



THE RURAL LANDSCAPE INSTITUTE

A CATALYST FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL INTEGRITY
IN THE AMERICAN WEST

RANCH MANAGER TRAINING PROJECT

Implementation Strategy

Now that a Certified Ranch Manager Training Program has been developed, one turns to how such a programmatic model might be implemented. This program's fundamental premise has been that ranch managers, whether they are owner/operators or employed by absentee owners, must have a skill set that is applicable to the 21st Century. No longer are these skills focused mainly on production, but they also focus on business and finance, marketing, communication and people skills. Ever-changing consumer interest and demand, a global economy, including free trade agreements, and dramatic technological advances all have combined to create a situation where the ranch manager skill set not only needs to be comprehensive but must be fluid. And, such ranch managers must adopt and commit to a lifelong learning mentality.

In developing the program model, we made a conscious decision to create a program that begins as a major in an undergraduate program, most likely at a land grant university in the West where there is a College of Agriculture. While we contacted some individuals who are in the ranch manager training field who felt that such a program would not be effective at the undergraduate or graduate level at a university, we believe otherwise. Today, university colleges of agriculture are in the midst of change. Many have decreasing student numbers due in part to the sense that those entering into various agricultural professions view such college programs as not that relevant in today's world. But we see this unsettled environment as a great opportunity for a program such as what has been developed here.

Another issue that is most important to consider is the affordability of professional training. There are many innovative and progressive ranch manager training programs today, but they are private and cost a substantial amount of money. Many aspiring ranch managers can't afford such programs in the startup phases of their careers. An assumption has been made these people are better able to afford a university degree including time spent in an extensive internship program to gain needed practical experience. Besides being more affordable, a university degree has widely accepted credibility and, as positioned here, is closely linked to the concept of a certified ranch manager.

Another point of strong emphasis is that a ranch manager training program must be interdisciplinary. If the major skill sets are agricultural production, business and finance, marketing, and good communications skills, an interdisciplinary/integrated curriculum is essential and readily available in a university environment. That is the rationale for the curriculum developed in this project. Although designed to be housed in a college of agriculture, it must involve the liberal arts and business colleges of a university as well.

A basic premise then is that an aspiring ranch manager is striving to be a 21st Century professional, with multiple skill sets and well-organized practical learning experiences. Such a professional needs to go through a certification process because he or she will be or is already managing a valuable, healthy, and productive working landscape in a sustainable and profitable manner. Having a certified/professional approach to this sophisticated and complex skill set is most compelling. That's why an association for certified ranch managers is a fundamental component of this training program since an ongoing commitment to lifelong learning is mandatory. Operating in a fluid playing field, with rapid technological advances, changing markets and an urban-oriented populace means that the certified ranch manager has to constantly have a perspective that's holistic in scope and embraces a lifelong capability to be on top of the skills necessary in the profession. This lifelong learning capability 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 University¹ and Burke Telchert, Vice President for Deseret Land and Livestock in Utah² Experts such as these feel that striving always to learn is a fundamental mode of operation for any successful 21st Century ranch manager.

General Strategy

As one goes about implementing this program, there are several critical strategic categories one must consider. The following strategic areas make the assumption that the proposed training model could be implemented in any Western or Northern Plains state, whether it's Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah or the Dakotas. And, similar to what has been done here with the needs and skills surveys, substantiating that there is a strong quantifiable need in the target state must be a part of any initial implementation strategy.

Strategy #1: Focus on a state's College of Agriculture, its dean and interested faculty who are predisposed to pursuing the development of a ranch manager undergraduate major. One would approach these people by talking first to those who might be most sympathetic. One would need to keep in mind that a certificate program might be the first step, with an undergraduate major being the next step in overall implementation.

