



NEWSLETTER

Photo by: Amanda Buus Thomsen

JOIN US FOR PRAIRIE PICNIC AT PIONEER BLUFFS

Ranchland Trust of Kansas invites you to our **Annual Prairie Picnic on Saturday, June 20, 2026, at Pioneer Bluffs in Matfield Green.**

Join us for a day of celebrating grasslands conservation and our community that supports working ranches.



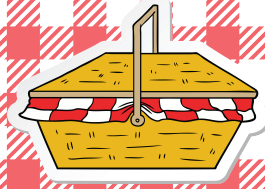
Photo by: Taylor Hunt

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Set in the heart of the Flint Hills, Pioneer Bluffs is a fitting place for this gathering. The historic ranch was first settled in 1859 by Charles Rogler, a young Austrian immigrant who walked from Iowa to Kansas to build a life on the prairie. Passed down through three generations of the Rogler family, the ranch became one of the most respected agricultural operations in the region. Today, Pioneer Bluffs is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the ranching heritage of the Flint Hills and educating the public about the past, present, and future of ranching on the tallgrass prairie. Its beautifully preserved homestead, now a National Register Historic District, features an iconic 1915 barn, early-20th-century farm structures, and a mile-long limestone fence that still defines the landscape. [pioneerbluffs.org]

-Continued from page 1-



- Tickets to the Prairie Picnic are \$50 per person, with free admission for children 12 and under. Attendance is limited to 150 guests, and formal invitations will be mailed to donors and special guests.
- Doors open at 10:30 a.m., with the program beginning at 11:00 a.m.
- Prior to the picnic, guests are invited to join Jessy, RTK conservation coordinator, for a short guided walk on the PrairyArt Path, just 1 mile south of Pioneer Bluffs, on the west side of Highway 177, featuring seasonal wildflower identification; the walk begins at 9:45 a.m.
- The program will feature speaker David Kraft with the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition.
- Additionally, we will have a preview of the Symphony in the Flint Hills Documentary with Director, Matt Crow of Wichita State University.
- During lunch, we'll enjoy a live acoustic performance by Madison, KS native Lora McDonald.
- We'll end the event with a live auction benefiting RTK, with Jeff Davidson as auctioneer.



Photo By: Kirkwood Kreations. Secretary of Ag, Mike Beam and Mike Collinge sharing remarks at 2025 Prairie Picnic.

To RSVP: Email Dawn@kla.org,
or call 785-945-3800.
We hope you'll join us!

Interested in
Sponsoring?

Become a Prairie Picnic sponsor and help support grasslands conservation while gaining visibility with our community of ranchers, conservationists, and supporters.

Sponsorship levels begin at \$100 and up, and all contributions are tax-deductible to the fullest extent allowed by law, your support makes this event possible!

Contact Dawn@kla.org,
or 785-945-3800 for more information.



Time Flies When You're Having Fun!

Update from Dawn Hovey, RTK Executive Director



This June, I will celebrate two years with Ranchland Trust of Kansas. When I joined RTK, I did not fully know what to expect, but I can honestly say these past two years have been incredible. I have learned more than I thought possible, and my passion for conservation—and for the land and people of Kansas—has grown exponentially.



Photo by: Dawn Hovey. Taken from her childhood home in Ozawkie, KS, in June 2025.

As a native rural Kansan who was raised in a family with a deep love for nature, it has been especially meaningful to return to my home state and work alongside others who share that same love for our land. Our landowners, board members, Kansas Livestock Association staff and members, conservation partners, and generous donors all play an important role in our shared success, both now and for the future.

Speaking of success, in May 2025 I was honored to represent RTK in the conservation of 1,121 acres in Cloud County. It was the first conservation easement transaction I had ever participated in, and the joy on the 96-year-old landowner's face that day still makes me smile. Then, at the beginning of this April, RTK completed another conservation easement in Wallace County, permanently conserving 937.5 acres. My second completed conservation easement! These lands are forever protected because of the voluntary commitment of the land stewards who own them, and I am grateful to consider them true friends.

