

# Our Neck of the Woods

## Insider News From and For NFS Staff

Thursday, March 16, 2023

Vol. 4 No. 2



*A note from your state forester . . .*

## Alphabet soup, decoded

As we reviewed our recent winter staff meeting evaluations, we were grateful to have such an engaged and interested team. We appreciate your active participation and the questions you raised, including a staff member's inquiry about various funding acronyms and their implications. Bearing in mind this question, I'm sharing some highlights about several key programs relevant to the future of forestry in Nebraska and the funding associated with it.

Firstly, BIL, the Bilateral Infrastructure Law, allocates funding to each state for implementing their Forest Action Plan (FAP). Nebraska is set to receive \$500,000 annually for five years, with an eight-year plan that requires all BIL funds to be fully expended by 2030. The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) is collaborating with partners to codify this funding in the 2023 Farm Bill, which would make it permanent.

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), or Law (IRL), is a significant funding pool designed to change how communities approach their forests. The funds are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis, with a review of spend-down rates in year four. If some states do not fully utilize their budgeted funds and it appears that they will have leftover funding by the end of year five, that money will be redistributed to states that have fully utilized their budgets. IRA is a ten-year program that aims to demonstrate the need for increased federal investment in community forests, potentially leading to a goal of tripling the UCF (Urban and Community Forestry) formula funds. The IRA is set to expire in 2032.

The 'new' LSR (Landscape Scale Restoration) grants use existing authorities by the US Forest Service to grant funds to state forestry agencies, allowing them to compete for funding

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## In this issue . . .

### Staff Spotlight

*Laurie Stepanek and Jennifer Morris  
Fred McCartney and Luke Gazak*

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, check out news from NSA, Rural Forestry, Wildland Fire, Community Forestry, and Forest Properties.

### Just for You—Page 5

In each issue, our newest feature, *Nebraska Natives*, focuses on a tree native to our state. To start us off, Justin and Bob provide a quick peek at the pawpaw.

And, of course, don't miss Darla's favorite movies in *Staff Picks!*

# Winter Staff Meeting returns in-person

The sounds of cheesy forester jokes, laughter, and overall camaraderie signaled the return of the annual NFS Winter Staff Meeting. After a two-year hiatus from the in-person event, old friends and colleagues played catch-up while newer NFS staff put faces and handshakes to the email threads and sometimes endless Zoom calls.

"Just seeing everyone here again reminds me why I love this agency so much," said Communications Specialist Ben Bohall. "I almost forgot how fun it all is."

The three-day, all-staff meeting brought not only its share of socializing, but also agency updates and professional development seminars. These included, but were not limited to, leadership exercises, bureau/program updates, and group discussions regarding how to best utilize NFS' strengths in 2023. Highlights included Alex Garcia of Leadership Resources facilitating lessons in effective supervision and Mark Frickel reviewing land management strategies he uses at Cedar Point.



Things took an unexpected turn with inclement weather on Friday (thanks, western colleagues, for sending the much-needed snow our way!). Leadership decided to hold the last day's events remotely via Zoom. Those presentations included Graham Herbst discussing 'Diagnosing Tree Illnesses,' Kendall Weyers and Sarah Buckley chatting about 'Plant Grants,' and Chrissy Land covering 'Community Inventories.'

"During the winter staff meeting I met many new people across different sectors of the Nebraska Forest Service who are incredibly driven and passionate towards their jobs," remarked new NFS Chadron Forester Luke Gazak.

"This level of enthusiasm is infectious, and it shows great support for me and my personal progression in my career with NFS. I left the winter staff meeting with new friends, colleagues, and people I can count on to help and support me in any way possible. I feel so fortunate to be surrounded by people who are passionate, supportive, driven, and involved in the success of others," he said.



## Staff Spotlight

### Laurie Stepanek, Forest Health Specialist, Lincoln

I'm Laurie Stepanek, Forest Health Specialist in Lincoln. I have been with NFS over 30 years. I assist staff and partners with forest health issues by developing educational materials, giving trainings and workshops, diagnosing problems via site visits or office calls, and conducting pest surveys. My favorite part of my job is visiting new areas of the state and helping folks with tree pest problems.

#### Background

I was born in New Ulm, Minnesota, but grew up in Fremont, Nebraska. I studied horticulture and plant protection at UNL and began working for NFS immediately after graduation.



