

Ranching Sustainability Self-Assessment Project

(George Work, Inspired by Western SARE Farmer/Rancher Grant, FW03-010)

Project Number: Project Built on Work from FW03-010

Title: Ranching Sustainability Self-Assessment Project

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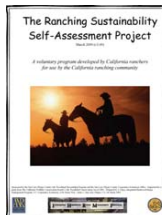
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Situation:

Through a Western SARE Farmer/Rancher Grant, the Central Coast Vineyard Team successfully demonstrated to winegrape growers the value of its Positive Points System approach to integrated crop management. The Positive Points System (PPS) is a 1,000-point self-assessment tool for evaluating sustainable vineyard practices.

This "Ranching Sustainability Self-Assessment Project" was inspired in large measure by the Central Coast Vineyard Team's success. A committee of ranchers, with input from natural resource professionals and coordinated by UC Cooperative Extension, developed the project over two years as a ranching self-help tool to stimulate awareness and critical thought about how to achieve sustainability.

This project has been sponsored by the San Luis Obispo County Oak Woodland Stewardship Program (through its Working Among the Oaks component) and the San Luis Obispo County Cooperative Extension Office, and was supported by a grant from the California Wildlife Conservation Board's Oak Woodland Conservation Program, promoting oak woodland conservation through good rangeland stewardship.



An assessment of forage might include standing and matted "old feed" in amounts appropriate to slope, soil type, and rainfall.



Objectives:

The objectives, as stated in the project's mission statement, are:

- To create and implement a voluntary self-assessment program in which we evaluate all aspects of our operations to ensure the sustainability of our production, our lands, and our families
- To determine what we do well and also find ways in which we can improve in order to assure ourselves and the public of our stewardship of our animals and natural resources



This is an example of an unstable stream bank.



A change in grazing promoted vegetation and helped stabilize this stream bank.



Students view the impacts of an eroded stream bank.

Actions:

Producers who choose to participate conduct an initial assessment that includes a description of their ranch – number of acres, type of operation, number of cattle, terrain, and value-added attributes – and the self-assessment.

The self-assessment is organized into 12 sections – a ranch plan and 11 subject categories related to the ranch and its operation. Each subject category includes 7-12 questions. Respondents rates themselves on a scale of 0-10 (poor to excellent) based on "your understanding of sustainable ranching practices and how well you think your operation meets the best possible practices for your situation."

Subject Categories

1. Livestock Management
2. Soil Management
3. Forage Management
4. Biodiversity/Wildlife Conservation
5. Regulations and Regulators
6. People Management
7. Economics
8. Energy
9. Monitoring
10. Pest Management
11. Water Quality

Water quality self-assessment

Energy self-assessment.

At the end of each category, producers are asked whether there is some aspect of that category that they could change to improve the social, economic, or natural resources of their practices. This allows them to identify specific action items and track their efforts.

In addition to using the information to benefit their own operations, ranchers have the option of submitting the information, confidentially, to UC Cooperative Extension, which is building a database that, among other benefits, will show partners, potential partners, agencies, and funding sources the value of the project.

Results:

The self-assessment project was presented and discussed at several UC Cooperative Extension "Working Among the Oaks" workshops in 2008-2009, with the most recent two events specifically promoting this project. More outreach is planned for 2010-2011.

In March 2009, the self-assessment document packet was made available on the Internet at <http://ucanr.org/rsa>, created for the project under the umbrella of UC Agriculture and Natural Resources. A poster, created for display at various events, is available on the project's website and was exhibited to a statewide audience at the CARCD annual conference Nov 2009. The poster and oral presentation will be made to a national audience at the 4th National Conference on Grazing Lands Dec 2009.

Potential Benefits:

It is anticipated that rancher participation, expertise, and feedback will:

- Provide positive reinforcement of effective and successful practices
- Encourage participation, progress, and innovation
- Identify specific action items that can enhance operations
- Document good practices being employed to help individual ranchers and the industry meet current and future regulatory requirements
- Demonstrate rancher dedication to stewardship of their livestock, their lands, and natural resources to themselves, peers, customers, agritourism clients, agencies, nongovernment organizations, and the public

"We believe this can be a powerful non-regulatory tool to guide rangeland owners through everyday decision-making processes and a means for ranchers to shape the future of California ranching on as much of their own terms as possible."



Pastures and oak woodlands on Work Ranch.



Cattle graze the hillside at Work Ranch.

Future Directions:

The written components of the self-assessment project may be considered a "living document" that develops and matures over time. Project plans include:

- A confidential database to serve the ranching community
- Proof of participation (certification)
- Workbook with information and education materials on rangeland practices
- Self-assessment workshops and events
- A website as a central hub of information and for entering self-assessments online
- Collaboration with regulatory agencies
- Partnerships with ranching and conservation associations
- The potential for third-party certification of sustainable practices

