

Sustaining Ranching, Supporting Conservation

Background for an interactive workshop for ranchers in southern Arizona

Introduction

The workshop has several goals:

- Give you and other ranchers the opportunity to talk about your ranching and conservation goals so we can effectively present your views to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the public
- Provide information to you about jaguar habitat and the implications of the recent critical habitat designation for jaguars
- Present the initial results of the *Survey of Rancher Opinions about Wildlife and Jaguar Habitat Management*
- Discuss with you the concept of conservation incentives (an approach to acknowledge and compensate ranchers for the benefits provided by sustainable ranch management)

Conservation incentives are a relatively new concept. This short introduction to conservation incentives will help you prepare for the workshop, where we will ask for your feedback on how the concept could be applied in the Southwest.

Conservation Incentives

Sustainable ranching is the cornerstone in the foundation of large-landscape conservation in the Southwest. The work ranchers are doing now with managed grazing systems, with water improvements across the landscape, and with grassland restoration and erosion management practices plays a vital role in maintaining healthy habitat for wildlife. Ranching also provides large blocks of open, relatively undisturbed land, which is essential for many species in the Southwest. Ranchers provide these benefits largely without compensation.

The concept of conservation incentives – often referred to as “payments for ecosystem services” – is developing as a way to pay ranchers for the ecological benefits of their existing or new land management practices. The aim of conservation incentives programs is to provide a voluntary, non-regulatory approach to encourage economically and ecologically sustainable land management. Ideally, ranchers who participate in such programs will benefit from:

- diversification of income sources, making operations more robust to market fluctuations and weather conditions;
- new capital sources to implement desired conservation practices, such as water developments or erosion control structures; and
- increased recognition by the general public of the value and ecosystem benefits provided by sustainable range management (including increased rangeland resiliency; maintenance of large, connected landscapes and open space that support

wildlife and public enjoyment; and increased certainty that rangelands are sustainably managed).

Examples of Conservation Incentives Programs

Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Project

The Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Project (FRESP) is a partnership between local, state, and federal agencies; the Florida Cattleman's Association; and the World Wildlife Fund. The purpose of the program is to work with ranchers on a voluntary basis to increase water retention on ranches to restore the Everglades ecosystem. Participating ranches enter into contracts to implement management practices that retain water on the ranch. In return, ranches are paid for the cost of implementing the management practices and an annual lump-sum payment for maintaining the practice. Contracts are 10 years in length. All participants are large, working ranches. The program was designed through a collaborative process that included ranchers, regulatory agencies, and conservation organizations.

Grass Banking

The Malpai Borderlands Group pioneered the grass bank concept. A grass bank is an area that is set aside to provide forage for ranchers when forage on their home ranch is unavailable or limited. Grass banks typically have three components: a formal or informal association of ranchers that come together to form the grass bank, an area with reserved forage that serves as the grass bank, and rules among the members of the association that determine who gets access to the grass bank and when. The concept is used to provide a way to help ranchers overcome drought, implement restoration projects that require resting pastures, or other circumstance that limit the availability of forage on their ranch. Typically, members of the grass bank association are required to implement certain management practices on their home ranch or agree to a conservation easement in order to gain access to the grass bank's forage. Grass banks are well suited to southern Arizona and New Mexico because of the sporadic nature of monsoon rainfall – one ranch may get enough rain to produce summer forage, while the neighboring ranch may experience localized drought conditions – and frequent, unpredictable fires that may disrupt rotational grazing systems.