



---

## **Introduction**

The following report outlines the results from an external listening session facilitated for Wachiska Audubon Society on April 5, 2020, to inform their strategic planning efforts. The sessions included the following individuals:

1. Mark Brohman, Executive Director, Nebraska Environmental Trust
2. Nicole Fleck-Tooze, Coordinator, Haines Branch Prairie Corridor Project
3. Kevin Poague, Office Manager, Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center
4. Lucas Sabalka, Climate Change Expert
5. Meghan Sittler, Executive Director, Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center
6. Ron Case, Professor Emeritus, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
7. Gerry Steinauer, Botanist, Nebraska Game and Parks

Theresa Pella welcomed the group and answered some questions about Wachiska's current programs. The meeting was facilitated by Tad Dickel.

Participants were asked to provide responses to the following questions:

1. What is Wachiska doing well?
2. What gaps do you see in the conservation efforts in our region that Wachiska could fill?
3. Are there conservation areas that you see Wachiska duplicating that we should reconsider?
4. What opportunities exist for Wachiska to more fully support conservation efforts?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?
6. What are the most important priorities Wachiska should focus on in the next 3-5 years?

**Question #1: What is Wachiska doing well?**

1. The passion of the members is great.
2. Communication about activities and resources is good.
3. Responsive when reaching out about acquiring property.
4. Good at getting people together through community activities.
5. Field trips for school age children.
6. Advocacy with the Nebraska legislature. Testifying and writing letters.
7. Community engagement is really good. They host good events.
8. There is a desire to engage young people.
9. Have a staff member. Able to keep up with education, monthly meetings, donations, and newsletters. That really helps.
10. They are community leaders. Well thought of in the community. Voice for conservation efforts in the region.
11. They mobilize members to acquire properties.
12. Continual review through strategic planning process. Looking at what they are doing.
13. Considering hiring a prairie manager.
14. Introspective. Want to fulfill the desire of property owners and donors.
15. Newsletter is very effective at engaging people in advocacy.
16. Building an endowment to care for properties in the future.
17. Do we have volunteers and activities in other areas outside of Lincoln?
18. Historically, Wachiska recognized the need to take care of small prairies in Lancaster County.

**Question #2: What gaps do you see in the conservation efforts in our region that Wachiska could fill?**

1. Not enough is happening outside of Lincoln. Easy for us in urban areas to set an agenda but not engage people in rural areas.
2. May be in contact with people outside of Lincoln but not sure.
3. Having more events could be helpful to call out people to help in the region.
4. Engaging youth. Their membership is not age diverse. Need a campaign to engage youth in membership and leadership. They will support Wachiska and community as a whole.
5. The pandemic has emphasized the need to get outside in nature. This might be an opportunity.
6. Spring Creek Prairie/Audubon Nebraska would like to work with Wachiska on giving young people experience through college chapters. There is a college chapter at UNO. They could help coordinate prairie management and get service-learning experience.
7. All conservation groups are struggling engaging young people. College chapters is a good idea.
8. Big gap in age between college and 50s. We can also target these age groups.
9. Digital engagement is an important piece to reaching out to young people.
10. Young people are interested in climate change. Need to engage young people through these conversations.
11. Managing prairies. Have we reached out to SE Community College about helping with service-learning efforts?

**Question #3: Are there conservation areas that you see Wachiska duplicating that we should reconsider?**

1. Can't think of duplicated services.
2. We can look for collaborative efforts for grant writing, land management, and memorandums of understanding between organizations.
3. Wachiska is effective. I would hesitate to scale back on activities.
4. Need to focus on legacy planning.
5. I don't see duplication.