#### What do you do when you aren't working?

I enjoy growing bearded iris and sharing them with colleagues, neighbors and friends—especially dwarf iris, which reach only 6 to 15 inches tall and can be squeezed into many little spaces in the garden.

#### What are your goals and dreams?

Several house remodeling projects are on my list; perhaps after that I can plan and develop some nice landscaping instead of my current hodgepodge of plants (and weeds).

#### The best advice you have given or received?

Put your big rocks in first. Otherwise all the little stuff will take up all your time. Unfortunately, I have trouble following that advice.

### Jennifer Morris, Forest Health Specialist in Tekamah

I'm Jennifer Morris, the Forest Health Specialist in Tekamah. I previously worked with NFS for four or five years, and I've been back for a little over two months.

My main activities include diagnosing forest health problems and speaking to the public. I'm taking over the oak grant, spotlighting herbicide damage on oaks. I love sharing my knowledge and experiences with people because I learn just as much as they do and I appreciate their curiosity and enthusiasm.

#### Background

I spent my early years after high school learning all sorts of things. I coded COBOL on civilian contract for the Air Force at Offutt until 9/11 changed my mind about my

career path. In my mid-twenties, I received my BS in Forestry at Iowa State. The job market crashed in 2008, just as I was graduating. I became an arborist out of necessity, as tree care companies were the only ones hiring at the time. I've been an arborist ever since.

My parents acquired an orchard over a decade ago. I help them manage an aging apple canopy of about 950 trees. It's a labor of love, but I make time to sell at local farmers markets, so the produce doesn't go to waste.

#### What do you do when you aren't working?

I spend most of my time with my family. Cooking is a passion of mine, along with reading sci-fi and fantasy books. When the

weather gets warm, I kayak, hike and travel. I love dogs more than I love most people. If there is a dog within my vicinity, I'll typically stop what I am doing, and we will be the best of buddies. Life wouldn't be the same without dogs.

#### Greatest accomplishment?

Making the decision to follow my dreams and study Forestry at ISU.

#### What are your goals and dreams?

My goal is to stay with NFS for the rest of my days. I have always dreamt of writing a novel. If I ever retire, I'd like to have a food truck and just travel the country.

#### The best advice you've given or received?

Do what is right, not what is easy.





## Staff Spotlight

### New forester, Luke Gazak, is settling in to Chadron

I'm Luke Gazak, Forester in Chadron. I have been with the Nebraska Forest Service for 6 months. My main activities with NFS are fuels reduction and forest thinning in the panhandle, on public and private lands in the Pine Ridge and Wildcat Hills. I have two favorite parts of my job. The first is the ability to be outside, in the woods, as often as I am. My other favorite part is the connection I have to the people on the land. I am lucky to meet so many different people that share my passion and love for the woods and the natural world.

#### Background

My background consists mostly of sports and the outdoors. I was fortunate enough to earn athletic scholarship and graduate as an NCAA Division 1 athlete with honors, and a biology degree. Post-undergrad, I found my love for forestry in the longleaf pine forests of southeastern North Carolina, and I have been a



forester ever since. The majority of my forestry background experience is in oak/pine savannahs and hardwood lowlands.

#### What do you do when you aren't working?

Outside of work is pretty simple for me, hunting, fishing, family, and friends. My wife and I are expecting our first child at the end of August!

#### Greatest accomplishment?

Honestly, I don't have one singular greatest accomplishment. It has been a series of wonderful and exciting accomplishments that have gotten me to where I am today, and I can't say I would put one above the rest.

#### What are your goals and dreams?

My goal is simply to be the best forester, outdoorsman, conservationist, and person that I can be.

#### The best advice you've given or received?

Take it easy . . . but take it.

### Fred McCartney has a Pine Ridge focus

I'm Fred McCartney, Forester, NW District based in Chadron. I began working with NFS in February of 2012. Most of my work centers around fuels reduction practices in ponderosa pine ecosystems in the Pine Ridge area. My favorite part about my job is working with private landowners. It has been both a privilege and a challenge to tailor biologically sound projects to fit the needs and objectives of individual landowners.

#### Background

I have had the privilege of working with private, state and federal landowners in both the private and public sector for more than 40 years. Most of these years have been in the Pine Ridge area of NW Nebraska, the Black Hills of SD and WY, and forested regions of SE MT. For 25 of these years I worked as a procurement forester for a sawmilling corporation (Pope and Talbot Inc.). I have a degree in Forest Resource Management from the University of Montana, 1981.

