

RANGELAND MANAGEMENT INITIATIVES

Ellie I. Leydsman McGinty

Roger E. Banner

In response to some of the institutional, environmental, social, and economic problems facing the western livestock industry, several national, state, and local agencies and organizations have developed management initiatives and programs to enhance rangeland sustainability. Sustainable rangeland management integrates three primary objectives, including environmental health, economic profitability, and social responsibility. Additionally, the Sustainable Rangelands Roundtable (SRR) defines rangeland sustainability as the capacity of rangelands to maintain health, productivity, diversity, and overall integrity from generation to generation, in the context of ecological, social, and economic systems.

The Sustainable Rangelands Roundtable is a partnership of about 50 organizations, including federal land management and research agencies; tribal, state, and local governments; scientific societies; non-governmental organizations; and researchers. The partnership has identified a set of five criteria embodying social, economic, and ecological factors for assessing rangeland sustainability. The five core criteria include: (1) conservation and maintenance of soil and water resources, (2) maintenance and conservation of plant and animal resources on rangelands, (3) maintenance of productive capacity on rangelands, (4) maintenance and enhancement of multiple economic and social benefits to current and future generations, and (5) development and promotion of legal, institutional, and economic frameworks for rangeland conservation and sustainable management (SRR, 2005).

These five components of rangeland sustainability have been instrumental in guiding and enhancing management programs within the nation, individual states, and local entities. The Utah Partners for Conservation and Development, the Utah Department of Natural Resources, the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Utah Quality Growth Commission are some of the federal and state agencies and organizations that have coordinated with ranchers and farmers in Utah to improve rangeland sustainability. Additionally, the Utah Farm Bureau Federation, the Utah Cattlemen's Association, and the Utah Wool Growers Association are some local organizations

that support the local agricultural industry and endorse the adoption of good livestock production practices.

UTAH PARTNERS FOR CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Utah Partners for Conservation and Development (UPCD) is a partnership of 17 natural resource-oriented state and federal agencies and organizations committed to providing solutions to conservation issues. The core values of the coalition are to protect biological diversity; to preserve water quality and quantity for municipal, agricultural, and natural resource uses; to promote sustainable agriculture through working and productive farms and ranches; and to support outdoor recreation opportunities, access, and quality. The premise of the partnership is to foster collaboration in order to increase the effectiveness of sustainable conservation solutions at local levels (UPCD, 2009).

Utah Partners for Conservation and Development administers the Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative, with the Utah Department of Natural Resources serving as the implementing agency. The Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative (UWRI) is a partnership-driven effort to conserve, restore, and manage ecosystems in priority areas across the state of Utah in response to invasion of exotic species and pathogens, increased frequency and intensity of wildfire, conversion of productive habitat to undesirable species, land fragmentation, and habitat loss. Utah Partners for Conservation and Development has three general approaches for addressing watershed and ecosystem issues. The first approach entails ecosystem restoration through physical and mechanical habitat manipulations, such as seeding, vegetation management, and species transplant. The second approach includes changes in land management, which may be made through permitted or allowed uses and management prescriptions. The third approach consists of increasing communication and team building among the public, stakeholders, and involved agencies (UWRI, 2009).

UTAH DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES PROGRAMS

The Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) is a voluntary program managed by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The program provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners for the protection and management of habitat to benefit federally listed, pro-

posed, candidate, or other at-risk species on private lands. The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources has identified two primary areas of focus for the Landowner Incentive Program in Utah, including (1) sagebrush steppe uplands supporting sage grouse species, sharp-tailed grouse, neotropical migratory bird species, pygmy rabbit, and prairie dog species, and (2) low- to mid-elevation riparian corridors and wetlands supporting various trout species and at-risk neotropical migratory bird species (NRCS, 2005).