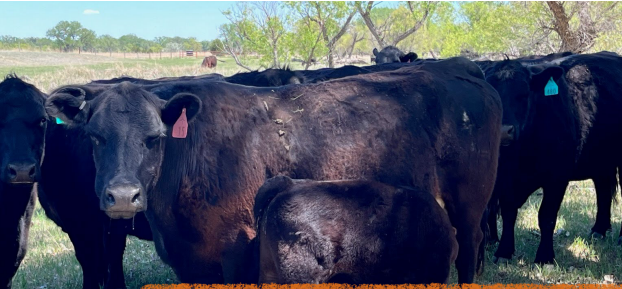
As we know, development pressures continue to grow. Once acres of Kansas working lands are converted to housing developments or large-scale energy infrastructures, they rarely return to the productive and beautiful landscapes they once were.

Thank you for allowing me to partner with you in conserving 2,058.5 acres of our great state this past year. RTK simply cannot do this work without you. Please consider making a tax-deductible gift to RTK so that next year we can protect even more Kansas land for today and for generations to come. After all, time truly does fly—and with your continued support, we can make sure that what we cherish most about our Kansas lands continues to endure.

Gratefully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dawn Hovey". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Dawn Hovey
RTK Executive Director
Dawn@kla.org



Photos by: Mark Smith

A Milestone Reached in Western KS

By Jessy Wilkes, Conservation Coordinator

Pleasant Valley Ranch, Smith Ranch Company, Wallace County

After several years of collaboration, Ranchland Trust of Kansas (RTK) is pleased to share that the conservation easement (CE) on Pleasant Valley Ranch officially closed on Friday, April 10, 2026. Pleasant Valley Ranch is owned by Mark and Cindy Smith of the Smith Ranch Company based in Wallace, KS. The couple first began working toward the CE a decade ago, after connecting with Matt Hough, director of conservation programs at Ducks Unlimited. Matt became a central player in supporting the Smith's vision and facilitating funding for the project. RTK came on board in 2021 as the land trust to hold the CE. This marks the furthest west property held by RTK.

The protected property encompasses 937.5 acres just southwest of Wallace, owned by the Smith family since 1985. The family has always been conservation-minded in their cattle operations, and this property is no exception. Mark believes that wildlife presence, or absence, is a barometer for the quality of forage the cattle have available. Without a functional ecosystem, the property, and their business, is more susceptible to the intensity of unrelenting western Kansas weather and climate. When their family first purchased the property, they had no idea of the deep historical significance hidden within its rolling short-grass prairie and creek bottoms.

"The history is so strong here. One of the only ways I can preserve the history of this ranch, and the agriculture, and the pasture land, so it can never be taken advantage of, is through this great conservation easement." - Mark Smith

With help from friends and the Kansas State Historical Society, Mark discovered the property once played a critical role in early U.S. military history and western expansion.

Prior to the establishment of Fort Wallace, the United States Union Army was headquartered at Camp Pond Creek, which was located on what is now the ranch. Extensive research and on-the-ground work have since revealed original building foundations and other remnants of that era. Mark and Cindy have taken great care to preserve what remains, including stabilizing key sites and installing signage to share the story of Camp Pond Creek (pictured right). Additionally, there was a stage-station for the Butterfield Overland Despatch Trail, which provided an opportunity for settlers to eat before traveling further west.

The historical importance of the property extends even further back. The landscape served as an important site for Native Americans, valued for its strategic and life-sustaining features.



Photo by: Jessy Wilkes. Mark holds Native American tool fragments found on creek bluff on protected property.

Projects like this one reflect the powerful connection between ranching, land conservation, and cultural history. We are grateful to Mark and Cindy for their dedication, and patience, to protect not only working prairie landscapes, but also the stories they hold.

This voluntary conservation easement was made possible mostly through donation from the Smith family, as well as grant funding from North America Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in partnership with Ducks Unlimited, as well funding from the America the Beautiful Challenge, a public-private grant program, issued by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, in partnership with Playa Lakes Joint Venture. A big thank you to the Smith family and all of the partners involved!



Photo by: Mark Smith. U.S. Union Army Soldier Re-enactment at Camp Pond Creek.

Located along the Smoky Hill River, with Pond Creek and Coon Creek winding through the ranch, the area provides water, shelter, and natural protection. The surrounding bluffs offer lookout points and refuge from harsh winds and winter blizzards. Tool flakes found across one prominent bluff (pictured left) provide insight into the lives and movements of the Native peoples who once used this land.

