



# Ranch Manager Training Project

## Executive Summary

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The Rural Landscape Institute

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## WHO'S MINDING THE RANCH?

There are still places in the West where you can look out across a landscape that appears much the same as it did when Lewis and Clark traveled through. Of course, appearances don't tell the whole story. While the rolling plains, foothills, bluffs, and mountains might look the same, the context within which they exist has been reset a number of times. Fur trapping, homesteading, railroads, market hunting, cattle, sheep, towns, and resource extraction have all brought consequential shifts to the western economy, environment, and culture. Today, dramatic changes in technology, land values, demographics, the global economy, and the marketplace are pushing the next big wave of change.

For upwards of a century, western farms and ranches have traditionally been managed by succeeding generations of owner/operators, who have lived on the land and largely kept it in a stable, productive state. But these are no longer traditional times. Sons and daughters taking over family operations are faced with challenges and opportunities that are markedly different than those met by their parents. And new families wishing to get into agriculture must bring strong entrepreneurial skills to the task in order to break in and succeed.

Adding to the cascading changes in agriculture are dramatic increases in property turnovers and conversions, many of which drastically alter the way land is used and managed. Many such land transfers can be traced to financial pressures on families, the aging of life-long farmers and ranchers, encroaching development, a global food economy, and the out-migration of young people looking for advancement and opportunity. New owners may be absent, and often don't understand the full implications of their decisions and actions. In 2004, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article entitled "Wall Street's Latest Pitch: Buy a Ranch." The article reported that "Bank of America and J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. are among the major players pitching working farms and ranches as an alternative investment. The idea is to buy the land and then let a private bank or trust company manage the cattle, corn, soybeans and almonds." Obviously the trend was well in play by the time that article came out. In 2002, the number of ranch sales in Montana alone had shot up 62 percent over the previous year, with total dollars invested up 96 percent.

Such stories and statistics beg the question, "Who is minding the ranch?" Who is running his or her eyes over the fields and hands over the cows? The answer is concerning. Some new owners have asked landscaping firms or management companies to create policies and practices for their properties. While often knowledgeable, such service providers aren't necessarily qualified to oversee and ensure the health and productivity of the land, or equipped to institute advanced land management practices.

"Who's minding the ranch—and how?" is an equally valid question for family owned operations. Ranching has never been easy, but outside forces and pressures are making it more challenging

than ever to run a thriving 21<sup>st</sup> century operation which can be kept intact and handed down to the next generation. Clearly, the men and women running today's western ranches—whether for themselves or someone else—need to be prepared for today's realities if they are to succeed in providing food for the nation, a livelihood for their families, stability for rural communities, and stewardship for the land.

## THE BACK STORY

Entities as diverse as the Montana Stockgrowers Association, realtors and land brokers, and representatives of The Nature Conservancy have all identified an increasing need for qualified people to manage western land resources, and voiced concern over the dwindling availability of such individuals. A survey of 23 universities in 17 western states, conducted in 2006 and updated in 2008 for the Rural Landscape Institute (formerly known as the Cook Center), found that even though ag management programs are offered, coursework was “almost without exception” not packaged in a way that effectively trained individuals for the challenges of contemporary ranch management. (Full survey results available on request.)

Many of today's ranches, particularly those in scenic landscapes supporting healthy fish and wildlife populations, are gleaned value beyond the production of agricultural commodities. The management challenge in those cases is to operate a profitable enterprise which accommodates or complements features such as open space and wildlife habitat. Ranch managers must be able to see the big picture, formulate goals, and challenge the status quo with operations tailored to their particular ranch. Further, ranch managers increasingly find themselves in the public arena. Over their careers they will likely participate in a multitude of public and private meetings, which may involve making decisions in the face of conflicting interests. Like any successful business manager, the ranch manager must be able to interact constructively with diverse groups of people, and adapt to changing social and business environments. He or she must be able to sift through a flood of information to develop well-reasoned opinions, and communicate effectively to defend those opinions.