One would need to familiarize oneself with how a new major is developed and adopted within a college of agriculture in a land grant university. All universities will have clear procedures on how this can happen. To proceed it is necessary to have substantial buy-in from a number of faculty, not only in the college of agriculture, but in the college of business and the liberal arts college. The program would have to go through the university's accepted process of how one goes about developing and implementing a major, which more than likely includes getting final approval from the state board of regents.

¹ "Successful ranch managers are directed to lifelong learning." Dr. Barry H. Dunn, Executive Director, King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management, Texas A&M University in "Key Characteristics of Successful Ranch Managers", *National Cattlemen*, Fall 2007

² "Successful ranch managers make learning a lifetime pursuit." Burke Teichert, Ranch Manager, Deseret Ranch, Utah in "Taking the Reins: What does it take to make a good ranch manager?" in *Working Ranch*, October-November, 2007.

Strategy #2: Involving the agricultural leaders in the state. Certainly the state's membership-based production agricultural groups need to be apprised of this program as they could metastasize as strong advocates of making this proposal a reality. This includes not only mainstream agriculture groups such as the stockgrowers, wool growers and grain growers, but also the alternative membership-based groups that are focusing on landowner rights, organic agriculture, community food systems and various other progressive agricultural interest areas. More than likely, several of these "alternative" groups exist in each Western state.

State agencies such as Departments of Agriculture and Livestock also should be apprised of this program. Fish and wildlife state agencies would have a vested interest as well. The same holds true for federal agencies like the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Extension Service. They all potentially have a real interest in seeing such a major implemented in the target state's land grant university.

Strategy #3: Recruiting land conservation/stewardship organizations. Another group of potential stakeholders related to the development, implementation and ongoing support of this major would be the state's land conservation/stewardship organizations. Examples include The Nature Conservancy, The Trust for Public Lands and various local and state land trusts. They all would have a particular interest since such a program would compliment their mission and vision. Furthermore, professional associations like The Society for Range Management would have a substantial interest and should be involved as well. This also holds true for membership-based organizations that have a specific interest in wildlife, such as Pheasants Forever, The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and the state's Wildlife Federation. Landowners and land managers are looking at wildlife more and more as a potential asset instead of a liability. Therefore, the 21st Century ranch manager needs proper training to know how best to provide healthy wildlife habitat and at the same time, maintain appropriate agricultural production on their lands.

Strategy #4: Include related private businesses with a working landscape focus. Other stakeholders are real estate agencies dealing with agricultural properties and farm and ranch credit and banking service entities. The state's industrial agricultural leaders also would be most interested. All have a strong interest in sound land management practices and therefore a certified ranch manager training program.

Strategy #5: Involve the state's federal delegation. Agriculture is not only a focal point of state interest but is also a major area of federal interest as well. The Farm Bill is a great example of where a state's senators and congressmen play a significant role in agricultural policy, both now and in the future. The state's delegation should be aware of the ranch manager training program that is being proposed and should become active proponents of such an endeavor. This means that agricultural specialists in the offices of senators and congressmen must be fully apprised of what this program is all about and how their office can be supportive.

Strategy #6: Incorporate youth agricultural organizations. The state's 4-H organization and its Future Farmers of America need to be fully aware of this program. And

depending on the state, there may be other youth agricultural organizations as well. One should help them understand why it's important to implement such a program and what the potential job opportunities are for those who wish to pursue an undergraduate major in ranch management and go on to become a certified ranch manager. Such individuals would most directly benefit from such a program. Therefore, their buy-in and support is essential.

Strategy #7: Focus on the state's consumer food movement. Another stakeholder is the state's consumer food movement. It's community and state leaders would have a compelling interest in this undergraduate degree initiative with an accompanying certification process. There also may be a strong farm labor movement in the state. If so, its leaders should be made aware of this initiative as well.

