

ANNUAL REPORT 2025



*Enriching the lives of all
Nebraskans
by protecting,
restoring, and
utilizing Nebraska's
tree and forest
resources*

UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Lincoln

N IANR

2025 Annual Report

In this Issue

FORESTRY

Tree-MENDOUS Returns.....	2
The Neighbor Effect.....	4
Invasives Meet Their Match.....	6
Better Together.....	9
A New View on Conservation.....	10
Reviving Community Canopies.....	13
The Battle for Bur Oak.....	14
Bark, Beetles, and Better Trees.....	16
A Future in Forestry.....	17

FIRE

Flying, Fighting, Protecting.....	18
Near and Far.....	20
Second Life, First Response.....	22
Beyond the Fireline.....	23
Fight Fire with Funding.....	24
Proof of Concept.....	26
Stopping Sparks Early.....	27
Neighbors in Action.....	28
Defending the Range.....	29



A Message from the Nebraska State Forester



It is my privilege to share with you the Nebraska Forest Service's 2025 Annual Report. This past year brought both challenges and opportunities, and through it all, our commitment to protecting Nebraska's forests, rangelands, and communities has remained steadfast.

Wildfire prevention and response continue to be at the forefront of our work. With pile burns still the leading cause of wildfires in Nebraska, we have redoubled our efforts to reach landowners and communities with practical tools, resources, and education. At the same time, we continue to invest in the equipment, training, and partnerships needed to prepare for large-scale incidents like this spring's Custer County Complex Fire and Plum Creek Fire.

But our mission extends far beyond fire. Across the state, our staff, student workers, and community partners are helping Nebraskans plant and care for trees, restore windbreaks, manage forest health threats, and find innovative ways to use forest products. Trees are more than a natural resource—they are an economic asset. They protect cropland and livestock, reduce energy costs, raise property values, and support local economies through the forest products industry. Every tree planted and every forest managed contributes to Nebraska's financial resilience as well as its ecological health.

None of this work would be possible without our partners—volunteer fire departments, state and federal agencies, local governments, nonprofit organizations, and landowners—who stand shoulder to shoulder with us in service to Nebraska. Together, we are making a measurable difference.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report and for your continued support of the Nebraska Forest Service. The challenges ahead are significant, but so are the opportunities. With your partnership, we are confident that Nebraska's forests and communities will remain strong, healthy, and economically resilient for generations to come.

Regards,

John A. Erixson

Tree- MENDOUS Returns

From boosting property values to attracting businesses, community trees are proving to be Nebraska's most reliable economic engine.



TREES ADD 3-15% TO HOME VALUES

Trees contribute over **\$31.5 billion** nationally to property values. Across Nebraska, tree cover at private homes adds **\$25 million** annually to property values.

OVER 2,000 JOBS ADDED

2,099 people are employed due to urban forestry activities in Nebraska, which includes arborists, nurseries, suppliers, and others.

\$145 MILLION TO COMMUNITY-WIDE BENEFITS

Every dollar spent on trees generates **\$2-5** in economic benefits through energy savings and increased property values. Community trees in Nebraska contribute **\$145 million** to community-wide benefits. In addition, trees help cool communities by providing shade and mitigating the heat from pavement and buildings on summer days.

TREES ADD UP!

From boosting property values to attracting businesses, community trees are proving to be Nebraska's most reliable economic engine.

\$153 MILLION DIRECT ECONOMIC FOOTPRINT

Community trees in Nebraska have a **\$153 million** direct economic footprint and a **\$253.1 million** total economic footprint, which includes economic activity, employment, and employee compensation, with an economic multiplier to capture spillover activity.

TREES BRING BUSINESS!

Research shows tree-lined areas boost foot traffic, sales, and encourage people to linger. In small-town Nebraska, trees also enhance community character, provide shade, reduce dust, moderate temperatures, and help prevent flooding.

95 NEBRASKA TREE CITY COMMUNITIES

Community trees in Nebraska are a source of community pride because trees enhance community character and beauty and bring people together. Nebraska's commitment to trees is demonstrated in the **95 Nebraska communities** enrolled in the Tree City USA program.



The Neighbor Effect

How small-town spirit and Tree Care Workshops are growing Nebraska's forests' futures and stretching the dollar.



A single training often benefits not just one community, but several nearby towns as participants share skills, tools, and resources.