Traditional College of Agriculture programs don't include the kinds of training and classes that help students develop critical thinking, communication, and modern business management skills. There are a handful of excellent private or graduate programs teaching 21<sup>st</sup> century ranch

management (e.g., Ranching for Profit and the King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management), but academically stringent program requirements (including high scores on the Graduate Record Examination) and high tuition rates put such programs beyond the reach of most prospective ranch managers wishing to break into the field, or individuals moving into positions on small-scale family, or other owner/operator spreads. With these barriers to entry, current programs are not meeting the rising need for well-trained and highly qualified managers.

In early 2005, staff from the Rural Landscape Institute (RLI) met with representatives of The Nature Conservancy in Fort Collins, Colorado, to discuss their concept of a rangeland institute program. TNC agreed to share their work, with the understanding that RLI would build on that foundation to develop a fully realized program to train ranch managers. In 2005, RLI received a grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service to establish a curriculum for an innovative new training and certification program to promote advanced resource management practices on private lands in the Rocky Mountain West. The increased use of such practices will protect soil, water, rangeland, and forests while sustaining productivity. Healthy, sustainable, and productive farms and ranches also naturally serve to strengthen rural communities and economies.

## NEEDS AND SKILLS

Early in the process, the Rural Landscape Institute commissioned two surveys: one to gauge the need for an innovative ranch manager training program, and one to identify the set of skills a ranch manager was thought to need. Surveys were distributed to ranch owners, ranch managers, ranch owner/operators, realtors, bankers, veterinarians, and other professionals with a perspective on ranch management in Montana. A majority of responses were from people working in occupations closely related to the training program. (View the survey at [rurallandscapeinstitute.org](http://rurallandscapeinstitute.org), under Projects, Ranch Manager Training; full statistical details are available from RLI).

In those surveys:

- 94% of respondents agreed there is a need for a 21<sup>st</sup> century ranch manager training program.
- 70% of respondents estimated that ranch manager turnover occurs every 3 to 6 years. A clear majority said the challenge of hiring and retaining good ranch managers has an impact on the overall success of business.

The following skills were among those identified as “essential” by respondents:

- Have a high degree of integrity (96%)
- Have range, grazing, and forage management skills (96%)
- Deliver clear communications, both verbally and in writing (94%)
- Lead by example (93%)
- Build trust and teamwork (89%)
- Create and understand business plans that conform to owner’s interests (84%)
- Be computer literate (84%)
- Create and understand profit and loss statements, balance sheets, cash flow statements, etc., and be able to use this information to guide ranch management decisions (83%)



It is noteworthy that a significant number of skills identified as “essential” do not require agriculture-specific training like machinery operation and livestock handling, which were more often rated as “useful.” The most important skills for a ranch manager, according to respondents, were those related to integrity, leadership, ethics, communication, loyalty, and the ability to manage people by building trust, delegating, and listening. Some of those skills come with maturity and experience. However the foundations for many of those skills can be laid through coursework in business management, communications, ethics, and philosophy. The Rural Landscape Institute’s proposed Ranch Manager Training Program places much more emphasis on obtaining these skills than does a traditional ag program.

## THE RANCH MANAGER TRAINING PROGRAM

After several years of assessment, research, and development, the Rural Landscape Institute has drafted a comprehensive program to prepare committed individuals to manage important, working western lands in sustainable, productive ways. Designed to be housed in a land grant university with a College of Agriculture, the Ranch Manager Training Program includes four main components:

- An undergraduate major in which students follow a specific interdisciplinary curriculum, complete three internships, and graduate with a B.S. in Ranch Management.
- A separate, shorter, and more basic program in which students earn a Certificate of Ranch Management instead of a B.S.

- A professional organization, The National Association of Certified Ranch Managers, for certification and continuing education.
- Online reference resources and a computer-based learning tool.