The Fort Wallace Museum in Wallace holds many of the original artifacts, maps, photographs, and historical stories from the property. Mark and Cindy have donated a significant portion of what they have uncovered to the museum and funded the creation of multiple exhibits. If you are traveling through along Highway 40, add the Fort Wallace Museum to the top of your list!

What Happened with HB 2063?

By Jessy Wilkes, Conservation Coordinator



Thank you to everyone who took the time this legislative session to contact your legislators in support of conservation funding. Your emails, phone calls, and conversations helped ensure that the voices of landowners, ranchers, and conservation supporters were heard at the statehouse.

The revised bill, House Bill 2063, submitted this year by Kansans for Conservation (KFC), received a hearing and advanced out of the House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources. While the bill was not scheduled for debate on the House floor before legislative deadlines—and therefore did not advance further this session—committee passage marked an important step forward.

Because of your engagement, lawmakers in both chambers are more aware of the need for long-term, dedicated funding for working lands, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation, and environmental education. Your outreach demonstrated broad, credible support for conservation and stewardship across Kansas and helped build relationships that will matter well beyond this session.

The KFC Executive Committee has shared that support for the bill continues to grow, with legislators previously unfamiliar with the proposal now indicating they would vote in favor if given the opportunity. We are optimistic that the conservation funding bill will have even stronger support next year—stay tuned for updates and opportunities to get involved!



RTK Welcomes New Board Members!

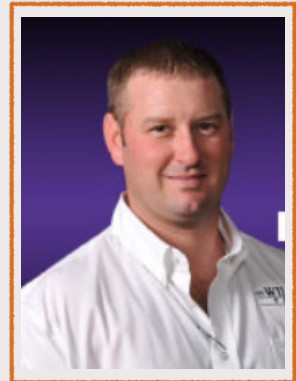
Jeff Davidson

Jeff lives in Greenwood County. He has served the agricultural community for over 50 years. He was the Greenwood County Ag and Natural Resource Agent for over 30 years before becoming the Flint Hills Watershed Specialist for K-State in 2011. He joins the RTK board on a one-year term.



Brandon Greenwood

Brandon lives in Greenwood County. He has worked for Wildcat Feeds, LLC for over 17 years as a livestock nutrition consultant. Brandon and his wife, along with their three children, operate a herd of 250 commercial cows and have recently begun dabbling in Spanish goats. He joins the RTK board on a three-year term.



Russell Plaschka

Russell lives in Pottawottamie County. He is the president/CEO of the Kansas Cooperative Council. He spent 25 years instructing FFA students and helping them grow into leaders. He has a background in agricultural education and a Ph.D. in Leadership Communications from K-State. He joins us on a three-year term.



From Conservation Tool to Conservation Threat: Sericea Lespedeza

By Jessy Wilkes, Conservation Coordinator

What Is Sericea Lespedeza?

Sericea lespedeza (*Lespedeza cuneata*), also known as Chinese bush-clover, is an introduced perennial legume and one of the most aggressive invasive plants affecting rangelands in our State, particularly in eastern and central Kansas. Once promoted for erosion control, forage, and wildlife habitat, we know now that sericea actually reduces forage production, displaces native plant communities, and increases long term management costs for landowners.¹



Photo by: Greg Houseman. Sericea Lespedeza in rangeland.

A Brief History of Sericea Lespedeza in Kansas

Sericea lespedeza was introduced to the United States around 1900 and gained popularity in Kansas during the mid 20th century for erosion control, strip mine reclamation, and conservation plantings. Its tolerance of drought, acidic soils, and low fertility made it an attractive option for stabilizing disturbed land and establishing cover where few other species could survive.¹

During the 1930s through 1950s, sericea was widely planted on strip mined lands in southeastern Kansas and around state and federal reservoirs. More recently, its spread accelerated following the implementation of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) after the 1985 Farm Bill, when contaminated native grass seed was unknowingly planted across large acreages.¹

By the early 1980s, sericea lespedeza was recognized as a serious rangeland problem, spreading rapidly and displacing native vegetation without providing the intended forage or wildlife benefits. In response, counties began listing it as a noxious weed in the late 1980s, and it was designated a statewide Kansas noxious weed effective July 1, 2000, marking the first time a federally promoted crop species received that designation.¹

