

Mathewson Family of Potter, Nebraska Receives 2011 Leopold Conservation Award

(Lincoln, Neb.) Gov. Dave Heineman was joined by the Nebraska Cattlemen in announcing the recipient of the 2011 Nebraska Leopold Conservation Award. The award is presented annually to private landowners who practice responsible land stewardship and management.

The award was presented on Earth day, April 21, 2011 to the three generations of the Mathewson family, who live near Potter in western Nebraska. Rodney and Arlene Mathewson started a small farming and cattle operation in the 1940's. His commitment to protect the health of natural resources was instilled in son, Randy, and grandson, Beau, who run the ranch today with their wives, Gina and Kahla, respectively.

"As we prepare to celebrate Earth Day, we want to acknowledge the conservation efforts of Nebraska landowners," Gov. Heineman said. "Ninety-three percent of all acres are utilized by farmers and ranchers. It is being well cared for by Nebraskans who take on the responsibility of leaving things better for future generations. Conservation on private land is something Nebraskans do very well. We all benefit from the work of private landowners who are preserving the natural beauty of our state."

The Leopold Conservation Award honors world-renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold. Eight states, including Nebraska, honor landowners for their work to conserve and preserve private land. In Nebraska, the award is presented by the Nebraska Cattlemen, the Sand County Foundation and Cargill, with sponsorship from agriculture and conservation organizations and businesses.

Nebraska Cattlemen President-elect Jim Ramm said, "Nebraska Cattlemen are proud to support this award because Nebraska farmers and ranchers are excellent stewards of the environment. Cattle farmers and ranchers like the Mathewsons work hard to sustain and improve their land as they produce wholesome and nutritious food for your family and mine."

In the early 1990's, the Mathewsons' ranch expanded with the purchase of adjacent land, which was in disrepair. It has been restored using effective soil and water management efforts and the time intensive work of removing abandoned equipment, farmsteads and fencing.

The Mathewsons use several techniques to manage land, water and wildlife, including rotational grazing practice in place for more than 30 years. Pastures receive a full season of rest every three or four years to maintain grazing quality for livestock. Noxious and invasive weed management is a high priority, with every acre searched several times each growing season for noxious weeds and invasive plants, which are tracked using GPS.

Many inefficient windmills have been replaced with electric wells to provide a reliable supply of water for grazing cattle. A solar well was recently installed as well. More than nine miles of waterline and more than 20 bottomless tanks have been installed to eliminate overflow of water for livestock and wildlife. These and other efforts such as cross fencing have eliminated soil erosion and increased production on pasture lands by 40 percent.

The Mathewsons have increased wildlife habitat by seeding with native grasses and planting over 6,000 trees, with 2,700 shrubs planned for 2011. Several wildlife watering facilities have been added, as well as a raptor nesting site and bird escapes on all water tanks. Rotational grazing and increased ground cover has provided nesting and habitat for migratory and game birds and other wildlife that are increasingly diverse in the area.

Beau Mathewson has recorded photo points, forage composition and measurement records for 19 sites on the ranch, based on information tracked via photography, GPS receiver and a laptop in the field. The family educates others about the importance of land stewardship, working with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension and the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition on several field day events, in addition to outreach with other groups.

Dr. Brent Haglund, Sand County Foundation President, said, "The Mathewson family represents a number of ranching families across Nebraska who are operating diverse agricultural operations at a high level and across generations. The Mathewsons' innovation, outreach efforts and commitment to the health of the natural resources in their care is truly exemplary."

The Sand County Foundation is a nonprofit conservation group working with private landowners to improve habitat on their land. Sand County's mission is to advance the use of ethical and scientifically sound land management practices and partnerships.

The Leopold award honors agricultural leaders for their conservation efforts. Award sponsors, agriculture and conservation organizations and businesses solicited nominations for the award, which was selected by a diverse panel of judges.

Previous Nebraska recipients of the Leopold award include: Kalkowski Family Ranches located near Lynch in 2010; Bluestem Valley Farms near Martell, owned and managed by the family of Lyle and Alice Sittler and Todd and Kristen Eggerling in 2009; A.B. Cox of Mullen in 2008; Rod and Amy Christen of Steinauer in 2007, and the Wilson Ranch in Lakeside in 2006.

Nebraska's award is presented with the support of: Burlington Northern Sante Fe, Ducks Unlimited, Farm Credit Services of America, Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Cattlemen Research & Education Foundation, Nebraska CattleWomen, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Nebraska Farm Bureau, NGPC, Nebraska Land Trust, Nebraska Nature Conservancy, Nebraska Sierra Club, Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, Sandhills Cattle Association, Sandhills Task Force, The Nature Conservancy, and Union Pacific.

More on the award is available online by visiting www.leopoldconservationaward.org.