



Photo by Kevin Higley

Desert oasis endangered; can't compete

Editor's note: The following story was written as an assignment in a depth reporting class. The author is a December graduate and former *Daily Nebraskan* staff member.

By Joe Hudson

Halsey-Neb.—The Sandhills roll drearily, almost hypnotically, through hundreds of miles of sparsely inhabited north-central Nebraska range.

And just about when the barren brown expanse has lulled the visiting motorist into believing he is indeed in the middle of the Great American Desert, thick green rows of pine and cedar break the treeless monotony.

This man-made 20,000-acre oasis—the Bessey division of the Nebraska National Forest—is healthy today, but many forestry experts are worried about its future. Because the forest is man-made, nature cannot be trusted to perpetuate it, experts say. And unless a half-million dollars eventually is spent on thinning and pruning the forest, they say, its long-range future will be in danger.

Some fear that because the forest is hard to justify economically, money for such a thinning project may be hard to come by. Officials already have decided not to replant most of the area devastated by a 1965 fire which scarred about one-third of the forest's timberland.

Why does the forest—described before a 1965 fire as the largest man-made forest in the world—face long-range problems?

District Ranger LaVerne Schultz blames Nebraska's climate and the thickness of the tree stands.

Low rainfall, torrid summer temperatures and drought dry out the top layer of sand, making natural reproduction almost impossible, Schultz said. "Most of the seeds germinate and die immediately," he said.

Trees stunted

Trees planted too close together become stunted as they compete for moisture, space and sunlight.

"Here we get into an unknown area," said Schultz, a five-year Nebraska forest veteran. "The weaker trees start dying out and become very susceptible to insect attack. An epidemic could take place—we don't know. But we do know that, the stands being as thick as they are, the susceptibility would be greater (than normal) for any disease you might have in there."

The stands' density also poses a fire threat.

"With the vigor going out of the trees and the dense stands," one official said, "once a fire got into the crowns, it could run from one side of the forest to the other before you could say scat." Shifting winds and kindling-dry conditions helped turn a lightning bolt in May 1965 into a ranger's nightmare.

Schultz is putting the finishing touches on a proposal calling for thinning of about 7,700 acres. However, hopes for such a plan gaining approval are not the highest. The Nebraska forest must compete with other forests for timber management funds, and Nebraska's product doesn't stack up to wood grown in other areas.

"You cannot in any way justify economically growing trees in Nebraska Sandhills for timber," said James Lees,

range and wildlife officer at the forest's Chadron headquarters.

Scrawny Sandhill wood

In other areas, national forests provide one-third of the nation's timber products, but the knotty, scrawny Sandhill wood is not worth marketing. "The returns are zero," Lees said.

"However," he added, "we recognize those trees are valuable for aesthetics, wildlife habitat, scenery—and just because the forest is unique."

"We recognize those values for timber in Nebraska," Lees said. But, he said, those values may not be seen in Washington.

"Congress has been looking at output," said John Combes, timber management group leader at the U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region office in Denver.

Nebraska forests must compete with Rocky Mountain Region forests in Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota and Kansas for about \$2 million in timber management funds each year, Combes said.

Of that, he said, the three Nebraska forests divide a "very insignificant" \$6,000.

Management not emphasized

"So far, that money for forest management is mainly directed to areas with an existing (timber) industry," Combes said. "In Nebraska, since no industry directly depends on forestry, timber management hasn't been emphasized."

Most of the money the forest takes in—\$57,000 out of \$63,000 annually—comes from ranchers who graze cattle on forest land. Two-thirds of the forest's 90,000 acres are covered with grass, not trees.

Under the forest service's doctrine stressing maximum benefits for the largest possible number of people, it was decided not to replant most of the 10,000 acres destroyed or scarred by the '65 fire, according to forest supervisor Larry Sutton.

Weighing the \$200-per-acre planting costs against limited benefits, it was decided not to block-plant the charred area, Sutton said. About 3,000 acres were replanted.

Like replanting, thinning would have to compete with other projects on local or regional levels.

"We have a lot of latitude to make the decision whether to thin," Lees said. "If we thought (thinning) was most important, we'd probably end up having to quit managing wildlife, for example."

Hopes for funds

However, hopes for getting thinning funds should rise as provisions of 1975's federal Resource Planning Act are put into gear, said Combes of the Denver office.

Under the act, Combes said, forest supervisors are instructed to look to the year 2015 in determining forest needs, starting in 1978.

"Hopefully, the Resource Planning Act will help. I think the practice of managing forests for production only is going to change. There should be some management for other uses.

Less mentioned the possibility of earmarked funds from Congress if, over the years, thinning money did not come through the regular budgetary process.

Of Nebraska's congressional delegation, only Rep. Charles Thone said he would support a move by Congress to get thinning money if it were proven vital to the forest's survival and if the regular process failed to generate the funds.

State Forester Mitchell D. Ferrill suggested other alternatives—state or private funding.

"If a Nebraska citizen feels there is a need to continue the Halsey forest," Ferrill said, "he's going to have to ask himself the question: 'Should I as a Nebraska citizen assume liability for this, or should the federal government play a role?'"

Ferrill said Nebraskans should "get to your congressman or go through the state Unicameral."

The unique forest—and the thickness of its stands of Eastern Red cedar and Austrian, Ponderosa and jack pine—date to its planting starting in 1902, when the forest was the bold experiment of Charles E. Bessey, University of Nebraska botanist.

Determined to prove trees could survive the Sandhills' hot, dry summers and blizzard winters, Bessey found through experimentation that seeds would not grow, but that one- and two-year-old seedlings could prosper.

President Theodore Roosevelt in 1902 set aside a wedge of land for the forest bounded by the Middle Loup and Dismal rivers, much to the dismay of area ranchers who hated to see good rangeland wasted on what they considered a foolhardy project.

Bessey had proved his point—that trees could prosper in Nebraska. Nebraskans followed his lead by planting shelterbelts to protect their land, crops and livestock from high winds and frigid temperatures.

No longer in the experimental stage, the forest's future now is pondered by officials. Left untended, there's not much question the forest eventually would disappear into rangeland, Lees said.

Schultz said the forest should last as long as the cedars normally live—about 250 more years

Urgent need

But Ferrill said the need for thinning is much more urgent than that. Because the trees are in the Sandhills, he said, they probably will not come close to reaching their maximum age. According to Ferrill, the forest could reach danger stages in the next 50 to 100 years.

Officials and politicians were unanimous on one point—the need for Nebraskans to make known their feeling: about the forest.

Schultz said Nebraskans "have a lot of pride in this forest. They take interest in it. In the mountains, you take trees for granted. Not here."

"There are a lot of people from around here who have put a lot of work into this forest. The pride is there."

The pride may be there, but without funds for thinning, officials can't guarantee the forest will, in some future generation, be anything more than a mirage in the Great American Desert.