Strategy #8: Include others in the implementation process. In any state where this project could be implemented, there are people in agricultural communications that specialize in agricultural policy issues. They could be in public broadcasting or an agricultural network program aired or viewed on radio or television stations. Whatever the vehicle might be, such entities and their leaders need to be apprised of the importance of this project to the future of agriculture in their state and region. Having their support in the implementation process would be extremely advantageous. This also holds true for agricultural editors in local or statewide newspapers and journals. One also should help familiarize the regional and national publications, such as the *Grassland Farmer* and *Range Magazine* about the project. They, too, could be extremely helpful in implementation. Furthermore, there are influential agricultural leaders at the regional and national level that should weigh in on this project as well. For example, the head of existing ranch manager programs at Texas A&M University, Texas Christian University, and California Polytechnic Institute could be most helpful. That also holds true with the leaders of Ranching for Profit and Allan Savory's Range Management program. Finally, there are going to be several large ranch owners in one's state that hire ranch managers who are familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the current pool of ranch managers. They could be very helpful in a variety of ways in getting such a program implemented at the state's land grant university.

Strategy #9: Identifying and involving funding interests. No college of agriculture or land grant university is likely to add a new major such as the one proposed here without a clear understanding as to where new monies would be available to make this project a success. Therefore, if such a program were to be adopted, additional monies need to be pursued. It's assumed that at least one new faculty chair within a land grant university is necessary and the occupant of this chair would focus entirely on this program. Funding possibilities need to be identified and pursued with realtors, selected large ranch owners and the Congressional delegation. Philanthropic foundations, at the state, regional and national levels that have an interest in funding rural economic development and agricultural programs also need to be pursued.

Some Thoughts on a Specific Implementation Strategy for Montana

Given that this project has been funded in large part by Montana interests, including funding from the Montana program of NRCS, project leaders from the outset have been looking specifically at initially trying to implement this project at Montana State University with its College of Agriculture playing a leadership role. While there exists a very modest ranch manager training program in the College of Agriculture, there is nothing that resembles what is being proposed here. Furthermore, Montana State University's College of Agriculture is currently working on ways to reposition itself to be as relevant as possible in the changing field of agriculture in the 21st Century.

It should be noted that the original idea for this project came from Montanans. Initially, the Executive Vice President of the Montana Stockgrowers Association in 2004 suggested that there needed to be such a program. Many Montana realtors also have championed the idea that such a program is strongly needed. This also is the case with several land conservation organizations, including leaders of the Big Sky chapter of The Nature Conservancy.

What follows are initial specific attempts and intended actions aimed at developing a strategy to implement this project in the College of Agriculture at Montana State University:

1. Specific contacts with Montana State University faculty members. At the very beginning stages of this project, we approached a resource economics professor within the College of Agriculture to discuss how one goes about developing and implementing a new major within the University. She was most helpful in outlining the University's process and giving us suggestions on how best to develop the project in a manner where it would be of interest and amenable to faculty within the College of Agriculture. She also initially advised us on the need to have a skills survey and a needs assessment survey, which then became an initial part of this project. We also discussed with the Dean of Letters and Sciences the process of getting a new major adopted into her College as well.

Once underway and hearing anecdotally from a wide sector of interested parties in the State, we contacted the Dean of the College of Agriculture and met with him about the project. He made it clear that once this project was completed, relevant and interested members of the Montana State University faculty needed to be involved and ownership needed to be shared with them. He also suggested that a beginning first step may be a certificate program that could eventually morph into a four year undergraduate program.

Due to the project director's ties on other matters with the executive team at Montana State University, it was thought that it was appropriate to inform some of them about the project, including the Provost of the University. The director of the Undaunted Stewardship Program, housed within the College of Agriculture, also a State senator and past executive vice president of Montana Stockgrowers Association, also has been kept apprised of the development of the project. There has been discussion of how the Undaunted Stewardship Program, which certifies ranches following conservation land stewardship practices, could be coupled with a certified ranch manager initiative, much like what is being developed here.

