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Reaching the Small Acreage Audience Through Collaboration: The Small Acreage Conservation Education and Outreach Project

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Abstract

The Small Acreage Conservation Education and Outreach Project is an inter-organization team of natural resource professionals that provides education to the growing audience of exurban and rural small acreage landowners on management of natural resources. This article outlines the effective and extensive collaboration as well as the three-pronged approach to land management education that has been developed. The model may be useful beyond the reported topic.

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Many new residents in the Intermountain West wish to live in rural and semi-rural settings on small tracts of what was once farmland, rangeland, or forested land. However, many of these new landowners have little knowledge of resource management in such ecosystems. Thus their expectations of the land and their land management techniques can be inappropriate for sustainable management, and they may cause a host of environmental and social problems.

To serve this audience an extensive collaboration among interested organizations was formed. The Small Acreage Conservation Education and Outreach Project brings together professionals from nine organizations in the Intermountain West (primarily Wyoming), all of which have an interest in small acreage management. This group has created attractive and popular methods of reaching the audience, including a popular magazine, regional workshops, and one-on-one consultations. However, this collaboration's primary strength is the diversity of coalition members. This article presents the group's collaboration and its innovative initial efforts. Its development generally followed the collaboration process synthesized by Strieter and Blalock (2006).

Development and Objectives

In recent years, natural resource professionals have noted an increasing number of small acreage holdings (typically 10 to 160 acres), many in exurban residential subdivisions, and many are beginning, limited-resource, and smaller enterprises. The issues related to small acreage development are often complex and interrelated, and the audience is often unfamiliar with relevant organizations. Yet no effective effort was in place to address the situation. Therefore in 2004, individuals from several state agencies met to create the Small Acreage Conservation Education and Outreach Project.

The involved organizations developed the following vision:

To create a culture of stewardship among small acreage land managers by promoting

sustainable practices which enhance the ecological, economic and social aspects of the land and its people.

To achieve this vision the collaboration has taken a holistic approach to educational outreach, which is outlined below.

Membership and Contributions

This collaboration's primary strength is the diversity of coalition members. Collaborations in engagement efforts are commonplace, naturally. What is notable about this one is the breadth of involved organizations. At present nine organizations are actively involved in the project's activities. Team membership is unstructured--all interested parties are invited. Current partners include:

- University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Wyoming Conservation Districts
- Historic Trails Resource Conservation and Development Council
- Montana State University Extension Service
- Wyoming Private Grazing Lands Team
- Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality & U.S. EPA
- Audubon Wyoming
- Wyoming State Forestry Division

Involved organizations provide project leadership and resources. Leadership contributions include goal setting, content management for the program's educational methods, representatives at monthly management meetings, and active participation in project activities.

Resource contributions are both financial and in-kind. Activities requiring financing include:

- Printing of the collaboration's flagship publication *Barnyards and Backyards*,
- Management of interns,
- Postage,
- Advertising, and
- Presenter and travel expenses for workshops.

Non-financial contributions include content development, design, layout, and subscription management for *Barnyards and Backyards*, as well as meeting hosting.

Startup funding was received from the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality through money originating with the Environmental Protection Agency, which aims to increase the health of impaired watersheds. Better management of the upland vegetation on which many small acreages lie is a factor in improving water quality.

Educational Approach

Content delivery emphasizes attractiveness and accessibility for today's media-oriented audience. The approach has three primary components.

Barnyards and Backyards

The hallmark component is an invitingly designed quarterly magazine that contains articles introducing small acreage managers to relevant topics. Subjects covered range from landscaping, grazing management, and animal care to soils, enterprise development, and gardening. Each issue features landowners who exemplify the practices discussed in the magazine, emphasizing the challenges faced and the strategies used. Reader comments particularly praise this personal element. Though written for the Intermountain West, this magazine has subscribers from across the United States, with proportionally high numbers from western states. A selection of articles is available at <<http://www.barnyardsandbackyards.com>>.

Distribution occurs via subscription and through partners circulating the magazine to such places as realtors' offices, county planner's office, farmer's markets, and libraries. Two years into the project, paid subscriptions approach 3,000, with editions of 5,000 to 7,000. Most paid subscriptions are from organizations such as conservation districts that offer the magazine as an educational resource to their clientele. In fact, one county planning board bought a subscription for every new rural resident in the county. Currently individuals may subscribe for \$6 per year.

Complimentary comments abound. In addition, the magazine is not only used by the target audience, but also by members of partnering organizations to become more aware of issues outside their area of expertise and to better understand small acreage constituents. As the project gained notoriety, the target audience broadened from the original Wyoming focus to the

One-on-One Consultations

Recognizing that this audience is not familiar with land management professionals, the team uses teams of two interns to canvas targeted exurban areas. The interns connect the landowners with resource professionals who can help address issues and provide landowners with information they need.

Workshops

Regionally focused workshops give landowners the opportunity to attend expert-led sessions and discuss issues with peers. Workshops focus on land and livestock management topics. During the spring and summer of 2006, nine workshops were held throughout Wyoming, with a total attendance of 326 participants, a notable success. The team provided a framework for delivery and advertising material and assisted with delivery.

Project Management

The team maintains a loose organizational structure with no one controlling partner, though a chair is elected. Grant funding is handled through the University of Wyoming. The project is viewed as a way to coordinate awareness efforts and change poor resource management practices while also reaching new clientele in effective ways.

Final Comment

Project initiatives have proven popular. The magazine is recognized as a valuable educational tool, as evidenced by subscriptions purchased by outside groups. Contrary to many Extension programs, the workshops supplement the publication rather than vice versa. Workshops and work by interns provide useful personal connections. The directors of participating workshops note the publicity generated and the knowledge gained by both clientele and project members. The project, though only in its second year, is projected to continue. Future efforts include surveys to better understand the audience as well as extending participation to other organizations in the region.

The Small Acreage Outreach Project has proven to be an excellent example of a successful collaboration. Many diverse organizations are actively involved in addressing a shared issue. In fact, project participation has caused an increase in cross-organization partnerships outside the effort. This model could be applied to other content areas in which numerous organizations must address a shared, and potentially new, audience.

References

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