#### What do you do when you aren't working?

I enjoy working on my rural properties. We are restoring a 1890s log cabin on one of these properties. I/we now have three grandchildren. Introducing them to the outdoor activities we enjoy has been both an honor and a privilege.

#### Greatest accomplishment?

My greatest accomplishment personally is my family. Professionally, I would like to think that my efforts have made a difference in improving the resiliency of the ecosystems I have had a part in managing.

#### What are your goals and dreams?

I will always be a forester. As I approach retirement, I plan to find ways to stay involved. I hope to find a balance between family activities and my forestry / outdoor hobbies in retirement.

#### The best advice you've given or received?

The best advice I have received and can share, both professionally and personally, is to listen to what people have to say with your ears and not your mouth.



## Rural Forestry Happenings

### Pine Reforestation

by Rachel Allison

This LSR program has helped replant ponderosa pine trees lost to large fires in the Pine Ridge and Niobrara Valley. In the past 5 years it has funded the planting of approximately 500,000 trees; 107,000 will be planted this spring. We received word that we will be awarded the grant to continue the next few years, so in the spring of 2024 we will begin offering reforestation in the Wildcat Hills for the first time.



The first Forest Management Partnership Workshop will be held the week of May 8 at The Crane Trust. More to come . . .



## NSA News . . .

# Spring Affair plant sale in Lincoln April 27-29

Spring is in the air with the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum's (NSA) upcoming Spring Affair Plant Sale, April 27-29 at the Lancaster Event Center in Lincoln.

Spring Affair is the Great Plains' largest plant sale, attracting more than 4,000 visitors and featuring more than 800 varieties of perennials, annuals, herbs, succulents and trees, in addition to gardening vendors and educational non-profits.

For those eager to get the best choice of plants, the Spring Affair Preview Party and Preview Sale on Thursday, April 27, from 5-9 p.m. is a great option. The Preview Party will include dinner and one drink ticket, as



well as admission to the plant sale. Tickets for the Preview Party and Plant Sale are \$40 for NSA members; \$50 for non-members.

An option to attend the Preview Plant Sale only from 7-9 p.m. is also available. Tickets for the Preview Plant Sale only are \$20 for NSA members and \$25 for non-members.

Free general admission to Spring Affair will be held on Friday, April 28, from 2-6 p.m. and on Saturday, April 29, from 9 a.m. to 12 noon.

To register for the Preview Party and Preview Sale or for more information about Spring Affair, please visit [plantnebraska.org/spring-affair](http://plantnebraska.org/spring-affair).

## Arbor Day: Coming soon to a community near you!

Arbor Day is a 'floating holiday' for UNL employees. For NFS staff, that's definitely appropriate, and we've got lots to do this time of year. Here's a quick snapshot of this uniquely Nebraska holiday, then and now:

Back in 1872, Nebraska journalist J. Sterling Morton proposed the tree-planting holiday during a State Board of Agriculture meeting. Nebraskans received the idea enthusiastically, and responded by planting over a million trees that first Arbor Day. By 1885, the state declared it a legal holiday, and Nebraskans now celebrate it on the last Friday in April.

In the century and a half since that early success, Nebraskans have commemorated the holiday with parades and speeches and, of course, by planting trees in school yards, parks, and communities across the state. This tradition fits well with the NFS Community Forestry program's efforts to increase local interest and participation in revitalizing community forests.

"An Arbor Day observance and proclamation is one of the four minimum standards required for a community to apply for Tree City USA," says Chrissy Land, the Western Community Forester in Scottsbluff. "This Arbor Day Foundation program fuels a nationwide movement by providing the framework necessary for communities to manage and expand their public trees."

Every year, Chrissy and her eastern Nebraska counterpart, Graham Herbst, review the applications and coordinate a celebration to recognize Nebraska's Tree Cities.

"It's been great to celebrate the work that nearly 100 communities around Nebraska do to celebrate their community forests and the people that plant and manage them," says Graham.

Last year, many communities held special celebrations honoring the holiday's 150th anniversary. We are hoping this year's celebrations will be just as widespread.