In 2025, the Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) traveled the state with pruning and bark scraping workshops in Brule, Arnold, Valentine, and Scottsbluff. Each drew a mix of arborists, city parks directors, homeowners, and master gardeners. Scottsbluff’s event, the largest, attracted participants from nearby towns like Gering and Minatare.

This momentum comes from what NFS calls “the neighbor effect.” In rural Nebraska, if one town works with the Forest Service, nearby communities soon follow. Traveling 60 miles for training is common, and word-of-mouth continues to lead to additional requests.

Workshops go beyond tree care. Many towns later request tree inventories, apply for grants, or join the Free Trees for Fall program. “One workshop leads to the next project, and pretty soon you’ve got a town full of people who care about their trees,” said NFS Western Nebraska Community Forester Chrissy Land.

For small towns with limited budgets, these workshops multiply impact. A single training often benefits several communities as participants share skills and resources. By pooling knowledge and partnerships, every dollar goes further—helping towns do more with less.

NFS also trains arborists—one of the most dangerous professions. Tree risk assessment certifications and safety instruction improve access to qualified experts while strengthening local economies with jobs in high demand.

In addition to in-person events, NFS expanded virtual workshops in 2025, cutting travel costs and opening opportunities for more participants statewide. The online format also provides a cost-effective first step for towns exploring additional NFS programs.

“It always comes down to the legacy,” adds Land. “The work you’re doing now can make a big impact for the next 30 to 100 years.”

“
ONE WORKSHOP LEADS TO THE NEXT PROJECT, AND PRETTY SOON YOU’VE GOT A TOWN FULL OF PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THEIR TREES.
Chrissy Land, NFS Western Nebraska Community Forester
”

Invasives Meet Their Match

*NFS expertise and community
teamwork are restoring balance
to Nebraska City's Riverview
Nature Park*





When invasive plants began crowding out native trees at Riverview Nature Park, concerned residents sounded the alarm. The 22-acre park along the Missouri River, known for its oak, hickory, and walnut forest, was under threat from fast-spreading Tree of Heaven and Amur Honeysuckle.

In response, the Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) teamed up with the nonprofit Friends of Riverview Nature Park to plan a large-scale treatment. After consulting with city officials and park advocates, chemical control was identified as the most effective option. The scale of the infestation required specialized contractors, leading the Friends group to secure cost estimates that helped unlock federal funding from the U.S. Forest Service.

Treatment began in fall 2025, with follow-up herbicide applications scheduled for spring 2026. In parallel, the Friends launched local fundraising for additional park improvements—tapping private donations, applying for grants, and even hosting a successful Fourth of July pickleball fundraiser.

“Our partnership with NFS provides the resources and expertise needed to restore and protect critical forest habitat,” said Riverview Nature Park president Briana Graham. “Together we are eliminating invasives and replanting beneficial species that ensure a forest for future generations.”

The project not only safeguards Riverview’s future but also offers a model for communities across southeastern Nebraska grappling with invasive species.


GOBBLIN’ UP THE WORK

**NEBRASKA FOREST SERVICE →
EXPERTISE & RESOURCES**

**U.S. FOREST SERVICE →
FEDERAL FUNDING**

**FRIENDS OF RIVERVIEW →
FUNDRAISING & ADVOCACY**





**“It’s easily one of the best partnerships
we’ve had in 30 years... I can’t say
enough about what the Nebraska
Forest Service has done to help us assist
the people in our district.”**

**GALEN WHITTROCK
SOUTH PLATTE NRD GENERAL MANAGER**



BETTER TOGETHER

The Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) works closely with Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) to connect landowners with expertise, funding opportunities, and programs that support healthy trees, communities, and landscapes. By sharing staff, technical knowledge, and resources, the partnership helps landowners understand what assistance is available—and how to make the most of it.

Across Nebraska, the two agencies co-fund several conservation forester positions, giving landowners and communities direct access to professionals who can help them navigate available programs and best management practices.

“NRDs are another point of contact for landowners and communities and a way to connect them with resources they may not even know exist,” said Aaron Clare, NFS and Lower Platte South NRD Conservation Forester. “This partnership expands our capacity and ensures the public can access the right mix of programs and expertise for their needs.”

Through programs such as the Landscape Tree Program, Community Forestry Program, and Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) initiatives, landowners and communities can explore multiple funding and support options offered by the NFS and NRDs. Whether addressing windbreak health, improving habitat, enhancing communities, or reducing wildfire risk, this collaboration ensures that Nebraskans can find the right fit for their land and goals.

