known as Web-DET to assist field foresters in developing management plans.

- Assisted with the Spatial Analysis Project, a GIS-based strategic management tool that allows NFS to identify and spatially display land in Forest Stewardship Plans.
- Provided forestry-related input to an NRCS team developing Ecological Site Classifications.
- Completed a fuels project in Pine Canyon, a disjunct population of native ponderosa pine in Custer County. Seed collected from this population was used to produce container planting stock at the Bessey Nursery in Halsey. The seedlings were out-planted on Lower Loup NRD property near Ord for future collections of this unique seed source.
- Hosted two State Forest Stewardship Coordinating Committee meetings.
- Conducted GPS training and demonstrated Arc-GIS forestry applications for NFS staff.

"I've most enjoyed field work and research projects that stretch me a bit," he says. He has authored or contributed to publications including Windbreak & Shelterbelt Appraisal, Wood Waste Supply and Utilization Assessment, CRP Land Use Guide, An Evaluation of a Chemical Root Pruning Technique for Improving Root System Morphology of Containerized Seedlings, An Evaluation of the Efficacy of Hot Water Treatments to Clean Styroblock Containers, and Agronomic and Botanical Components Associated with Seed Productivity of Kentucky Bluegrass.

His advice for the future of NFS: "Maintain customer service commitment with good expertise in the field."

Good Luck and Happy Retirement, Rich!



NAEOP recognizes Erixson

The National Association of Educational Office Professionals announced State Forester John Erixson as the recipient of the 2023 Educational Administrator of the Year Award. Winners are chosen for their unrelenting support of educational office professionals and staff professional development.

"John cares about people, as evidenced by his support of NFS staff," says Christina Hoyt, Community Landscapes and Forest Health Bureau Chief. "I lead a team of nine people, and John always supports the continued education and professional development of those on my team."

John was also recognized for prioritizing education in his current role as NFS Director and providing positive reinforcement to staff for on-going projects and deliverables.

"In my 42 years at UNL, John has been my best boss to date (and that says a lot since I've worked for some pretty remarkable people)," says Business Associate Lola Young. "John has been the kindest, most humble, generous, and considerate boss I've ever had. He constantly tells me how my job positively affects landowners and volunteer fire departments across the state and that, in turn, help the residents who rely on the VFDs by providing them with added safety measures."

John will be honored at a banquet at the organization's annual conference July 16th-19th at the Hilton Omaha Hotel downtown.

Congratulations, John!



FPU Update . . .

Wood is Good . . .

by Kim Slezak

"To enrich the lives of all Nebraskans by protecting, restoring, and utilizing Nebraska's tree and forest resources." They're all connected. If we are to protect our forest stands from insect and disease pressures and protect from fire, they need to be managed sustainably. If we are to restore our forest stands to functional ecosystems without encroaching cedar and invasive plants, they need to be managed sustainably.

If we are to manage our forest stands sustainably, the costs must be reasonable. Therefore, the material coming out can't increase cost due to disposal fees. If the material can be a product, or value-added product, the cost of the management activities is reduced.

ALL trees can be utilized. The first step in achieving increased utilization is teaching Nebraskans that trees can be utilized. To burn it all in a pile just because "we've always done



From furniture to planks, chips to biochar, Nebraska's trees have reincarnation potential once they're done being upright, green, and growing. Help spread the word!

it" is neither logical nor is it ecologically and economically sustainable.

Education includes Sawmills in Schools (SiS), demonstrations, and outreach, perhaps expanding on SiS to community colleges. It's promoting Maker Spaces, as not everyone can afford a lathe or large table saw. It's every staff person reacting to a tree removal—are you going to make use of the tree? (I will provide a business card size cheat sheet to distribute). You've heard of ambulance chasers? I'm a chainsaw-sound chaser.

Then we can work on building capacity by thinking outside the box. Not every tree is lumber, nor is it firewood. And trees certainly are not waste! Work with loggers, contractors, earth movers, and processors—efficiencies, waste stream to new products. What works? What doesn't? Studies are on-going with UNL on biochar in both agricultural and engineering (cement).

Grants R Us!

If you think grant-writing is a chore, or one of those "...other duties as assigned" parts of our work, you just might want to reconsider that point of view.

Over the past two decades, NFS staff has blossomed in our success rates for writing quality applications that get funded year after year. It's truly the gift that keeps on giving. These grants have enabled NFS to become a national leader in working with landowners and communities to achieve far-reaching 'boots-on-the-ground' goals.

Our successful WUI applications began with one, modest \$25,000 grant back in 2001, and culminated this year with seven grants, totaling a whopping \$2,013,243. It would have been more, had we not hit the allowable limit. Chris Wood's CDK proposal ranked #1, the others made the top 16.