This comprehensive Ranch Manager Training Program is innovative, diversified, financially accessible, and lays the foundation for 21<sup>st</sup> century ranch managers in the western and northern plains states. Some of the program's final details and criteria are contingent on the requirements and parameters of the adopting institution. Still, while not quite in a "turn-key" state, the Ranch Manager Training Program is fully realized and ready for implementation. Details are available at [rurallandscapeinstitute.org](http://rurallandscapeinstitute.org).

## WHO DOES THE PROGRAM SERVE?

Today's ranch managers aspire to operate the working landscapes under their care in a professional and sustainable manner. They may own their ranch, may manage the family farm or ranch, may run an operation for a corporation, or may work for an owner whose primary residence is in another state and who may or may not know anything about agriculture.

There are three basic delineations in levels of ranch management:

1. Ranch manager: A ranch manager is responsible for general business management, including the development of personnel policies, marketing, budgeting, annual ranch operation plans, bookkeeping, enterprise analysis, and so on. Depending on the size of the ranch and scope of its activities, the ranch manager may participate in, and be responsible for, certain daily or seasonal hands-on ranch work.

2. Ranch foreman: The foreman plans, leads, and completes daily work activities, including fencing, irrigating, livestock movement, haying, and maintenance and repair. Responsibilities include developing and implementing weekly work plans, timely communication with the ranch manager or owner, and also sometimes hiring, firing, motivating, and supervising employees. The ranch foreman works for an owner or ranch manager who is responsible for general business management.

3. Working ranch manager: On some ranches, the manager fills the role of both foreman and manager. This may be the case with smaller ranches under absentee ownership, or smaller family ranches run by owner/operators.

The B.S. in Ranch Management is geared toward ranch managers, while the Certificate in Ranch Management program is targeted for ranch foremen.

## COURSEWORK

The fundamental premise for this program is that ranch managers, whether they are owner/operators or employed by absentee owners, must have skills that encompass not only agricultural production and range management, but also business and finance, marketing, communications, and people skills. Ever-changing consumer interest and demand, a global economy, and evolving technology demand that the ranch manager's skill set be fluid as well as comprehensive, in order to keep up with changing times and technology. Today's ranch managers must be prepared for, and committed to, lifelong learning. For those reasons, the college setting provides an ideal venue in which to train prospective ranch managers. This facilitates an interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum involving agriculture, business, and liberal arts, all of which are essential. Many colleges of agriculture are experiencing somewhat unsettled times, with decreasing numbers of students who have the sense that college ag programs are not fully relevant in today's world. This brink-of-change environment can lead to great opportunity—for colleges of agriculture, students, and the rural landscape itself.



Affordability was another important reason behind shaping this Ranch Manager Training Program around an undergraduate degree. As already noted, there are a handful of excellent private or graduate programs teaching cutting-edge ranch management, but their stringent academic requirements and high tuition rates put them beyond the reach of many aspiring ranch managers, especially rural young people who can't afford such programs when they're just starting out. In-state tuition at a land grant college is much more likely within reach.

### **Bachelor of Science in Ranch Management**

While the Ranch Manager Training Program was designed to be applicable throughout the western states, the model was crafted around a theoretical integration into Montana State University.

As currently written, the B.S. in Ranch Management degree is 123 credits, which exceeds MSU's minimum requirement of 120 credits. Coursework is comprised of 30 core credits, two 400-level seminars, all the classes required for the Certificate of Ranch Management (described below), and three internships (see next section).

In terms of core requirements, MSU does not stipulate which core courses a student must take within designated categories, except for College Writing I. The ranch manager major, however, stipulates specific courses that must be taken to satisfy all but 9 of the 30 required core credits.

Certain courses which are abridged for the certificate-only track are required in their entirety for the B.S. degree. One example is BUS 201, Managerial Communication. Certificate students attend an abbreviated version of the course emphasizing communications with employees and owners. But because more fully developed skills are essential to the manager charged with broader business management, the entire course is required of B.S. candidates.