Why Cattle Avoid It

Despite high crude protein, sericea has high concentrations of tannins that bind protein and reduce digestibility. Tannin levels increase as plants mature, making it unpalatable. Cattle avoid it, leading to overgrazing of desirable species and further invasion across grazable acres.¹

What Research Shows Works

Kansas State University research evaluated late summer prescribed fire and fall herbicide application for sericea lespedeza control in native tallgrass pasture.³

Key findings:

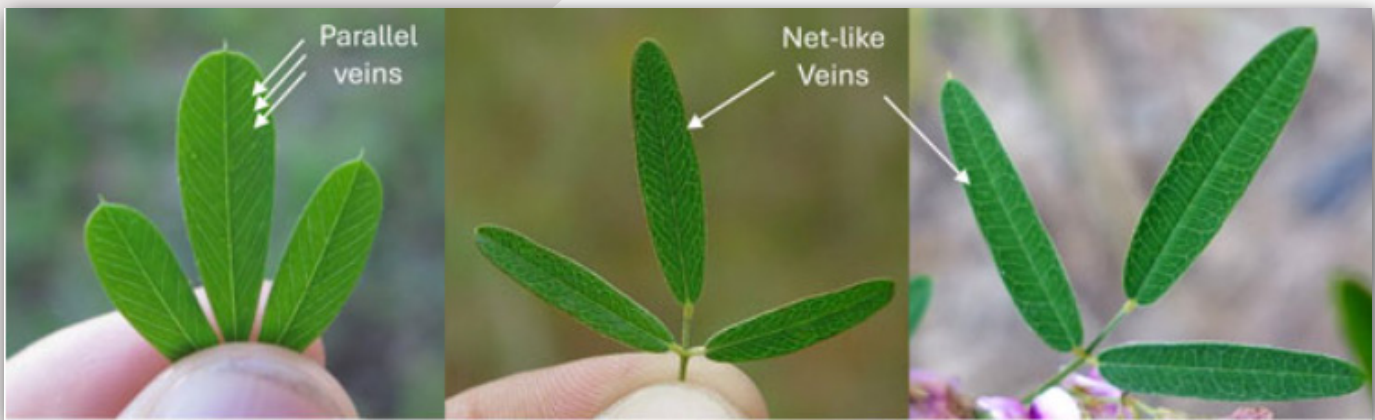
- Late summer prescribed fire alone reduced sericea frequency and vigor in lightly infested pastures³.
- Fire followed by fall herbicide application produced the greatest suppression in heavily infested areas³.
- Integrated approaches outperformed single practice treatments³.



K-State Extension Guidance

K-State Agronomy Extension emphasizes that herbicides must be applied when plants are actively growing to be effective². Contact your local extension office for site specific recommendations.

- Triclopyr herbicides are most effective during early summer vegetative growth².
- Metsulfuron based products perform best from bud stage through bloom².
- Burning in August or early September nearly eliminates seed production^{2,3}.
- Adequate spray coverage is critical for control success².



↪ Sericea

↪ Natives ↪

Photos By: Hamilton Native Outpost (left), D.E. Tenaglia/Missouri Plants (center), and Peter Friedman/Wildflowers of the National Capital Region (right)⁴

How to Distinguish Sericea from Native Lespedeza

Correct identification is critical to avoid damaging desirable native legumes.⁴ Round-head Lespedeza and Slender Bush Lespedeza are native to Kansas and are not aggressive spreaders. Round-head is palatable and highly nutritious for cattle.

- Sericea is a warm season perennial with a woody, bushy growth habit and may reach five feet tall⁴.
- Leaves have three wedge-shaped, blunt-tipped leaflets, while natives' leaves are linear-shaped⁴.
- Leaf veins are parallel, while native lespedezas have net like veins⁴ (shown in photos above).
- Sericea flowers appear mid to late summer (photo on next page) and are cream colored with a distinctive purple patch; seed production is prolific⁴.

Why This Matters to Rangeland Conservation

Unchecked *Sericea Lespedeza* infestations:

- Reduce rangeland carrying capacity¹
- Displace native grasses and wildflowers¹
- Undermine prairie restoration efforts¹
 - Degrade wildlife habitat quality¹

Effective control is essential to maintaining productive working lands and healthy prairie ecosystems. Successful control depends on timing, integrated management, and persistence. Late summer prescribed fire, especially when paired with fall herbicide application, offers a science-based, cost-effective approach to suppress this invasive species and protect Kansas rangelands.³



Photo by: Michael Haddock. *Sericea Lespedeza* flowers and leaves.

