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RANCH MANAGEMENT PLANNING GUIDE

The essentials for ensuring the long-term economic,
environmental and social sustainability of ranching operations



Using this guide will help ranchers and land managers align with well-recognized sustainability goals, like those of the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef. © Ian Shive

Purpose

This guidebook provides an adaptive, outcome-based approach to helping ranchers and land managers assemble and implement a suite of complementary land, livestock, and business management activities that can help them achieve a sustainable future for their operation and their families. It is intended to help ranchers crosswalk diverse plans the key components of their operation so that they work better together by design. The process of doing this frequently leads to increased efficiency and new opportunities. This guide is not meant to suggest that ranchers compile a massive, impractical document covering all aspects of their operation.

Importance of Integrated Planning

Ranchers face challenges and uncertainty every day—from price fluctuations to drought and other extreme weather events. Taking a systematic approach to continuous improvement—a cycle of planning, monitoring and adapting—is increasingly important to running a resilient and profitable ranch operation.

Ranchers and land managers can use this guidebook to create an over-arching ranch plan that aligns sub-plans for different aspects of their operation toward their desired economic, ecological and social goals. The guide is designed to reflect ranchers’ needs to practically monitor and document results, adapt management, and communicate progress on important indicators of sustainability.

Ultimately, this guidebook can help users select the best practices—or suite of practices—that they can use to manage an operation that is profitable, resilient, and effectively conserves the lands and waters on which people and nature depend.

Why The Nature Conservancy?

Livestock grazing on intact, working grasslands is not only vital to feeding a growing world, but it’s essential to the conservation of many native grasslands and shrubland ecosystems. TNC strives to help ranchers adopt practices that restore and protect natural resources, like wildlife habitat and soil carbon, while providing food and securing livelihoods.

The approach outlined in this guide builds upon TNC’s decades of experience working with numerous ranching partners to advance conservation on working lands and the many valuable lessons we learned along the way.

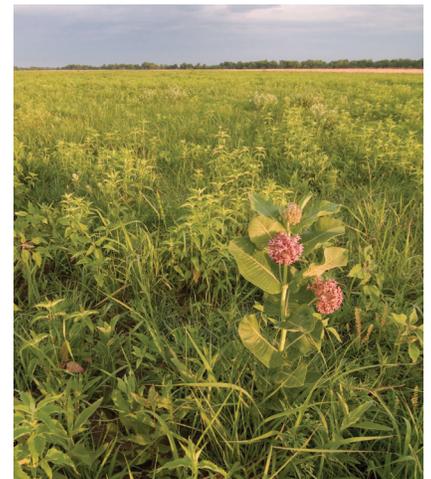
“Taking the time to make a plan that encompasses every aspect of my ranching operation is key to ensuring the long-term sustainability of my business, my land, and my legacy.”

— Steve Wooten, Colorado Rancher



Populations of the greater prairie-chicken are declining, but many ranchers are managing their lands to provide habitat for the species, which also improves range conditions.

© Jim Miller



Ranchers can ensure an economically sustainable operation while enhancing habitat for native species, such as common milkweed and other wildflowers © Chris Helzer

1. INTRODUCTION

Provide a brief overview of the operation including ownership, management responsibilities, and any significant ecological or other aspects of the operation. This section may also include the timeline for which this management plan covers.

1.1 PROPERTY OVERVIEW

Provide a description of the property to include physical location, ecological habitats, wildlife present, vegetation types (short grass prairie, mixed cropping, etc.), any unique or natural features of the property (wetlands, woodlands, etc.) as well as a description of the infrastructure on the property (fencing, roads, pipelines, tanks, buildings, etc.). A description of the primary and any secondary uses of the property should also be included. The land manager may consider an appendix that further describes the ecological values of the property. A map with property boundaries and any key infrastructure (fencing, water lines, etc.) should also be included.

1.2 HISTORY OF PLAN DEVELOPMENT

This section should be used for historical reference regarding plan development (i.e., when the first management plan was developed and why, etc.) as well as any major milestones that may have caused the plan to be altered or re-written (i.e., change in ownership or management, changes in focus, major practice or infrastructure alterations, etc.). Additionally, a reference to the timeframe that this version of the plan covers (i.e. 2020 - 2024).

1.3 MANAGEMENT PARTNERS

List any partners who play key roles in management of the property as well as a description of their duties under the plan.

