Teaching Old Dogs New Tricks—An Educational Training Project for County Extension Agents in Texas

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County Extension Agents—Agriculture (CEAs) are generally well qualified for their jobs, and usually have strong, well-rounded agriculture backgrounds; however, most receive their college degrees in the Animal Science and Agricultural Education disciplines. Therefore, many have little or no formal training in rangeland management and may be unprepared to effectively help producers with land management problems. The Environmentally and Economically Sustainable Use of Rangelands project was developed by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service (TAEX) to provide training and education for extension agents in rangeland management. The objectives were: 1) provide CEAs with a course that introduced the skills necessary to be able to understand and develop ecologically sound and economically sustainable range management practices affecting livestock and wildlife enterprises on the ranch and 2) then evaluate the courses for further refinement.

The Workshops

A series of three, 3-day training workshops were held in July and October, 1995 and in March, 1996. These workshops were attended by 19 county extension agents from five extension districts across the state of Texas. Instructors for the workshops included personnel from the Texas Agricultural Extension Service (TAEX), the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station (TAES), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Holistic Resource Management (HRM) of Texas, and an adult education specialist from Colorado.

The July and October sessions were held at the Krooked River Ranch near Haskell, Texas. This is a large North Texas working guest ranch and was chosen because of its central location and conference facilities. The Waggoner Ranch near Vernon, Texas was the site of the third session and was selected because of its cooperative work with the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station in Vernon on prescribed burning and rotational grazing systems.

The first of the three workshops was held in July 1995. The material presented during this three day workshop was based on concepts similar to the Holistic Resource Management and Total Ranch Management programs. These concepts included goal setting, communication and team work, facilitation skills, and biological and economic resource allocation. Our specific goals were to emphasize and introduce to the CEAs the importance of 1) setting goals and objectives for ranch management planning and 2) inventories economic and biological resources as a means of accessing and monitoring ranch and range conditions.

The second workshop was held in October, 1995. The participants were taught some of the basic techniques and applications of range and wildlife management. These methods included: range site delineation, determining range condition, trend, and use, estimating forage supply and demand, calculating stocking rates, identification of plants and recognizing their forage value for both livestock and wildlife, wildlife habitat assessment and population surveys. The concepts for these techniques were first introduced in a classroom type setting and then reinforced by field experiences relating to how these techniques were applied on two separate ranches.

The third workshop was held in March, 1996. The purpose of this workshop was to emphasize the integration of a prescribed burning program into a grazing management system as a means for more economical brush management. The agents were
exposed to the different types of grazing systems and how burning was implemented in each system. The agents were also taught basic fire ecology, safety considerations for prescribed burning, and how to develop a fire plan. The agents concluded the workshop by constructing a fire plan for a pasture and implementing an actual burn.

Participant Feedback

The success of the program was measured through the use of workshop evaluations. At the end of each workshop, participants were asked to evaluate and critique the programs and instructors. In addition, an adult education specialist served as an instructor and critic of our program. This specialist taught several sections dealing with adult education techniques and the development of action-oriented lesson plans. It was demonstrated to participants how they might utilize the information gained from the workshops to better serve the producers within their own counties. This instructor also helped design our evaluation format.

Evaluations determined that participants responded much more favorably to a "hands on" learning approach as opposed to classroom-style lecture sessions. As a result, our first workshop was the least favorite of the three. Although the agents recognized the value of the material being presented, it was an unpopular workshop due to presentation methods. Suggestions and criticisms from the evaluations were incorporated into the second and third workshop and included more field exercises, ranch visits, and realistic ranching problems. The improved learning environment created for the last two workshops produced a very positive response from all participants and instructors. A large percentage of participants indicated that they had definitely acquired an understanding of new range management technology and, more importantly, that they now planned to share certain knowledge gained with producers upon returning to their respective counties.

A three-ring binder was provided to participants for compilation of all teaching materials. As a direct result of training materials utilized during these three workshops, a manual containing various handouts along with other Extension publications has been compiled. This manual, the Texas Range Management Handbook, has been used in 1995 and 1996 for a state-wide agent training effort for County Extension Agents with less than 5 years of service. The handbook is now available to all clientele on a cost basis. Another three-day agent training workshop for three more Extension districts is planned for the fall of 1997, and all of these participants will receive and use a copy of this handbook. Current plans call for transferring the entire handbook onto a CD that could be more easily accessed with selected portions printed as needed.

The participants of this project were able to gain a better understanding of how to assist ranchers with developing ecologically sound and economically sustainable range management practices affecting their livestock and wildlife enterprises. The evaluations of each training session served as our own best critic. Suggestions by participants allowed for modifications that greatly improved the quality of the program and assured its continuance as a beneficial training program for CEAs. This project also appears to have been successful in helping other Extension districts establish similar training programs for their agents. The Texas Range Management Handbook will continue to serve as a training manual and is now available for fee based distribution. The long term benefits of our program will be that more Extension personnel are better qualified to assist Texas landowners with decisions involving range management practices.

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