Did you know? A single, mature sericea plant can produce up to 1,000 seeds in a single year.

References

¹ Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service. *Sericea Lespedeza*. FORAGE FACTS Publication No. FORA44.

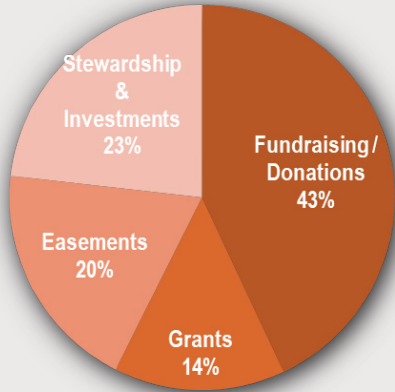
² Kansas State University Department of Agronomy. Controlling *Sericea Lespedeza*. Range and Forage Extension Publication.

³ Gatson, G.A., Fick, W.H., Hsu, W.W., & Olson, K.C. (2018). Late Summer Prescribed Fire and Fall Herbicide Application Show Strong Suppressive Effects on *Sericea Lespedeza* Frequency and Vigor. Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station Research Reports, Vol. 4, Issue 1.

⁴ Kansas State University Agronomy eUpdate. World of Weeds: *Sericea Lespedeza*.

2025 RTK Annual Report

Total Income - \$455,220

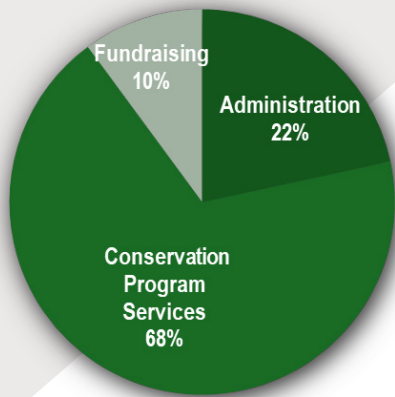


Friends,

2025 was an incredible year for Ranchland Trust of Kansas, our great landowner partners, amazing donors, and a growing team, as we closed the year strong with the completion of one easement transaction in Cloud County and carried the momentum into 2026 with another easement in the books from Wallace County and we are cautiously hopeful we are not done for the year - more to come.

We welcomed a new Conservation Coordinator, Jessica (Jessy) Wilkes into the RTK family. Jessy's presence has had an immediate impact and helped us to close the recent easements. As we grow in 2026, we anticipate more opportunities and with those, more activity and the addition of another key person on our team. Hard to believe she's already been with us for one year!

Total Expenses - \$358,422



We are working to increase our online presence to tell our story, and, more importantly, the stories of the families we serve. We plan to celebrate the heritage that is uniquely Kansas through words, pictures and video and we invite you to come along on the ride. Please join us for exciting regular updates on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn.

We look back on 2025 with appreciation. Thankful for our committed volunteers, who have given their time, talent and treasure to RTK's mission. A special thank you to Barth Crouch, outgoing board chair who served nine years on the board of directors. As well as Lindsey Graber-Runft and Callahan Grund for their time and dedication. As we thank those who are rotating off the board, we also want to welcome Jeff Davidson, Russell Plaschka, and Brandon Greenwood to the board, bringing with them fresh ideas and a new commitment to the RTK mission.

The mission to conserve Kansas' working lands and open spaces is more important than ever. The task doesn't fall to one volunteer, one staff member, or even one-organization. It is a group effort drawn on the RTK community to fulfill our commitment. We thank our supporters even as we welcome new faces, because we need everyone! Please consider volunteering on a committee, attending an event and/or making a tax-deductible gift to RTK as we go forth and conserve parts of Kansas for generations to come.

26 conservation easements	19,513 acres conserved
7,886 acres pending	4 easements pending with funding secured

- Scott Strickland, RTK Secretary/Treasurer

Thank you to our Herd!

With heartfelt thanks to our 2025 donors; we truly couldn't do this work without you.

(alphabetical order):

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
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Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy.
We gratefully welcome any corrections.

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Our Mission

To preserve Kansas' ranching heritage and open spaces for future generations through the conservation of working landscapes.

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- Sound Finances
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