David Potter, the Lower Platte South NRD General Manager, said the partnership helps landowners and communities take full advantage of the NRD's and state's available resources.

“It's a strong, effective collaboration,” Potter said. “By working together, we're able to achieve far more than we could alone—and landowners across Nebraska are seeing the benefits. The 23 NRDs in Nebraska offer various programs, including cost-share projects, tree seedling sales, and tree planting assistance, but together with the NFS expertise and programs, there is something for everyone to consider and utilize.”


By combining expertise, funding, and outreach, Nebraska's forestry partners help landowners and communities access the tools and programs that keep the state's landscapes healthy.

Significant Damage Significant Damage Significant Damage

A New View on Conservation

NFS/NRD foresters are helping Nebraska landowners care for trees and windbreaks using hands-on expertise and drone technology.





Conservation Forester Raymond Asamoah uses a drone to survey a windbreak in disrepair, capturing aerial imagery that helps identify gaps and plan future restoration efforts.

As a Conservation Forester with both the Nebraska Forest Service and the Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District (NRD), Raymond Asamoah embodies how collaboration can make conservation more effective across Nebraska. His shared position connects statewide forestry expertise with local relationships, helping landowners care for their trees, woodlands, and windbreaks.

Each day looks a little different for Raymond. Some days, he's walking a property with a landowner to assess a shelterbelt. Other days, he's using a drone to map windbreaks – capturing aerial imagery that helps identify gaps, disease issues, or opportunities for replanting.

“The drone gives us a new perspective,” Raymond explains. “It helps landowners see the big picture and plan for the future.”

Raymond's work goes beyond technology and tree care. He collaborates with Nebraska Extension, the NRCS, and other conservation partners to connect landowners with education, cost-share programs, and technical guidance.

“No single agency can do it all,” he says. “But when we work together, we can reach more people and make a bigger impact.”

By blending hands-on expertise with innovative tools and strong partnerships, Raymond Asamoah is helping Nebraska's forests – and the communities that depend on them – grow stronger for generations to come.

PLANTING TREES WITH FUNDING!

1084

... trees planted in Nebraska in 2025
through Trees for Nebraska Towns funds

211

... Nebraska communities assisted
with tree-related projects

\$139K

... spent in tree planting dollars



REVIVING COMMUNITY CANOPIES IN BLUE SPRINGS AND WYMORE

From parks to trails, Nebraskans are putting Trees for Nebraska Towns funding to work—restoring shade, beauty, and resilience across their communities.

When storms, disease, and time took their toll on the trees of Blue Springs, community member Dean Cole saw more than missing shade—he saw history that needed to be replanted. Through the Trees for Nebraska Towns program, a partnership between the Nebraska Forest Service and PlantNebraska, funded by the Nebraska Environmental Trust, Cole has helped his community and neighboring Wymore restore tree canopies that once defined their character.

Cole and his wife Cindy first connected with the program through the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum’s workshops and forestry outreach. Since then, they’ve helped organize plantings across southeast Nebraska—from the Blue Springs Main Park and Chief Standing Bear Trail to the Calvary Cemetery and Wymore city parks. Each project has brought volunteers together while replacing trees lost to Dutch elm disease and damaging storms.

“Trees are more than something standing there,” Cole said. “They’re a utility to the community. They stabilize soil, clean the air, and give people pride in their town.”

The impact of programs like this continues to grow statewide. In 2025, Trees for Nebraska Towns received 131 applications, resulting in 112 awarded projects across 72 communities, with more than 1,000 trees planted. By pairing local dedication with state-level expertise and grant support, the initiative strengthens community forests and resilience across Nebraska.

For Cole, each tree planted carries both memory and hope. “We missed what we had—and now we’re working to bring it back for the next generation to enjoy.”





THE BATTLE FOR BUR OAK

NFS leads statewide trials to secure the future of Nebraska's iconic shade tree



NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES JOIN IN TESTING BUR OAKS FOR RESILIENCE

Bur oak is among the Great Plains' longest-living shade trees, providing shelter, wildlife habitat, and ecological benefits. But in new plantings, young trees often struggle against stem galls—growths that disrupt development and leave trees vulnerable to pests and stress.

Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) Forest Health Specialist, Jennifer Morris, is leading a statewide project to find a solution. "Some bur oaks are completely free of galls, even near infested trees," Morris said. "If resistance is proven, those trees could become valuable seed sources for future plantings."