A new development has occurred recently where a major absentee ranch landowner/philanthropist initiated contact with the President of Montana State University about the need for a ranch manager training program within the University. Right after this contact, the President contacted the Dean of the College of Agriculture, who then informed the project director about this development. At a recent luncheon initiated by the MSU President for other reasons, the project director shared with him the essence of this proposed program. The President was most interested that so much work had already been done in this area, which has since resulted in a meeting between the President, the Dean of the College of Agriculture and leaders of the College of Business at MSU. The project director has made it clear that he is more than willing to help further this new development, and has provided the College of Agriculture's Dean with a draft of the elements of this project. This was done with the clear understanding that the project has not been completed, but that parts of it could be used as a resource to show that there is a move afoot to propose an undergraduate ranch manager curriculum that could lead to a certified ranch manager process, of which the College of Agriculture at Montana State University would play an integral and complementary role.

2. Working with agricultural leaders in Montana. As pointed out earlier, the Executive Vice President of Montana Stockgrowers Association initially suggested in 2004 that such a project be undertaken. He has since retired but various board members of the Montana Stockgrowers Association have been apprised that this project is being developed and implementation is being pursued at Montana State University. The Guidance Council for Undaunted Stewardship was also apprised at a Council meeting in Fort Benton on May 8, 2008 about the project. Leaders from MSGA and The Farm Bureau were in attendance.

Further work in this area will need to occur where the project is fully vetted by MSGA, The Farm Bureau, Farmers Union, Grain Growers and other member-based organizations. This also needs to be the case with the alternative agricultural organizations in the State, including leaders of the Western Organization of Resource Councils, Alternative Energy Resource Organization (AERO), organic agricultural leaders, the National Association for Appropriate Technology and other leaders in the local/healthy food movement in the State.

Familiarization initiatives regarding this project also need to be undertaken with leaders in the State Department of Agriculture, the Board of Livestock and with appropriate leaders in the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Implementation strategy meetings also need to continue with appropriate federal agency leaders in the State, including the Bureau of Land Management, the Extension Service and the various relevant entities within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Obviously, people within USDA's NRCS program are being apprised of this project.

There are also several agricultural communication vehicles within the State that need to be made aware of the program. This includes the radio station called the Northern Ag

Network and the Agricultural Roundtable on PBS, along with Home Ground, another PBS program focusing on a variety of timely issues facing Montanans.

3. Land conservation organizations. As stated above, the Guidance Council for Undaunted Stewardship needs to be kept thoroughly informed about this project in its implementation phase. So do leaders of the Big Sky chapter of The Nature Conservancy and in their regional office in Fort Collins where this project had early origins. State leaders for The Trust for Public Lands and The Montana Land Reliance and other land trusts in the State also need to be involved in any implementation strategy for Montana.
4. Special interest land-related business entities. Early proponents of this project were people in the ranch real estate business. There are several major entities in this area, including Hall & Hall, Fay Ranches, Outlandish (Bob Kiesling), American Lands (Bruce Bugbee), and Mark Norem Real Estate (Mark Norem) who have expressed a very specific interest in having an organized ranch manager training program in the State. No doubt, many other ranch real estate entities would have an interest, too.

Farm and ranch credit services and other related agricultural financial interests also should be apprised of this project and involved in implementation.

5. The Federal Congressional delegation. All three members of the Montana Congressional delegation need to be fully informed about the project. Discussions are already underway with the agricultural director for Senator Baucus. His equivalent in Senator Tester's office and in Representative Rehberg's office need also to be informed and involved. It goes without saying that they all could be extremely helpful in an overall implementation strategy, including assistance in the procuring of funding.
6. Montana youth agricultural organizations. 4-H and the Future Farmers of America are strong organizations in the youth agricultural community in the State. The leaders of these organizations need to be made aware of this project. Presentations should be given to appropriate gatherings of young agriculturalists, not only within 4-H and FFA, but also in some of the other mainstream agricultural organizations that have youth membership, including The Farm Bureau and the Montana Stockgrowers Association.

