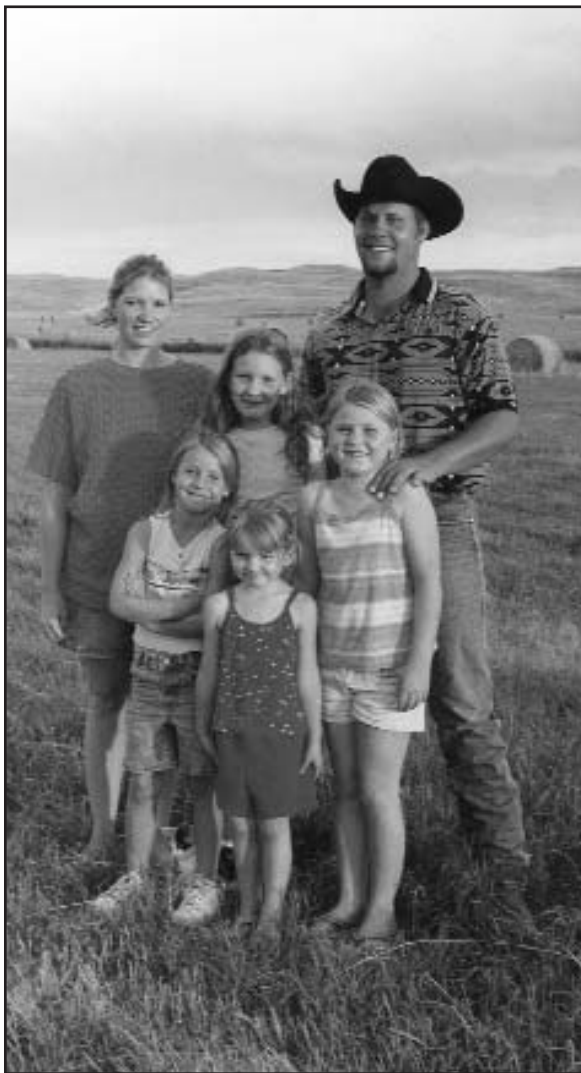


Creating Opportunity

Program protects environment, offers economic benefits to new ranchers.



The Daniels family is full of optimism about their future on the ranch. Shane and Kristi Daniels are pictured with their four daughters: Mikayla, Rebekah, Kortney and Alysen.

Story & photos by
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Sitting at the kitchen table and gazing through the window, Shane and Kristi Daniels are all smiles. Outside, their four giggling little girls play with a litter of kittens. Just beyond the front yard, a level expanse of meadow stretches toward rolling, grass-covered hills. For this young couple, it's a nearly perfect picture — an ideal setting for raising their family and gaining a toehold in the cattle business.

The Daniels family moved to this Nebraska Sandhills ranch in July 2005. They assumed management of its 3,480 acres and started harvesting hay from the meadows — winter feed for a couple hundred mother cows. They're looking forward to the day when they own it all.

"We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity here," Shane says, "but we know that it's up to us to make it work."

Making things work can be tough enough for well-established farmers and ranchers, but it's particularly challenging for young people. The trend toward fewer and larger operations, with mounting input costs and the likelihood of staggering long-term debt, has deterred many aspiring producers. When you have little to start with, entering production agriculture is hard.

Living the dream

It appeared nearly impossible to the Danielses. Natives of Nebraska's Sandhills region, they have lived in the Mullen, Neb., area since their

marriage. Ranch-raised Shane hired out to area cow outfits and worked as a carpenter, while Kristi taught preschool and worked, seasonally, for a local golf course. More than anything else, they wanted a ranch of their own.

Opportunity came knocking in the form of the Beginning Rancher Program — a Nebraska-based effort

to keep young people involved in ranching and strengthen rural communities, while promoting conservation of natural resources. The ambitious program, born of a partnership between The Nature Conservancy and the Sandhills Task Force, offers a young family the opportunity to get started.

After applying and undergoing the interview process, Shane and Kristi were offered a lease for Horse Creek Fen Ranch, located north of Mullen. At the end of the five-year lease agreement, the couple plans to exercise an option to buy the property.

"To stock it, we're taking in a herd of Angus-cross cows from a local rancher and running them on shares. We can purchase the cows over time — as many as we can afford each year," Shane explains. "Our goal is to own the herd within 10 years."

Realistic goals and a business plan for achieving them were key elements in the selection process. The applicants had to show how they planned to sustain a viable, long-term operation while implementing conservation measures to enhance native plant and wildlife species.