To test this, Morris collected acorns from promising oaks, germinated them, and distributed seedlings to 12 communities and three larger research sites managed by NRDs and NFS. Each site received 10 young trees to monitor over the next 5–10 years for gall resistance.

Communities have embraced the project. Crete Public Schools hosted a planting celebration at its arboretum, where students learned proper tree care. "The lasting legacy of being there on that day will be something students can return to and share with future generations," said Joel Bramhall, Director of the Cardinal Community Learning Center.

At Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska City, the seedlings are part of an oak savannah restoration. "It was perfect timing," said Grounds and Orchard Manager Ben Heusinkvelt. "These trees will help us demonstrate a unique ecosystem that once dominated Nebraska."

With drought, pests, and aging forests reducing community tree numbers—and limited budgets for replacement—NFS hopes the trials will uncover resilient bur oaks that can secure the species' future across the Great Plains.

COMMUNITIES

BLUE SPRINGS

CHADRON

CRETE

CURTIS

GERING

GOTHENBURG

MCCOOK

NEBRASKA CITY

NORTH PLATTE

ORD

SYRACUSE

WAVERLY

BARK, BEETLES, AND BETTER TREES

From Arnold to Valentine, workshops peel back the bark on pests and pruning—giving residents the tools to protect their hometown trees.

Last spring, Arnold residents got an up-close look at a destructive tree pest during a hands-on workshop hosted by the Arnold Tree Board and the Nebraska Forest Service (NFS). Participants peeled ash logs infested with emerald ash borer (EAB), revealing live larvae beneath the bark and gaining a better understanding of how the insect damages trees.

Tree Board member Mary Becker called the event a success. “As a retired educator, I always taught with a three-word motto: Tell, Show, and Do. That was exactly the approach,” she said. “Actually seeing the live insect was an educational experience.”

Nearly 20 participants—including utility workers, homeowners, and students—took part, learning to identify EAB and practice proper pruning techniques on live trees. A similar workshop in Valentine, hosted by the Middle Niobrara Natural Resources District, drew attendees from several surrounding communities.

NFS Forest Health Specialist Lauren Keefe, who led both sessions, said pairing pruning with pest education was intentional. “Tree trimming crews trained in pest ID are often the first to discover new infestations,” she said. “Early detection helps communities get a jump on managing the problem.”

In 2025 alone, Keefe trained more than 500 people from 23 communities and assisted with tree inventories and site visits to diagnose issues and discuss management options. “The opportunity to meet people face-to-face helps build relationships and ensures communities know they have a reliable resource,” she said.

ROOTED IN RESULTS

500+ NEBRASKANS
TRAINED IN 2025

23 COMMUNITIES
REACHED

6+ PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS
INVOLVED



A FUTURE IN FORESTRY

The Nebraska Forest Service's (NFS) student employment program is helping college students gain hands-on experience, technical training, and mentorship that prepare them for careers in forestry and beyond.

For Chadron-based student worker Elle Hewitt, the opportunity has been transformative. She has taken part in large-scale tree planting, GIS data analysis and mapping, hazardous fuels reduction, and even earned her Red Card for wildland firefighting. Along the way, she's discovered the wide variety of paths within forestry, from urban tree care to timber utilization, and fire management.

"Working alongside experienced professionals here in Chadron and across the NFS has helped me explore all the different niches in forestry," Elle said. "It's allowed me to identify my specific interests and career aspirations within the field."

Elle says the best part of her job is the daily variety and encouragement from her mentors. Whether in the field or office, she continues to gain real-world skills while contributing to meaningful forestry projects.

Her experience is just one example of how NFS invests in student workers across the state—building a passionate, capable workforce to steward Nebraska's forests for generations to come.





FLYING. FIGHTING. PROTECTING.

NFS staff brought strategy, aerial power, and statewide teamwork to one of the year's largest wildfires.



Aerial operations played a key role in the effort, with the NFS Single Engine Air Tanker (SEAT) Base manager directing retardant drops and reconnaissance flights to access rugged terrain unreachable by ground crews.

NFS ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- ✓ Division Supervisors oversaw firefighting operations
- ✓ Logistics provided food, water, equipment, transport
- ✓ Public Information Officers informed media and public on fire
- ✓ SEAT Base Managers coordinated aerial drops

Custer County Complex Fire

In February 2025, the Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) played a pivotal role in battling the Custer County Complex Fire, which burned nearly 6,000 acres near Broken Bow. The complex included the Eureka Valley, Lillian, and East Table Road fires.

