

February 14, 2020

Nebraska Environmental Trust Board  
P.O. Box 94913  
Lincoln NE 68509-4913



RE: NET February Board Meeting Activity

Dear Nebraska Environmental Trust,

The Nebraska Chapter of The Wildlife Society (NETWS) respectfully submits testimony in response to recent activities of the Nebraska Environmental Trust Board in regards to ranking and funding applications.

The NETWS is an organization of wildlife professionals dedicated to excellence in wildlife conservation through science and education. We represent biologists, researchers, managers, educators, technicians, and others who study, manage, and conserve wildlife and their habitats in Nebraska.

In February, the NET board met and voted to revise the Grants Committee funding recommendations released January 20, 2020. In doing so, the Trust Board chose to de-fund several highly ranked projects and appeared to target certain conservation organizations that are involved with conservation easements and land acquisition.

Choosing to fund lower-ranked projects over higher-ranked projects **weakens the legitimacy of the board and scoring system**. Applicants should be assured of a fair process that involves the ranking of projects based on technical merit and conservation outcomes. The process appears broken when the board can arbitrarily jettison high ranking projects for a lower-ranking project.

Conservation easements are legal in Nebraska, a proven conservation method, and an allowed conservation practice under the statutes that establish the Nebraska Environmental Trust. We believe it is an infringement of landowners' rights to not allow them to place conservation easements on their land or sell their land to conservation organizations. Landowners should be allowed to sell their land to whomever they deem appropriate and in line with their intentions for the land, including permanent protection of natural resources. In most cases, easements allow farmers and ranchers to continue to carry out agricultural endeavors on their land. By eliminating acquisitions and easements, landowners are denied this opportunity and their land management options are limited.

Many of the funds through NET are spent to help conserve working farms and ranches designed to be compatible with agriculture. Protecting working lands by aiding all landowner objectives (including permanent protections) will help keep land producing for the rural economy and on

the tax roll. **NET funds help the agricultural and rural economies** revolving in communities where they are spent and strengthen the agricultural operations themselves.

Over the years, NET grants have helped to permanently conserve acres across the state of Nebraska. Many of those projects adjoin already protected land including state parks, national forest, national grassland, the Niobrara Scenic River, Wildlife Management Areas, local parks, and privately held land. This creates enduring benefits by creating larger blocks of contiguous protected habitat which conserves the ecological and scenic integrity of both public and private lands. **These types of protected conservation projects produce positive press for NET.** Positive public perception will help ensure the funds of NET are continued to be used for conservation-based activities in Nebraska.

NETWS strongly supports the mission of NET “to *conserve, enhance and restore the natural environments of Nebraska.*” In order to maintain the integrity of the ranking process and the Nebraska Environmental Trust as a whole, NETWS asks that you reconsider your decision and reinstate the original Grants Committee recommendations published January 20, 2020.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shelly McPherron".

Shelly McPherron  
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