### **Certificate of Ranch Management**

The certificate program can serve as an end goal for students, and it also comprises part of the larger Bachelor's program. A stand-alone certificate program offers good options to individuals who are not ready or able, or who do not wish, to enroll in the undergraduate degree program. Providing such a program can help ensure that the broadest cross section of people responsible for day-to-day ranching operations are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and tools to run a sustainable and profitable operation that is good for the bottom line, and good for the land.

The Certificate in Ranch Management program is housed along with the B.S. program in the university setting. Much of the course content is drawn from Department of Animal and Range Sciences classes, although these courses aren't required in their entirety. The goal of the certificate program is to provide students with instruction in what they will need on the job.

The certificate program is designed to be completed in one academic year, with students attending classes all day, five days a week. In the MSU-based model, this is two semesters plus a one-month immersion in conversational Spanish. There are a total of ten required courses and three electives, worth 36 credits in all. Students take classes in management and business, as well as in livestock nutrition and health, crop production, forestry, and other subjects. Also included are veterinary basics, tillage practices, stockmanship, assessing bovine body condition and frame score, range monitoring, and other practical skills.

Extensive field trips to different ranching operations—from commercial cow-calf operators producing feeders for Midwest feedlots, to a family raising organic beef for local markets—are integral to the certificate program. In addition, outside experts will be brought in to present special workshops on such topics as low-stress stockmanship.

*Copies of the proposed course listings are available upon request.*

## THE RANCH MANAGER INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

The successful management of agricultural lands has become increasingly complex, requiring a wide variety of skills and knowledge, some of which can't be learned most effectively in the classroom. Being out in the field working side-by-side with experienced farmers and ranchers exposes students to a vast array of knowledge, and can be an important way of transferring the collective wisdom of a dwindling pool of life-long agriculturalists. At the same time, internships can also expose students to innovative new ideas and approaches.

In most cases, the first 10-week internship will occur between the student's sophomore and junior year, with the second 10-week internship coming between the junior and senior years. Students will be expected to complete a third, 20-week internship after their senior year. Under the current Ranch Manager Training proposal, these mandatory internships do not count toward the 123 credits needed for graduation.



Examples of student learning objectives within an internship:

- Recognize pest damage to crops and identify probable cause.
- Estimate the value of farm inventory.
- Calibrate, operate, and clean pesticide application equipment according to safety guidelines.
- Record and analyze enterprise records.
- Recognize and monitor wildlife migration patterns and properly record data.
- Update the usability and search engine optimization of the operation's website.

Along with gaining practical skills and local knowledge, the internship program gives graduates a distinct, competitive advantage when seeking career positions.

## THE RANCH MANAGER AS 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY PROFESSIONAL

Most 21<sup>st</sup> century professionals—from attorneys to accountants to chefs—have organizations that vet and validate a member's education, experience, ethics, and commitment. The establishment of a national association for professional ranch managers is a fundamental component of the Ranch Manager Training Program, and is of utmost importance to the program's long-term success.

Today's ranch manager needs a commitment to lifelong learning and the support of a network of peers. A strong and widely accepted national association will foster continuing education, offer a sense of community, ensure high and consistent standards, and facilitate the recruitment of new entrants into a field with a recognized shortage of qualified personnel.

As part of their overall program development, the Rural Landscape Institute created The National Association for Certified Ranch Managers (NACRM), which at present exists only on paper. It is felt that the NACRM (registered as a 501(c)(3) organization) needs a membership of 200-300 Certified Ranch Managers in the Northern Rockies to be a significant presence.

### **Certification and Professional Development**

Graduates of the Ranch Manager Training Program are eligible to take a certification test for NACRM membership, and individuals currently working as ranch managers with at least five years experience could also gain membership through the certification test. Every effort would be made to help qualified, experienced, and committed individuals become Certified Ranch Managers, no matter what their educational background is.