Horse Creek Fen Ranch consists mostly of upland range, plus

subirrigated meadows and marshes typical to many parts of the Sandhills. However, it also encompasses part of the Horse Creek Fen. A rarity in the Sandhills, a "fen" is a distinctive type of wetland, characterized by peat soil, which supports rare and threatened species of small fish, turtles and plants. It was this unusual feature that attracted the attention of The Nature Conservancy, which currently owns Horse Creek Fen Ranch.

Jim Luchsinger, Niobrara project director for The Nature Conservancy, says the property was purchased from the previous owner with funding from the Nebraska Environmental Trust. The Nature Conservancy's goal was to prevent this unique landscape from being drained or otherwise jeopardized by future land development. Plans called for reselling the property, while maintaining a conservation easement to guarantee that it will always be

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The partners

In its efforts to promote biological diversity and protect natural plant and animal communities, The Nature Conservancy is increasingly turning to partnerships with organizations having complementary goals. According to Niobrara Project Director Jim Luchsinger, The Nature Conservancy also seeks opportunities to work with private landowners.

"In general, ranchers are great stewards of the land, but socioeconomic factors do impact conservation efforts. Stable ranching operations usually employ more conservation practices," Luchsinger states.

"One way to work with them is to buy conservation easements. It can put some money in ranchers' pockets while protecting property from development and maintaining it for ranch production," he adds.

The Sandhills Task Force is an example of a regional land trust that has successfully partnered with The Nature Conservancy. A Conservancy representative serves on the Task Force, along with representatives from federal and state government agencies such as the Natural Resources Con-

servation Service (NRCS), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. However, Sandhills area ranchers compose a majority of the 16-member board.

A rancher himself, Sandhills Task Force Project Coordinator Jim Van Winkle says the ranching community often shares common ground with government personnel and environmental groups. Both are sources of funding for Sandhills Task Force projects. Rather than establishing refuge or non-use areas, the projects are developed to help private landowners be even better stewards of their own land.

"We can offer technical and cost-sharing assistance to design and improve planned grazing systems, with additional water capacity and appropriate fencing. We also help with design and construction of water control structures," Van Winkle explains.

"We want to protect wetlands and riparian areas for the benefit of wildlife, but with economic benefit to ranchers as part of the goal."



maintained as a working ranch and managed for grazing and native hay production.

Aiding ranchers

Horse Creek Fen Ranch was offered for the Beginning Rancher Program. A collaboration of ranchers and representatives of both federal and state conservation agencies, the Sandhills Task Force aids private landowners in designing and applying new or improved management practices to enhance water, forage and wildlife resources while also providing economic benefits. In addition to helping implement the Beginning Rancher Program's selection process, Sandhills Task Force members are providing ongoing support to the Danielses.

"Along with a technician from the NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service), I'm helping them develop a grazing system beneficial to the cattle, the land and wildlife," Sandhills Task Force Project Coordinator Jim Van Winkle says. "A support team consisting of a Nature Conservancy representative and two ranchers will meet with them routinely — at least quarterly — to discuss financial planning and livestock management. The support team will propose stewardship options, not dictate how the ranch will be run. Hard work and good intentions won't be enough to guarantee success. Shane and Kristi will have to make sound management decisions."

The couple welcomes the challenge. They readily admit that it won't be easy, but they do have much working in their favor: a competitive and stable lease rate for a period of five years, the option to buy the ranch at a predetermined price, and favorable arrangement for stocking the ranch now and into the future.

As landlord, The Nature Conservancy will provide materials for maintaining fences and windmills, as well as improvements to the house, shop, barn and corrals.

"I think Shane and Kristi have the opportunity to build some equity during the course of the lease and, hopefully, be in a good position to buy the ranch," Luchsinger says.

"We're excited about helping them get started, encouraging their conservation ethic and that of generations to come. But, we think we're enhancing more than conservation of the land. We're helping put a family on a ranch, and that should help strengthen the community. We hope other organizations pick up on this example and pursue something like it elsewhere," he adds.

It's not meant to be a one-time-only project in Nebraska.

"I've been encouraged by Sandhills Task Force members to seek another potential property for another beginning rancher," Van Winkle states. "This is something we want to continue."



Horse Creek Fen Ranch, located in Nebraska's Cherry County, is the first property involved in the Beginning Rancher Program launched by the Sandhills Task Force and The Nature Conservancy.