## Conservation Ed Calendar

### Upcoming Events

- 3/16: Teach Outside! Monthly Outdoor Learning Educator Workshop Series-Online
- 3/17: Prairie Chickens: A Lot to Lek! Educator Workshop-West Central Research & Extension Center
- 3/21: Splash into Springtime! Early Childhood Educator Workshop Series-Sowing Seeds Academy
- 3/27: Leading Little Learners in Nature! Early Childhood Educator Workshop Series-Online
- 4/3: Arbor Day Middle & Secondary Educator Workshop-Online
- 4/12: Project Learning Tree Arbor Day Mini-Workshop: Learn About Forests, Virtual

For information on Conservation Education activities contact Jack Hilgert: [jack.hilgert@unl.edu](mailto:jack.hilgert@unl.edu)





*Fire staff is gearing up for the season . . .*

## NFS to host 15th annual wildfire academy at Crawford

by Eric Moul

The Nebraska Forest Service will host its 15th annual Nebraska Wildland Fire Academy (NWFA) at Fort Robinson State Park in Crawford from April 26-30, 2023. The first NWFA was held at the Crawford Fairgrounds. NFS staff, along with staff from the Nebraska State Fire Marshal's Training Division, provided the S-190 / S-130/L-180 (Red Card) class over the course of two weekends. The following year, NFS staff and their partner agencies held the NWFA at Fort Robinson State Park.

As an original NWFA alumni, I can appreciate how far the NWFA has come. I went from attending classes at the NWFA as a young volunteer firefighter to teaching and coordinating these academies as an NFS staff member. I am privileged to be in the presence of some of the most competent and well-experienced instructors our academies have to offer. Without those instructors providing the knowledge that exceeds the students' expectations, this academy would not be as successful as it is.

All courses that are provided at both the NWFA and Eastern Nebraska NWFA are accredited by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG). NWCG sets the national standard for all interagency trainings and qualifications. What students are taught



at our academies follows the same curriculum that students in other regions of this nation are learning. The only thing that changes about these courses are the instructors who facilitate them.

The NWFA provides high-quality training through experienced wildland fire instructors from around the country to ensure that training needs for firefighters in Nebraska and the surrounding regions are met.

Whether you are new to firefighting or have years of experience behind you, the classes offered at the NWFA will not only grow your wildfire knowledge but also enhance specific skills necessary for safely suppressing wildfires or conducting a prescribed fire.

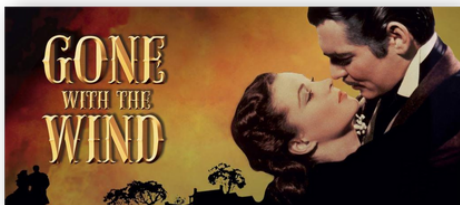
More detailed information about this year's academy is online at <https://nfs.unl.edu/>. Staff wanting to attend should contact Eric Moul at [emoul2@unl.edu](mailto:emoul2@unl.edu).

### Staff Picks . . .

#### Great movies, great smiles

Darla Huff, Office Associate, is the smiling face at Forestry Hall's front desk. Perhaps she's smiling because she's thinking about her favorite movies!

"I just love old westerns," she says. *McLintock!* has to be one of my favorites, with John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara." Vintage musicals, such as *Paint Your Wagon*, enthrall her, too. "But *Gone with the Wind* is my absolute favorite movie of all time. It was the first color movie to win the Oscar for best picture!"



*Message from the State Forester  
(continued from page 1)*

for various projects. As of now, we are still waiting for the 'advice letter' which will outline the specifics of how and where these funds will be used. This letter should be available by the end of March or early April. There is \$200 million available in this funding pool, spread out over the next eight years.

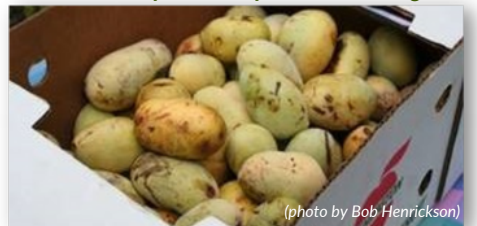
As an agency, we pride ourselves on our proactive approach and diligent adherence to timelines. We are deeply committed to our staff and remain unwavering in our determination to create new positions that support our long-term goals. Rather than being swayed by temporary funding constraints, we remain focused on the future, always seeking to anticipate and meet evolving needs. Our innovative spirit ensures that we continue to move forward, exploring new possibilities and developing exciting new roles for our team.