NACRM members would be expected to recertify every two years, through the completion of 32 hours of continuing education. This is similar to what is required in most other professions. Credit could be given for attending annual meetings of such organizations as Society for Range Management, state stockgrower associations, and weed control districts, and for taking classes in relevant topics like direct marketing, effects of the 2008 Farm Bill on ranch management, consumer trends, energy conservation on the ranch, product diversification, and resources for improving conservation practices, productivity, and profitability.

In addition to a formal professional development program, the NACRM will provide a variety of resources to support lifelong learning among members. These resources are likely to include:

- A monthly newsletter featuring relevant trends and breaking news, with attention to what's new in production, marketing, natural resource management, and public policy.
- A weekly internet news service with links to relevant ag news, articles, and papers.
- A virtual library in relevant topic areas (this has already been created and can be found at [rurallandscapeinstitute.org](http://rurallandscapeinstitute.org)).
- NACRM website postings announcing programs, conferences, seminars, and other offerings that could earn continuing ed credits.

The Rural Landscape Institute and others involved in the creation of the Ranch Manager Training Program feel that it's impossible to overstate the importance of lifelong learning—and therefore of a professional organization like the NACRM. Commitment to lifelong learning has been emphasized many times by leading professionals in the field, including Barry Dunn, Executive Director of the King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management at Texas A&M University, and Burke Telchert, Vice President for Deseret Land and Livestock in Utah. Experts such as these feel that any successful 21<sup>st</sup> century ranch manager must be continually striving to learn.

## IMPLEMENTING THE RANCH MANAGER TRAINING PROGRAM

Now that the Certified Ranch Manager Training Program has been developed, the next step is to implement it. Important strategic steps toward implementation include:

1. Inform and involve the state's College of Agriculture dean and interested faculty. To succeed, there must be substantial buy-in from a number of faculty, not only in the college of agriculture, but in the colleges of business and liberal arts as well.
2. Involve agricultural leaders in the state. This includes not only mainstream groups such as stockgrowers, wool growers, and grain growers, but also smaller groups focused on organic agriculture, community food systems, and the like. Relevant state and federal agencies should also be apprised, if not involved.
3. Recruit land conservation and stewardship groups and professional organizations. Examples include The Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Lands, Society for Range Management, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and Pheasants Forever.
4. Include private businesses involved with working landscapes. Real estate agencies dealing in agricultural lands, credit banks, and agriculture-based businesses all have an interest in the availability of qualified ranch managers.
5. Involve the state's federal delegation. Agriculture specialists in senate and congressional offices must be fully aware of the program and informed as to how their offices can be supportive.
6. Incorporate youth agricultural programs. Alert those involved in Future Farmers of America, 4-H, and other youth organizations of the opportunities a ranch manager training program could open for members.

7. Focus on the state's consumer food movement. Local food movements are making people more interested in how working landscapes are managed.

8. Reach out to potential supporters. Key editors, publishers, and broadcasters who specialize in agriculture could be extremely helpful in the implementation process, as could the owners of large ranches who are familiar with the need for qualified and vetted managers.

9. Identify and involve funding interests. Colleges need to know where additional monies will be coming from if they were to agree to establish the Ranch Manager Training Program. Possible outside sources include realtors, large ranch owners, philanthropic foundations, and the state's congressional delegation.

#### A CLOSING NOTE FROM THE PROJECT DIRECTOR

Detailed information on the Certified Ranch Manager Training Program is available from the Rural Landscape Institute, and can also be found at [rurallandscapeinstitute.org](http://rurallandscapeinstitute.org). It is our intent to make this material known to all land grant universities in the Intermountain West, as well as to whomever else might find the material useful. Helping implement such a program together with an accompanying recruitment strategy is a high priority for our organization. Efforts to find implementation resources are already underway. For more information please contact Bill Bryan, PhD at [billb@rurallandscapeinstitute.org](mailto:billb@rurallandscapeinstitute.org), or Scott Hibbard, at [scotthibbard@quest.net](mailto:scotthibbard@quest.net).



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