NFS quickly deployed staff to the scene, working side by side with local fire departments and emergency managers. Their expertise in strategy and resource coordination proved vital as crews raced to contain the fast-moving flames.

Aerial support was central to the effort. NFS Single Engine Air Tanker (SEAT) Base Manager coordinated retardant drops and reconnaissance flights, reaching rugged areas inaccessible to ground crews. One striking moment came when a large air tanker made a precise drop over the Eureka Valley Fire, demonstrating the precision and teamwork guiding the operation.

The crisis prompted Governor Jim Pillen to declare a state of emergency, allowing fire departments statewide to send aid. Departments from as far away as Beatrice responded, reflecting Nebraska's spirit of solidarity.

Throughout the event, NFS and local officials kept residents informed with critical safety updates. Thanks to swift action, statewide collaboration, and community cooperation, the fires were contained—showcasing NFS's dedication to protecting Nebraska's people and landscapes.

NEAR AND FAR



 **The Elk Fire,
Wyoming**

Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) staff don't just protect the Cornhusker State—they're also lending their expertise to wildfire incidents across the country.



Staff have supported northern California's Chester Air Attack Base as Fixed Wing Parking Tender and Ramp Manager trainees, providing vital assistance to aviation operations that keep fire suppression efforts running safely and efficiently. In Colorado, NFS personnel partnered with the Division of Fire Protection and Control, assisting aircraft operations for major wildfires like the Turner Gulch and Derby fires, while also offering support on numerous smaller incidents throughout the state.

Back home in Nebraska, NFS staff played critical roles during the Plum Creek and Lagoon fires. Their experience gained in national deployments allowed them to share new techniques with local crews, improving response effectiveness and ensuring safety on the firelines. Additional staff served on multiple Nebraska fires, filling positions in aviation coordination, Deputy Incident Commander, Operations, and division leadership roles, demonstrating versatility and leadership under pressure.

Nationally, NFS personnel have stepped into leadership roles on task forces tackling fires in Alaska, including the Aggie Creek and Himalaya Road fires. They have also coordinated aircraft operations for the Dad's Lake fire near Valentine, ensuring that both ground and aerial firefighting efforts operated in seamless coordination.

From aircraft management to operations leadership, NFS staff demonstrate how Nebraska-trained firefighters bring skill, coordination, and teamwork to wildfire incidents both in-state and across the nation. Their work reflects the Nebraska Forest Service's dedication not only to protecting communities within Nebraska but also to contributing to wildfire response efforts wherever they are needed—showing that the Cornhusker State's commitment to safety and expertise extends far beyond its borders.

SECOND LIFE | FIRST RESPONSE

At the NFS Fire Shop in Mead, retired military trucks get a second life—rebuilt into custom wildland engines that rural fire departments depend on to save lives and property.

In Mead, Nebraska, the Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) Fire Shop quietly plays a critical role in wildfire response—and at the center of it all is Lew Sieber.

As shop supervisor, Sieber leads the transformation of retired military vehicles into wildland fire engines for rural fire departments. The work is made possible through the Federal Excess Personal Property (FEPP) and Firefighter Property (FFP) programs, which provide surplus military equipment for emergency use.

“We don’t just hand over a truck,” Sieber says. “We build a tool—designed for the terrain, the department, and the job.”

Each build is completed in-house, from metalwork and plumbing to paint and pump systems. Under Sieber’s leadership, the shop has delivered more than 400 engines—many to communities that couldn’t otherwise afford updated firefighting equipment.

“These trucks are lifelines,” says Brian Sisson, Fire Chief for the Arapahoe Volunteer Fire Department. “Our crew responds faster, safer, and more effectively because of the Fire Shop’s work.”



BEYOND THE FIRELINE

Restoring balance. Reducing Risk. Building Resilience.

The Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) continues to lead initiatives that strengthen the long-term health, resilience, and productivity of Nebraska's forests. Through strategic investments and strong partnerships with landowners, agencies, and communities, NFS is implementing fuels-reduction programs that lower wildfire risk, restore ecosystem function, and promote sustainable forestry that benefits both wildlife and rural economies.