The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is a conservation easement program operated by the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire, and State Lands (UDFFSL) and funded by the United States Forest Service (USFS). The program is designed to protect environmentally important forests and to prevent future conversions of forest land and resources. Conservation easements are used to achieve the objectives of protecting and enhancing water quality; protecting wildlife habitat and maintaining habitat connectivity; maintaining and restoring riparian areas; maintaining forest sustainability; and sustaining the cultural and economic vitality of rural communities. Accompanied with the conservation easement is a management plan or stewardship plan. The plans are specifically tailored to each property and are written to encourage long-term stewardship (UDFFSL, 2008; USFS, 2006).

UTAH DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND FOOD PROGRAMS

The Utah Department of Agriculture and Food (UDAF) is a state agency that promotes and protects the interests and products of agriculture and related industries. The agency oversees the Division of Grazing Improvement and administers the Grazing Improvement Program (GIP). The Grazing Improvement Program is a broad-based, voluntary program, led by range specialists and assisted by policy analysts and rangeland scientists. It is focused on improving the productivity and sustainability of Utah rangelands and watersheds. Cost-share grants are awarded to applicants in five regions (Northeast, Northwest, Central, Southeast, and Southwest) in Utah to improve grazing management practices and rangeland resource health on private and public land. The Grazing Improvement Program has approved funds to increase livestock water supplies, improve grass species that benefit livestock and wildlife, combat forage-damaging insects, and rehabilitate rangeland damaged by wildfire (UDAF, 2007).

The Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, in collaboration with the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development, secured support from the Utah Legislature

for the war on cheatgrass. Senate Bill 89, authored by Senator Dennis Stowell, established the Invasive Species Mitigation Fund and set aside \$2 million to fund range projects that will limit the size and frequency of wildfires. A significant portion of Utah rangeland is being invaded by fast-growing annual grasses, such as cheatgrass, that negatively impact livestock grazing and wildlife habitat. Cheatgrass has been blamed for fueling catastrophic fires during the summer of 2007 that contributed to highway traffic fatalities and record pollution in Utah. Provisions of Senate Bill 89 offer the UDAF and UPCD the financial resources to undertake projects to reduce cheatgrass encroachment. The UDAF and associated partners distributed \$2 million from the Invasive Species Mitigation Fund in 2008 for ten projects affecting 705,000 acres in nine counties. These projects were undertaken by agencies such as the BLM, the Department of Natural Resources, the Utah Conservation Commission, and 15 other state and federal agencies. The projects will focus on mitigating risks to public safety and health, air pollution, flooding, soil erosion, the release of carbon, damage to local economies, and habitat for wildlife or livestock (UDAF, 2008).

The Utah Department of Agriculture and Food also supervises the Utah Conservation Commission (UCC). The Utah Conservation Commission, authorized under the Utah Conservation Commission Act and comprised of a 16-person board, aspires to preserve the soil and water resources in Utah. Since 1937, the commission has been actively involved in planning and cultivating programs that ensure the development and utilization of soil and water resources, while protecting them from the adverse effects of wind and water erosion and sediment-related pollutants (UDAF, 2009).

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE PROGRAMS

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offers several technical assistance, incentive-based, and easement programs to ranchers, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Grazing Land Conservation Initiative (GLCI), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) program, and the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP).

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary conservation program that provides assistance to landowners and agricultural producers in a manner that promotes agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals. Through the program, farm-

ers and ranchers receive financial and technical assistance to implement structural and management conservation practices that optimize environmental benefits on working agricultural land. The NRCS provides funding and expertise for measures to protect natural resources, while ensuring sustainable production on farms, ranches, and working forest lands.

The Grazing Land Conservation Initiative (GLCI) program is a voluntary program whereby the Natural Resources Conservation Service provides technical assistance to owners and managers of private grazing land. Although the program does not provide financial or cost-share assistance, the program offers opportunities to maintain and improve private grazing land by implementing grazing land management technologies that protect and improve water quality, maintain and improve wildlife and fish habitat, enhance recreational opportunities, encourage diversification, and promote the use of sustainable grazing systems (NRCS, 2003).

The Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) is a voluntary program that encourages the improvement of high-quality wildlife habitat on private property. The Natural Resources Conservation Service provides technical and financial assistance to landowners that enhance upland, wetland, riparian, and/or aquatic habitats on private property. Through the program, the Natural Resources Conservation Service works with participants to develop a wildlife habitat plan. The plan becomes the basis of the cost-share agreement between the agency and the landowner (NRCS, 2004a).

The Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) program provides cost-share assistance and incentive payments to agricultural producers who voluntarily address issues, such as water quality and soil erosion control, by incorporating conservation practices into their operations. The Agricultural Management Assistance program is available in 15 states, including Utah. Under the program, the Natural Resources Conservation Service works with landowners to develop conservation plans. The conservation plans provide the foundation for the contract between the agency and the landowner (NRCS, 2007).

The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) is a voluntary program that provides matching funds to organizations with existing farm and ranch land protection programs to purchase development rights and conservation easements to preserve productive farm and ranchland (NRCS, 2004b). Conservation easements are

legal agreements between a private landowner and a land trust or government agency that prohibits development on the land in order to protect the ecological or cultural value. The conservation easement is either voluntarily donated or sold by the landowner. The property remains in the possession of the original landowner and most private property rights are retained. The easement is held by a land trust, such as The Nature Conservancy, or a government agency, such as the Utah Department of Natural Resources or Utah Department of Agriculture and Food. The easement holder extinguishes the development rights in order to protect the valuable resources on the property (UGOPB, 2008).

USDA SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE RESEARCH AND EDUCATION PROGRAM

Since 1988, the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program has helped advance farming and ranching systems that are more sustainable by administering competitive research and education grant programs. The grants are offered through four regions, including North Central, Northeast, South, and West, under the direction of councils that consist of farmers, ranchers, representatives from universities, government agencies, agribusinesses, and non-profit organizations. The grants are used to increase knowledge about sustainable agricultural practices and to help farmers and ranchers adopt innovative systems. The Western SARE program, hosted by Utah State University, administers grants in several categories, such as Research and Education grants, Farmer/Rancher grants, Professional/Producer grants, and Professional Development grants (USDA SARE, 2008).

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

In 2007, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne launched the Healthy Lands Initiative to accelerate land restoration, to increase productivity, and to improve the health of public lands in seven western states, including: Utah, Wyoming, New Mexico, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, and Colorado. The primary objective of the initiative is to preserve the diversity and productivity of public and private lands, with an emphasis on improving critical sage grouse habitat and other important wildlife habitat in the wildlife-energy interface. In 2008, the budget for the initiative was \$22 million. The 2009 budget included an increase of \$10 million over the level enacted in the 2008 fiscal year.

In Utah, the Bureau of Land Management, in cooperation with the Utah Partners for Conservation and Develop-

ment, is using funds from the Healthy Lands Initiative in conjunction with the Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative to conduct efficient science-based monitoring and restoration activities; to increase water quality and quantity on rangeland; to promote sustainable working farms and ranches; and to encourage social-economic uses and opportunities. The additional funds from the 2009 fiscal year will permit an increased number of land treatments, facilitate best-management practices, and update habitat management plans based on new information and technology (BLM, 2008).

UTAH QUALITY GROWTH COMMISSION

The Utah Quality Growth Commission (UQGC) was established in 1999 by the Quality Growth Act in order to address the challenges and opportunities associated with population growth. The Commission has three primary responsibilities: (1) to provide local governments with planning assistance, (2) to recommend principles of quality growth and advise the legislature on growth management issues, and (3) to administer the LeRay McAllister Critical Land Conservation Fund. The LeRay McAllister Critical Land Conservation Fund is an incentive program that provides grants and loans to preserve or restore critical lands, such as agricultural lands, wildlife habitat, and culturally and historically significant landscapes (UGOPB, 2008; UQGC, 2008).

The program has been influential in preserving large expanses of private ranchland via the purchase of conservation easements. The LeRay McAllister Fund provides up to 50 percent of the project cost, but applicants must provide the remaining 50 percent or more of matching funds. Matching funds typically come from private citizens, conservation foundations, government agencies, the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, the Utah Department of Natural Resources, and/or the Natural Resources Conservation Service Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (UGOPB, 2008; UQGC, 2008).