

Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) is the most widely distributed tree species in North America, yet throughout the West small aspen stands are disappearing from the landscape. Aspen is a disturbance-dependent species that adapted well to the frequent fire regimes that existed prior to European settlement. The lack of fire and other natural disturbance on today's landscapes has also led to the overly dense ponderosa pine forests that we see today, a second strike against Aspen which is very intolerant of shade and would have done well in the open, park-like pine forests of the past. In Nebraska, a handful of *Quaking Aspen* stands persist within the mixed forests of the Pine Ridge and Middle Niobrara River valley, relics from a time when the boreal forests of the north extended down into the state.

Aspen stands are of interest to biologists for a number of reasons. Because of its rarity and vulnerability to further population decline, *Quaking Aspen* has been identified by the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project, a state-wide conservation action plan developed and used by many agencies within Nebraska to prioritize conservation efforts, as a species worthy of increased attention and management action. Additionally, small isolated aspen stands within ponderosa pine dominated forests provide valuable vegetative diversity and have been found to harbor a wider, denser suite of bird and other animal species, including other at-risk species.



There are many ways that you can protect or enhance small aspen stands on your property. Though aspen produces abundant annual crops of viable seed, it reproduces primarily by root suckering. Many of the aspen stands in Nebraska are in fact individual plants with several trees growing from a singular system of roots. You can increase a new sucker's chances of maturing with a few simple considerations. To increase the plant's exposure to sunlight you may need to thin or remove pine or cedar that has encroached in or around the stand. You may also want to limit the stands accessibility to livestock or wild grazers which select the lush, green leaves of young deciduous trees. There are also several other ways to disturb existing trees or roots that can encourage new production of suckers.

If you know, or think, that you may have aspens growing on your property and are interested in improving or expanding the stand(s) to benefit wildlife, please contact the Nebraska Prairie Partners office at 308-220-0052 or me personally via email at andrew.pierson@nebraska.gov . Up to 100% cost share is available with an accompanying management plan.