This year, NFS completed fuels-reduction work on 5,949 acres and, working with several counties, secured over \$24 million in federal grants to expand wildfire-mitigation efforts across high-risk areas.

"Crews are thinning dense stands, removing ladder fuels, and creating fuel breaks to prevent small fires from becoming catastrophic ones," says Steven Jara, NFS Deputy Director. "Through cost-share programs that often cover up to 75 percent or more of treatment costs, we're able to make this work accessible to more landowners and increase the overall effectiveness of our efforts."

Beyond managing vegetation, these projects support healthier watersheds, improve habitat for native species, and enhance access for first responders. Every acre treated contributes to a more resilient Nebraska, one where forests, grasslands, and communities are better prepared to face future wildfires, drought, and extreme weather events.

For NFS, fuels-reduction work goes beyond forest management—it's about strengthening Nebraska's landscapes and communities to withstand whatever challenges come next.

CREWS ARE THINNING DENSE STANDS, REMOVING LADDER FUELS, AND CREATING FUEL BREAKS TO PREVENT SMALL FIRES FROM BECOMING CATASTROPHIC ONES

Steven Jara, NFS Deputy Director

FIGHT FIRE WITH FUNDING!

84%

... of Nebraska fire departments have
received support since 1996

\$6.5M

... awarded through Volunteer Fire
Assistance (VFA) grants to date

\$950K

... leveraged in Infrastructure Investment
and Jobs Act



As wildfires grow more severe, Nebraska invests in volunteer fire departments—providing critical gear and resources to meet the challenge head-on.

In 2025, The Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) awarded more than \$410,000 in Volunteer Firefighter Assistance (VFA) grants to 114 volunteer fire departments across the state. These grants help departments purchase essential equipment to reduce the size and number of wildfires in Nebraska.

Since 1996, more than 400 volunteer fire departments have received over \$6 million through the VFA program. In addition, \$850,000 has been awarded to 133 departments for wildland Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) grants, funded through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and state support.

Together, these programs strengthen the backbone of fire protection in Nebraska.

VFA grants provide 50% cost-share reimbursements for equipment like radios, pumps, hose, and protective clothing. The newer IIJA-funded PPE program focuses on replacing outdated turnout gear with safer, wildland-specific clothing. “Having the correct equipment greatly enhances firefighter safety,” said State Forester John Erixson.

The impact is clear: 84% of Nebraska’s departments have benefited, with safer firefighters and stronger community protection. In a state where volunteer departments safeguard vast rural areas, these investments mean faster response times and greater resilience against increasingly severe wildfire seasons.



VFA grants provide 50% cost-share reimbursements for equipment like radios, pumps, hose, and protective clothing.

PROOF OF CONCEPT

Backed by Nebraska Forest Service programs, Gering's volunteer firefighters are strengthening community safety at home—while gaining experience on the nation's biggest firelines.



The Gering Volunteer Fire Department (VFD) is proof of how Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) programs strengthen volunteer fire departments across the state—and beyond. With more than 45 active members, Gering has built a model partnership with NFS that boosts their local response and equips them to assist on large-scale wildfires nationwide.

“We wouldn’t be our department without the partnership with the Nebraska Forest Service,” said Gering Fire Chief Nathan Flowers. “NFS’s entire team plays a critical role in our operation—from equipment and training to leadership and prevention.”

That support spans nearly every major NFS program. Through the Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) grant program, Gering has outfitted all volunteers with essential wildland protective gear. The Federal Excess Personal Property (FEPP) program also enabled the department to acquire and convert a surplus truck into a Type 6 wildland engine, now one of their primary response vehicles.

Training is just as vital. In 2024, 22 Gering members enrolled in the NFS Wildland Fire Academy, with firefighters advancing their certifications and gaining new skills through NFS-led instruction. Training through NFS has given Gering firefighters nationally recognized certifications at no cost.

Thanks to a Cooperator Agreement with NFS, Gering firefighters are also dispatched nationally through the Interagency Resource Ordering Capability system. Since 2019, they’ve logged about 160 days on out-of-state wildfires, sending crews with their Type 6 engine to train alongside seasoned teams.

“These assignments give our members exposure to large-scale incidents and the chance to learn directly from credentialed professionals,” Flowers said. “They come back with skills and knowledge that strengthen our local capabilities.”

STOPPING SPARKS EARLY



NFS Fire Shop Manager, Lew Sieber, shows a child how to operate a fire hose at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln East Campus Discovery Days Event in August, 2025. Outreach at youth events like this one is a central part of NFS' wildfire prevention campaign.