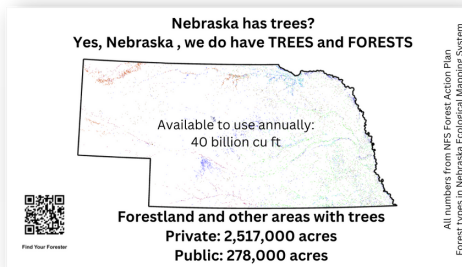
And our LSR grant writers had an equally good year. Their applications—ranked 1, 3, and 16—were awarded \$661,720.

The value of most of these grants are double their face value because of matching funds.

Since 2001, our 57 WUI grants have brought in over \$14 million, enabling fuels reduction on over 1,200 projects, treating nearly 34,000 acres, plus funding CWPPs that cover the entire state.

Since 2011 (the earliest data available), our 21 LSR grants have generated over \$4.7 million.

So, if you're looking for a side gig to help boost your program, look into getting some grant-writing training!



Staff Picks . . .

Pam loves Ham(ilton)

by Pam Bergstrom, Agroforester

I love movies. Right now the movie I am watching over and over again on Disney+ is Hamilton: The Musical. I love everything Hamilton, from my favorite CD that is in my truck to the Hamilton blanket a friend gave me. In April, I went to Minneapolis to see the live performance of this instant classic. To put it in Hamilton terms, "I was in the room where it happened." Rated for adults, this phenomenon is one of the best musicals around. If you're a history buff, this is the show for you.



(photo by Pam Bergstrom)

Canva Training Available

Are you frustrated with InDesign? Do you want your flyer or trifold done YOUR way?

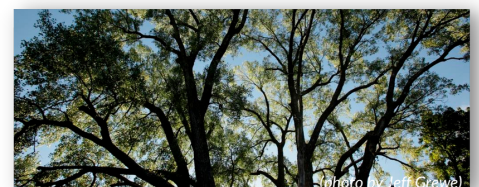
The Comms team is now providing intermittent Canva trainings via Zoom for the next calendar year.

This training will teach you the fundamentals of designing a flyer for an upcoming event, and will set you on the path to creative success in the browser-based graphic design program. Watch your inbox for announcements on how you can sign up.

Nebraska Natives . . .

Our state tree

Eastern Cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) grows along most of Nebraska's rivers. It grows big, fast, and is relatively short-lived. In 100 years, it can grow to 90' tall with an equally wide canopy spread. Trunks of older trees can exceed 30 ft. in circumference. Because of its fast growth, cottonwood is a fairly brittle tree, often losing branches in wind storms. It is named for the cottony strands that carry its seeds in early summer. The fluffy stuff can get so thick in the air that it's sometimes called "summer snow." It has distinctive deltoid-shaped leaves with a flat base and prominent blunt teeth at the edges.



(photo by Jeff Grewe)



Cedar Canyon Update

by Mark Frickel

We are currently conducting an e-bid to select a new grazing lessee, who will have the lease for the next five years. Once we select the lessee, we will come up with the grazing strategy for this season.

In April, we did the site prep to install a new solar well to replace the existing windmill. We also trenched a pipeline to install a third livestock tank. This will enable a better grazing management regime.

Another project, in cooperation with Rachel Allison, is developing a Cercospora needle

blight management study in the windbreak located on the north side of the property. We will be demonstrating mechanical and chemical methods for reducing impacts to windbreak effectiveness caused by the fungal disease.

Other forestry activities include pile burning, which will remove the slash from previous fuels treatments. Planning for broadcast burns will help address regeneration of eastern redcedar, and in the future we will do this in conjunction with rotational grazing.



The local wildlife approves



Ready to roll



Pile burning warms a winter day

Events Calendar

Send your info about events that will be of interest to staff to bbohall2@unl.edu

May

- 19 NSA Plant Sale-UNL East campus greenhouse
- 22-24 NFS Forestry Field Meeting, Ponca
- 26 NSA Plant Sale-UNL East campus greenhouse

June

- 5-11 National Wildflower Week NSA events:
 - June 8: Wildflower Plant Talk and Guided Wildflower Hike, 6:30 p.m. Chadron State Park.
 - June 9, Gering: Community Planting at Ever Green House, 1210 Overland Trails Rd., 9-11:30 a.m.
 - June 9, Scottsbluff: NSA Members & Friends Gathering, 6-9 p.m., Papa Moon Vineyards & Winery.
 - June 10, Gering: NSA Plant Sale, Ever Green House, 9-11 a.m.

- 2-16 NRCS Forestry Subcommittee / NFS Forest Stewardship Coordinating, North Platte
- 17 NSA Plant Sale-Camp Brewster, Fontenelle Forest, Bellevue, 9-noon.

July

- 25-28 Forest Management Workshop-Chadron



Tree planting help comes in all sizes. Photo courtesy of Bryce Gerlach.