1.4 USING THE PLAN

Describe how the plan will be utilized and the circumstances for when it will be reviewed and/or updated as well as any major instances that may be cause for major modification (financial, drought, new challenges, etc).

2. VISION AND GOALS FOR THE OPERATION

2.1 LONG-TERM VISION

Provide a long-term vision for the operation that includes the three pillars of sustainability (economic, environment, social). The vision statement should outline what the operation would like to ultimately achieve and provide purpose for its existence. It should simple but ambitious and leave nothing for interpretation. An example might be:

Establish an economically sustainable ranching and farming operation that improves functioning grasslands, supporting the full array of native species while also contributing to the viability of our rural community.

A description of how you intend to achieve the vision should also be included as well as the parties involved that will help you achieve this vision.

2.2 MANAGEMENT GOALS

This section should outline the goals for the operation. The operation should have an adequate number of goals to show continuous improvement over time and should encompass economic, social and environmental outcomes. Goals should also be measurable, and time bound. Some examples may include:

By 2024, vegetative diversity on the ranch will improve by XX% thereby improving the resiliency and function of tallgrass prairie and the associated ecosystems on the ranch.

Annual profit for the operation increases by X% over previous year without increasing inputs or degrading the associated ecosystem processes.

Provide educational opportunities for 100 students to increase their awareness of the importance of ranching to the economic, social and environmental health of the local community.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

This section should detail the various management activities and plans needed by the operation to achieve the goals set in the previous sections. Some overarching categories and subcategories to consider (**BOLD** = Primary) include:

- a. **Operation Resource Plan**
 - i. **Forage/range condition and production**
 - ii. **Infrastructure (fence, water, corrals, etc.) and equipment**
 - iii. Money and labor
 - iv. Livestock type/class/genetics
 - v. Nutrition (water, feed and supplement, where applicable)
 - vi. Other
- b. **Conservation/Natural Resource Plan**
 - i. **Wildlife and/or habitat (terrestrial and aquatic)**
 - ii. **Invasive species, rare/sensitive plant species and communities**
 - iii. Water quantity and quality
 - iv. Soil condition/soil health
 - v. Other (e.g., fire)
- c. **Socioeconomic Plans**
 - i. **Succession/ranch transition**
 - ii. **Financial (income and expenses for grazing and non-grazing enterprises)**
 - iii. Continuing education
 - iv. **Stockmanship & equipment use (worker safety focused)**
 - v. Business and marketing
 - vi. Other
- d. **Animal Well-being Plans**
 - i. **Ranch-specific performance indicators; examples:**
 - Daily gains and body condition scores
 - Weaned calves per exposed mother cow
 - Disease and veterinary program development
 - Low-stress animal handling training
 - Other
- e. **Contingency Plans**
 - i. **Drought or other natural disaster**
 - ii. Market fluctuations
 - iii. Other
- f. **Partners, neighbors, shared land use:**
 - i. If part of your land is leased or permitted use (e.g., federal public lands), what is the lease schedule and any restrictions/complications/opportunities that lease creates?
 - ii. Identify any actions or opportunities for connecting or collaborating with other ranchers or stakeholders in your region or similar operation types (e.g., grazing lands coalitions, beef marketing co-ops, active social media groups, trainings/conferences).

IN ADDITION

Each subsequent plan should have the following components:

- Title of the plan (i.e., grazing management)
- Person or organization leading the effort if applicable
- Specific goals around the subject of the plan
- Any additional context around the plan that would aid the operation in achieving the goals of the plan
- Management actions taken to achieve the goal of the particular plan
- A list of the relevant subplans and how they support the overall plan
- A monitoring plan to support land manager decisions

Monitoring is a critical component of adaptive management and should be included as a piece of each plan in order to drive management decisions. Monitoring aids land managers in evaluating whether or not their management activities have achieved the intended outcomes desired by the operation. Some suggested items to monitor include:

- Grazing: stocking rate, grazing and rest schedules, and contingency plans for drought and other disruptions
- Infrastructure: schedule, practices cost, benefits
- Invasive species: practices (prescribed fire, herbicide) and timing
- Business and marketing plans: manage income and expenses, position ranch for success
- Succession/ranch transition plan: legal and financial
- Animal health and wellbeing: training/certification
- Worker health and safety: training/certification
- Other: hunting, agri-tourism, other classes of livestock, energy development, etc.

REFERENCES

The land manager may wish to include any scientific or technical references to support the decisions made in the plan.

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