Nearly 90 percent of Nebraska's wildfires are sparked by people. The Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) is working to cut that number by 10 percent in five years—not just by fighting flames, but by reaching the people who can prevent them.

“It’s not just about putting out fires,” says NFS Public Information Officer Ben Bohall. “It’s about reaching the people who can prevent them in the first place.”


The prevention push has two fronts: youth and landowners. Kids see updated fire-safety campaigns online, including a modernized Smokey Bear, through new videos and digital content.

For landowners, the focus is sharper. Pile burns—the state’s leading wildfire threat—are the centerpiece of NFS prevention messaging. Through radio, TV, and digital campaigns, landowners are urged to keep burns small, watch the weather, never leave them unattended, and fully extinguish fires. One careless pile can destroy homes, livelihoods, and lives.

NFS also works directly with landowners, hosting workshops on safe burning, fuel reduction, and equipment checks. By partnering with local fire departments and resource districts, they deliver training where it’s needed most.

Beyond campaigns, staff work year-round with schools, fire departments, and community groups to strengthen wildfire readiness. The message is consistent: prevention begins with each individual.

“The more people understand their role,” Bohall says, “the better chance we have of keeping our communities safe.”



NFS manages contracts to remove wildfire-caused dead trees, protect survivors, and safeguard cultural sites.

Good Neighbor Authority powers wildfire recovery and resilience in Nebraska's Panhandle.

Nebraska's use of the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) is driving real progress in the Panhandle, where state and federal partners are working together to restore fire-damaged forests and reduce future wildfire risks.

The Cherry Creek GNA Project, south of Crawford in Dawes County, grew out of the devastating 2021 Post Fire, which left behind heavy tree mortality and hazardous fuels. Through GNA, the Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) is leading a multi-year effort to remove dead timber, reduce fuel loads, and prepare the site for replanting and natural regeneration.

Covering 220 acres of ponderosa pine, the project follows a U.S. Forest Service (USFS) prescription that emphasizes retaining live trees for seed, habitat, and aesthetics. Crews are also leaving four snags per acre to support wildlife, striking a careful balance between restoration and wildfire mitigation.

NEIGHBORS IN ACTION

"Our foresters and federal partners have worked hand-in-hand to ensure the project is ecologically sound and logistically feasible," said Mark Frickel, NFS Western Area Forester.

NFS oversees contracts and operations, which include felling and piling dead trees, minimizing damage to survivors, and protecting cultural resources. Contractors must navigate steep terrain and comply with seasonal restrictions to safeguard sensitive species like the northern long-eared bat.

Private landowners are also playing a key role by granting critical access across their property. Respect for fences, gates, and infrastructure remains a top priority.

"The partnership is critical for accomplishing fuels reduction and timber salvage," said Sarah Myers of the USFS. "Without GNA, the capacity to complete these projects would have been greatly reduced."

Set for completion in November, 2025, the Cherry Creek GNA Project shows how collaboration can stretch limited resources and leave Nebraska's forests healthier, safer, and more resilient.

DEFENDING THE RANGE

In 2025, landowner Shawn Sterling teamed up with the Nebraska Forest Service's Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) program to complete a 24-acre fuels reduction project near Maxwell in Lincoln County.

The effort targeted dense stands of eastern redcedar, with basal areas exceeding 150 square feet per acre, that posed a significant wildfire risk. Sterling and a contractor thinned the cedars to create three fuel breaks, improving first responder access and breaking up fuel continuity across the property.

"While the primary goals of the project were to reduce the risk of wildfires and allow better access for first responders, I feel the land will also be improved for future grazing of cattle as well as all wildlife," said Sterling. "It was a pleasure to work with Jason Clark and Mark Frickel—they seem to care as much for the land as I do."

Maxwell, Nebraska: project blends wildfire safety with land stewardship

All slash from the project was mulched onsite, minimizing debris. Shawn repurposed some of the material into fence posts, adding value and reducing waste. They created access in previously inaccessible areas and thinned along existing two-track roads to make them safer for vehicles and emergency personnel.