### Nebraska Natives . . .

#### Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*)

In a recent issue of his *Shady Lane* newsletter, Justin Evertson spotlighted the pawpaw, native to southeast Nebraska from Plattsmouth to Rulo. It grows 15-25' tall and 10-15' wide, forming colonies. Its large, fleshy fruits contain a custard-like pulp. Our native pawpaw fruits are about the size of a potato and the ripe flesh has the consistency of mushy banana.

**Check out Justin's newsletter for more details. Contact him if you're not yet on his mailing list!**



(photo by Bob Henrickson)



## Eastern Properties Update

by Aaron Clare

### Horning

An area of Horning that was once pasture and transitioned into woodland has been under-going a transformation nearly 10 years in the making. The woodland's dominant species was thorned honey locust, which were all girdled in 2015 and left standing to dry, ultimately to be felled, logged, and sold as firewood. The locust removal has been a major focus over the last few years, and with only a few 'troublesome' locusts left standing, the project should be wrapped up this year.

Increased focus has been placed on the agroforestry demonstrations at Horning. Last spring, over 70 pecan trees were grafted with cultivars of pecan and hickory with a 65% success rate. This month we'll prune and harvest scion wood from the successful grafts and re-graft this spring on the trees that failed. In the hybrid hazelnut plots, 10 different superior plants were selected for propagation via mound layering. The process involved cutting back the shrub in the fall to make it produce many new shoots the following spring. Then, in June, a ring is made around the plant with roofing paper and selected shoots are girdled at the base

with zip ties, sprayed with rooting hormone, and buried in potting mix or sawdust. By November, the shoots have rooted and can be harvested for transplanting. We intend to plant the layers in replicated yield trials (4 reps each) at Horning, Prairie Pines, and some of our off-site test plots.

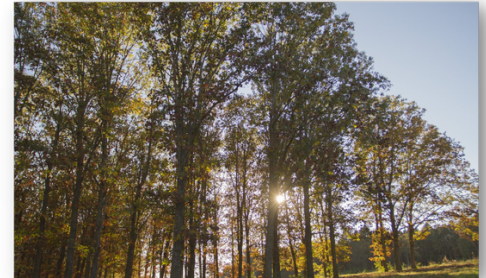
### Timmas

The willow harvest agreement with the Henry Doorly Zoo's animal browse team has been renewed and they will continue harvesting this year.

### Prairie Pines

Aaron has moved his office permanently to Prairie Pines and is pretty much settled in. Student workers Olivia Wagner and Paul Masin will be coming back part time until May when full time work begins, and we hope to add at least two more students for Horning, as well.

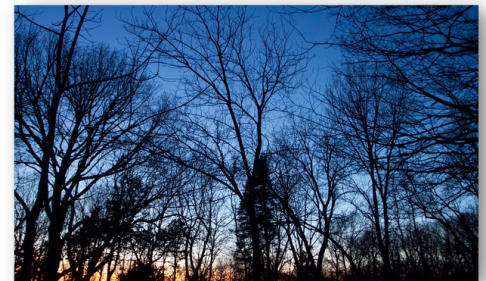
Lots of honeysuckle and autumn / Russian olive clearing with the forestry head occurred late last fall; we will be looking to hit the re-sprouts with herbicide. TSI work, thinning to reduce fire risk, and taking down declining ash trees will be major focuses this coming year.



Horning Farm



Timmas Farm



Prairie Pines

## Events Calendar

Send your info about events that may be of interest to staff to [sbenenson4@unl.edu](mailto:sbenenson4@unl.edu) or [bbohall2@unl.edu](mailto:bbohall2@unl.edu)

### March

- 22 Pruning Workshop-Ord, Lower Loup NRD
- 23 Pruning Workshop-Concord, Dixon Co. Extension
- 30 Pruning Workshop-Curtis, call Chrissy for info
- 31 Pruning Workshop-Sidney, call Chrissy for info

### April

- 1 Pruning Workshop-Gordon, call Doak for info
- 18 Prairie Pines Work Day (Rain date 4/21)
- 26-30 Nebraska Wildland Fire Academy-Crawford
- 27-29 NSA Spring Affair Plant Sale-Lincoln

### Arbor Day Celebrations:

- 18 McCook (Chrissy)
- 22 Sidney (Chrissy)
- 28 Gothenburg (Chrissy)

### May

- 9 Horning Farm Work Day (rain date 5/12)



Laurie Stepanek enjoys growing bearded iris and sharing them with colleagues, neighbors and friends. She snapped these photos of two of her favorites, Elf Esteem (left) and Dividing Line.