Ranch Planning - Where to Start

by Nick Ashcroft, Ph.D. - Extension Rangeland Management Specialist

“By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.” — Benjamin Franklin
“If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else.” — Yogi Berra
“The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining.” — John F. Kennedy

I am frequently asked about ranch plans or have been in situations where a ranch plan would have helped explain resource conditions, pasture/grazing management, or ranch objectives. Most ranchers have goals and objectives, and a plan in mind on how to manage their livestock and the land. Yet, do most ranchers formalize their goals, objectives and management plans by writing them down? Increasingly, documentation of ranch plans is important on federal and private lands especially as it relates to increased federal regulations and agency oversight regarding management of natural resources. Even in the absence of federal regulations, writing a ranch plan encourages ranchers to slow down and consider specific objectives for infrastructure, finance, livestock production, wildlife enterprises, and range management in relation to overall ranch goals, objectives and operations. This newsletter will attempt to address a few of these questions. My colleagues and I are in the process of writing a more comprehensive publication about ranch plans that we hope to have available to you soon. If you have experience or thoughts with ranch plans we would be like to hear from you.

Reasons for developing a ranch plan:

- You are the expert on your ranch. A written plan helps you stick to that plan rather than allowing externalities to dictate management.
- Economic efficiency and profit.
- Inform management and provides direction.
- Encourages annual and consistent documentation regarding budgets, natural resource conditions, goals, and objectives.
- May assist and inform a successor in ‘how the ranch is/was run’.
- Could be used to acquire financial credit.
- Required for federal grazing allotments [e.g., Allotment Management Plans (AMP), National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Endangered Species Act (ESA)].
- Inform and communicate to federal land management agencies when management changes or analysis are required.
- Required for conservation programs.
- Required for federal-based programs administered through multiple agencies on private lands.
A ranch plan can seem like a daunting task. In fact, just knowing where to start can be a challenge. A simple approach to get started is to break it into steps, make it a living document, using it, modifying it, and improve it at regular intervals and the task will become second nature. Most businesses have mission statements, goals and objectives—start with these. Write something, think about it, and review or modify it. We hear a lot about goals and objectives, however not everyone may know the differences. Goals are an overarching principle that guides decision making. They are typically broad, general intentions that are intangible and difficult to measure. Objectives are accomplishable actions that are specific, measureable, time constrained and by their completion lead to attaining a goal. Several objectives may need to be accomplished to attain a goal. Developing ranch goals and objectives provides a positive direction in the ranch planning process and stabilizes ranch management. Note that plans change and by actively using your ranch plan and making changes when needed, it will assist in improving efficiency of ranching operations and attaining goals for the ranch business.

Next gather or record historical information on the ranch, many people know the history of their ranch, but few have written it down. This information should be included throughout the ranch plan to help explain why conditions may exist, to document climate or management, or demonstrate an improvement/degradation in resource conditions. You now want to develop and inventory of the ranch and a physical description of the ranching operation. With current and historical information or data you can begin to identify where you are now and what is necessary to accomplish new or existing goals. Developing and accomplishing objectives will begin moving you towards attaining ranch goals.

Below are a series of questions you may ask to get started and headed in the right direction. Consider both the historical and current conditions.

What do you want the ranch to look like in 5, 10, 20, or 50 years?

What is the land base for the ranch?
- Locational description
- General description of vegetation communities
- How many deeded acres? Federal acres? Leased acres?

What are your management options or restrictions on these lands?
- Past and present management, Allotment Management Plans (AMPs).
- What other multiple uses may affect the ranching operation?
- How involved were you in these plans and how do they work with the current goals and objectives?
- Existing right-of-ways?
- Agreements or leases?

What are the current and historic conditions of the land?
- Soils (sources: Soil Surveys, Ecological Site Descriptions (ESDs), historical records or data)
  http://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov/App/HomePage.htm
  - Soil type
- Potential vegetation
- Forage production
- Timber production
- Identify issues areas (excessive erosion, toxic plants, invasive or noxious plant)
- Precipitation (sources: Soil Surveys, Ecological Site Descriptions (ESDs), historical records or data) http://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov/App/HomePage.htm,
  http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/CLIMATEDATA.html
- Annual average
- Seasonal average
- Fluctuations
- Locations
  - Precipitation form (snow, rain)
- Temperature
  - Highs and lows
  - Duration
  - Seasonal
- Wind
- Other climate conditions- flooding, droughts etc.
- When does the ranch receive precipitation and where (historical records)?
- How has vegetation responded to historical precipitation?

What are the natural resources on these lands (forage production, timber, fuelwood, wildlife)?
- How has vegetation changed on the ranch, what trends have been observed?
- Current composition, production, condition, and cover of vegetation.
- What are the current uses?
- What is the potential vegetation for the soil type, slope, aspect, and climate?
- What is the forage trend by pasture or site?
- What areas have riparian vegetation types?
- What are the wildlife resources on the ranch?
- Has a wildlife enterprise been part of ranch diversification?
- Have there been changes in wildlife populations?
- Are there threatened or endangered species?

What water resources exist and are available?
- Location by pasture, water type (spring, dirt tank, well, live water).
- What are the priority dates of the water?
- What is the dependability and volume of each water source?
- Have water rights been filed on the ranch?
- Where do water developments need to be repaired/replaced?
- Where should new water developments be located?

What have been the current and historic grazing practices or grazing systems of the ranch (seasons, timing, stocking rates, intensity, and duration)?
- Number and size of pastures
- When each pasture is grazed and for how long (currently and historically)