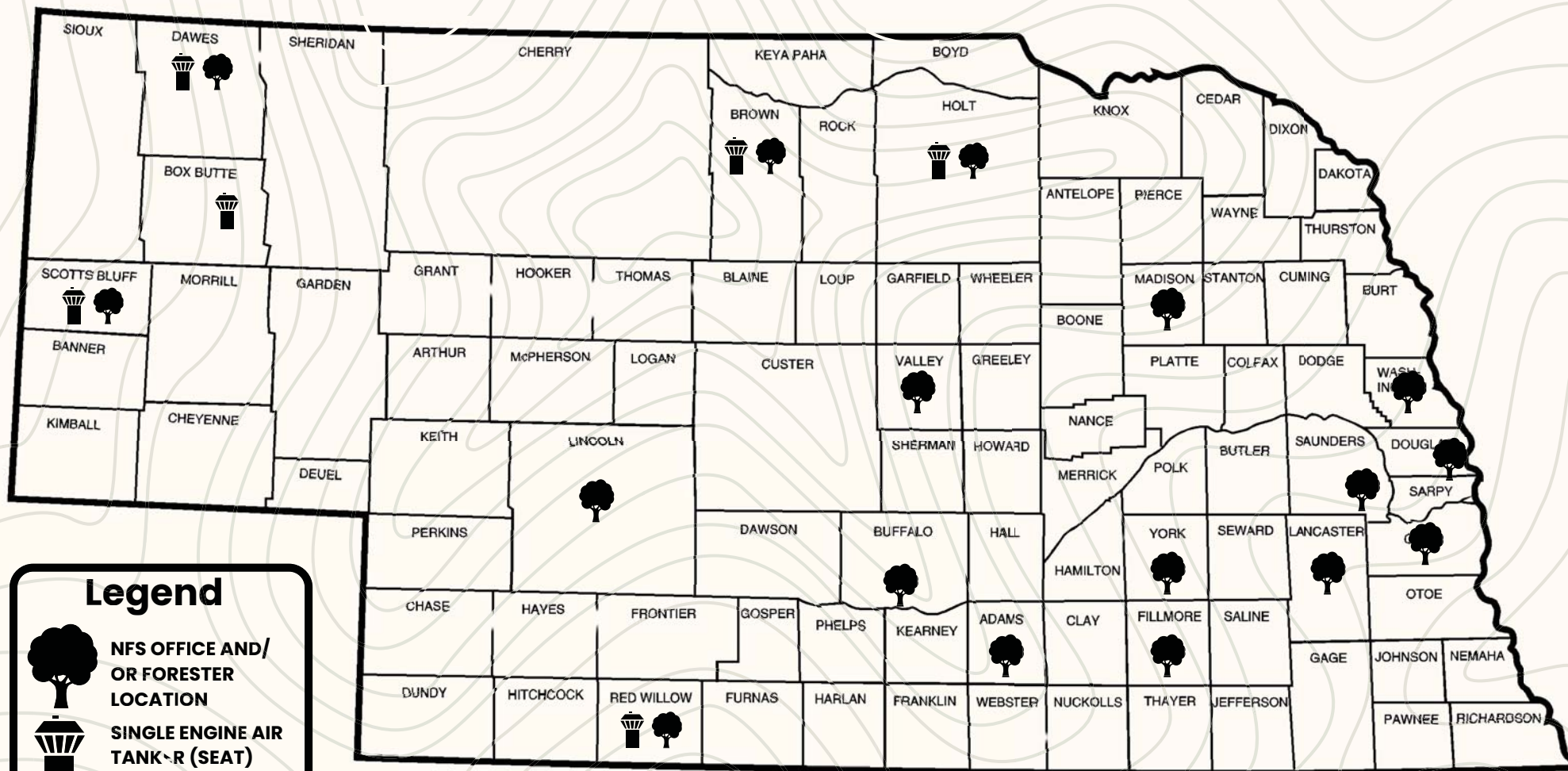
"It was great to help Mr. Sterling because he was concerned about wildfire risk on his property, especially after experiencing several fires in the past," said NFS Conservation Forester Jason Clark. "We designed the project to improve firefighter access and disrupt fuel continuity."

Sterling's project took about a year from planning through completion and stands as a strong example of how private landowners and state partners can work together to reduce wildfire threats while improving overall land health.



The effort targeted dense stands of eastern redcedar, with basal areas exceeding 150 square feet per acre, that posed a significant wildfire risk

WE SERVE NEBRASKA



Legend

-  NFS OFFICE AND/OR FORESTER LOCATION
-  SINGLE ENGINE AIR TANKER (SEAT) LOCATION

CONTACT US!

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