**Question #4: What opportunities exist for Wachiska to more fully support conservation efforts?**

1. Get different organizations working together on advocacy such as Nebraska Conservation Roundtable, League of Conservation Voters, Sportsman's Council, and Nebraska Wildlife.
2. Nebraska Conservation Votes have over 10 staff members. It is a younger organization. Engaged in rural areas. Have Americorps members in 10 counties. Focusing on paid educational programs, community outreach. They have a good way of engaging rural communities with a statewide reach.
3. Good job purchasing prairies and securing easements. Other groups aren't doing this anymore. There are struggles getting these areas managed, but it is important work.
4. Prairie management volunteers are getting older. Northern Prairies Land Trust has younger volunteers and a paid prairie manager.
5. Creating endowments for the various tracts of land. Setting up with legacy giving is a great idea.
6. Collaboration efforts between agencies is important.
7. Collaborate and establish land trusts in the region. Dialogue with Northern Land Trust.
8. Form a partnership to bring a staff member to manage prairies.
9. Spring Creek Prairie could host the prairie manager position. We could share monitoring plans. Interested in partnering with that position.
10. Communication between Nebraska Audubon and Spring Creek Prairie. Look at collaborative programs that focus on climate change and bird friendly practices. Could be fairly easy to work together. We could advocate for climate change and elevate climate positive practices.
11. Wachiska members have a lot of knowledge about prairies' role in climate change. Could share with communities.
12. Game and Parks, Fish and Wildlife, and Environmental Trust could be sources of financial support.
13. Funding from private foundations such as the Cooper Foundation and Ricketts Foundation is untouchable to government agencies.
14. Fertig and Berg Prairies are some of the best prairies.
15. Some funders are not interested in easement acquisition programs.
16. For the Nebraska Environmental Trust, there is little interest in funding acquisition of additional properties. Focus the grant on how to manage the properties. For example, fire, grazing with local landowners, and tree removal. Focus on habitat development and maintenance.
17. Get partners together for brainstorming about grant writing.
18. The Cooper Foundation dedicates a very small percentage of funding to environmental efforts. Go for a small to mid-size grant.

**Question #5: Is there anything else you would like to add?**

1. Thank you Wachiska for initiating this process and reaching out to partners.
2. Sustain UNO is a very active group for young people.
3. Very important process. Hopeful for the future.
4. You have a tough time getting prairie management done. Game and Parks can help with funding.
5. Seed collection is a good way to engage young people. Find activities to engage families such as field days. Game and Parks has ideas for getting young hunters and fishers.
6. Lots of great activities that Wachiska offers. Struggle to bring volunteers together with the Prairie Coordinator.
7. Spring Creek Prairie developed a for credit internship with Doane, Nebraska Wesleyan, and UNL. Meghan could talk to Wachiska about this opportunity. This might help recruit new members.
8. Get a group together this summer to look at each prairie. Gerry Steinauer, Kent Pfeiffer (Northern Land Trust) could help decide on practices needed such as tree cutting, burn, etc.
9. Engage families with kids. Get kids out of the house during COVID-19. Need to have information about not congregating and touching specific things.
10. Internship program. Love that idea. Untapped resource for conservation efforts.
11. Project for university classes – survey of invasive species in prairies. Would be a great experience for college students.
12. Need a paid employee for prairie maintenance. Seems to be way beyond what a team of volunteers can do. Some exotics need specific timing. Need to coordinate tree cutting with Fish and Wildlife. This is too much for a volunteer.
13. Could reorganize staff to allow time on the prairie.
14. Executive Director role could help coordinate efforts with other organizations.
15. Could hire a part time prairie management position through the Northern Land Trust.
16. Haven't talked about birds much. Can be conduit between nature and the community. Birds have been in the background behind prairies and advocacy.

**Question #6: What are the most important priorities Wachiska should focus on in the next 3-5 years?**

1. Active membership campaign. Eye to get young people involved including school age and young professionals.
2. Getting a half- or full-time prairie manager. Aryls is running the newsletter and communication. We still need that. Need to apply for a three-year grant and collaborate with other agencies.
3. Managing prairies. Wachiska made a major investment and need to follow through with those efforts.
4. Develop college internships for career pathways.
5. Don't lose sight of birding.
6. Strong advocates in the community.
7. Long term sustainable organization. Funding for management.
8. Engaging with families and younger adults.
9. Engage with university for future members and staff members.
10. Older members have financial resources to support conservation efforts.
11. Need a full spectrum of membership from youth to more experienced members.

## **Debrief**

What went well?

1. Given the circumstances this worked well.
2. Nicely facilitated.
3. Good questions.
4. Reminder to folks about Wachiska background.
5. Appreciate the discussion and asking questions of each other.
6. Convenient. Went very well.

What could have gone better?

1. I tried to call in yesterday.
2. Clicked the wrong link.
3. Once the ball is rolling with the plan, need to follow up and keep the discussion going.
4. No pandemic.