This stakeholder area is particularly important since they are the ones who would be directly affected in a positive way if such a program were implemented at Montana State University. This then begs the issue of the importance of developing and implementing a marketing strategy to attract aspiring ranch managers to the undergraduate training program. This must start with a new paradigm of thinking in the agricultural community that encourages young people to get involved in production agriculture, not discourage them. Over the years, there has been a conscious attempt by many to tell young people that a future career in agriculture is not very promising or rewarding. That must change.

Therefore, an integral part of a specific implementation strategy for this project needs to involve a marketing segment that describes the various job opportunities for certified ranch managers, including salary ranges and benefits. One also needs to develop a clear

rationale as to why a young owner/operator needs to be a certified ranch manager and what specific professional rewards are there for those that want to become certified ranch managers. This means that at career days in high schools in the State, a ranch manager major at Montana State University needs to be clearly and convincingly delineated and the benefits for pursuing such a professional clearly articulated.

Some of this cannot happen until the program is in place at the University. On the other hand, a young people's marketing strategy touched upon here needs to be fully developed, funded and implemented if such an academic program is going to have long term success.

7. Funding of this project. The Rural Landscape Institute needs to find further funding to work on this implementation strategy. Such funding could come from private sources and may very well be augmented by some federal/state funding.

Most importantly, one needs to be very clear about the importance of adequate funding as it relates to such a program being accepted and integrated into the College of Agriculture and Montana State University as a whole. Funding an endowment for one to two faculty chairs for this program is essential. That's why it is essential to identify interested philanthropists that not only have a specific interest in this State but also in the future of agriculture and in the importance of sustainability in managing healthy and profitable working landscapes in Montana and throughout the region.

There also are funding sources in the regional and national rural philanthropy world, along with possible funding at the Federal level as well.

8. Involving other influential people and organizational entities. There are some well-known absentee landowners in the State that need to be informed of this project with the hoped-for outcome being their support. This includes the leaders of the Padlock Ranch, the H-Bar Ranch, the Sun Ranch, the J Bar L and Turner Enterprises. All have significant properties in the State, employ ranch managers and are adamant about pursuing progressive strategies as they relate to production agriculture and sustainable working landscapes.

Furthermore, leaders of Ranching for Profit and Allan Savory's Range Management School need to be apprised of what's happening in Montana and their support sought as well. While there may be some concern that this project duplicates some of what they are doing, one needs to be clear that that is not the case but rather this initiative can be viewed as a way to potentially recruit participants to their programs through the ongoing professional development arm of the National Association of Certified Ranch Managers that this project has created.

9. The National Association of Certified Ranch Managers. Much work needs to be done on implementing NACRM. While it is technically a formal entity incorporated in the State of Montana, it is nothing but a shell at the moment. It has no legitimacy in the ranch manager world mainly because it is not something that anyone other than those involved

in this project are even aware. Any implementation strategy needs to seek out support in the present ranch manager world for such a national association. This needs to be well thought through, with benefits clearly delineated as to why such a national association is important, not only for its members but for the whole concept of working towards certified, sustainable working landscapes that has been initiated by the Undaunted Stewardship's certification program involving Undaunted Stewardship ranches. Once it's clear and well thought out that certified ranches should be managed by certified ranch managers, this particular tie could then be very instrumental in the overall success of the implementation process.

Obviously, the concept that those working on and with the land need to have a solid educational foundation, along with the commitment to lifelong learning and a team approach to managing working landscapes is a fundamental premise of this project. While many might say that this is already happening with much of our ranch lands and with our ranch managers, there is no organized approach, nor is there a professional body focusing on helping recruit new farm and ranch land managers, whether they're people working for absentee landowners or who are themselves aspiring owner/operators. Having a widely acknowledged and accepted national certification association supporting and further these successful ranch manager characteristics is of paramount importance to this program's long term success.