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**A voluntary
partnership
with private
landowners**

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Photo provided by Josh Dukart. Pictured are he and his wife Tara in one of their North Dakota pastures where grazing was deferred during the growing season to improve soil health and provide wildlife habitat. It was then grazed during the dormant season.

Consider Your Triple Bottom Line *Evaluating the economic, ecological and social parameters within your business may help yield more valuable outcomes.*

By Kindra Gordon

Sustainability is an often used word in today's society – maybe sometimes overused. How does Joshua Dukart define it from a holistic management approach? He says, "In my mind sustainability means managing for the optimal balance of people, money, and land."

Dukart, who is a certified educator in holistic management, probes people to think about those three aspects, which are often called the triple bottom line.

Based near Bismarck, North Dakota, he hopes that by asking producers to ponder their operation from a three-prong approach they will be given a reminder that – like the old adage says – money isn't everything.

Your Triple Bottom Line

Coined as a 21st century business term, the "triple bottom line" is designed to be a means for measuring economic, ecological and social parameters. Or to put it in cowboy terms, Dukart explains it as "making money, conserving your natural resources and having fun in the process [quality of life]."

Dukart is a believer that the triple bottom line approach – or similar forms of holistic management – can be beneficial in helping farmers and ranchers balance their workload and resources, become proactive, and most importantly move beyond crisis management into planned prosperity.

Along with that, the time and communication put into identifying goals and values related to a triple bottom line may help facilitate the transition of an operation from one generation to the next. Dukart points out, "The true test of sustainability has very little to do with land or money – The big question is: does the next generation want to come back to the ranch?"

Getting Started

Starting the process of outlining your triple bottom line begins with identifying your goals. But Dukart clarifies these aren't traditional "number" goals like having a specific number of cattle or acres or making a certain amount of money. Instead, Dukart says people need to focus on

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identifying “value” goals based on their beliefs, emotions and feelings – and as they do this for a family farm or ranch operation, input and consensus needs to be gathered from the entire team involved.

He acknowledges this can be a challenge for many people. But Dukart says it’s worth the effort. “Identifying in your own words why you farm or ranch in the first place can make social, financial and resource based decisions easier to make,” he says.

Dukart notes, “People get focused on specific number goals, when they really need to start with the bigger picture.” The bigger picture encompasses overall goals related to quality of life, stewardship, financial security, family time, long-term vs. short term, etc.

He explains, “This really focuses on getting the proper model in place before worrying about specific details. In other words, it is more important to make sure you are shooting at the right target, before you concentrate on hitting the bullseye. Hitting the bullseye on whatever target is in front of you may show signs of efficiency, but if it is the wrong target, it may actually move you away from your long term goals.”

Dukart’s advice to families working through this goal setting and evaluation process is that it’s not necessarily about the answers. Rather, it’s all about pondering the questions. “What’s the best place to use your next dollar? What’s the best way to use your next hour of time? What action will lead you toward your long term goals?” he asks.

“Often by working through this process and communicating people find that not everyone was on the same page. But by identifying value goals for the farm or ranch operation, everyone can feel like they are part of the team, and once that ownership in the future of the family and business is accomplished it can be amazing to watch people turn a corner,” says Dukart.

And the real bottom line, according to Dukart, is this: “By concentrating on being effective with your time and money, you should be achieving the number goals for a profit along the way.”

Dukart provides consulting and presentations on holistic management topics. He and his wife stay involved with his family’s cow-calf operation as well as run some of their own cattle. He is also the field representative for the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition and works with the Burleigh County Soil Conservation District.

Striving for Sustainability

Joshua Dukart explains that working towards sustainability is a direction you take, and different people can be at different places in their journey. “There is never a point where you have arrived; but if you are moving ahead toward sustainability you are making progress,” he says. Dukart offers this advice for other producer’s striving for sustainability:

1. **Aim to be proactive vs. reactive.** He gives the example – are you just doing what seems urgent at the moment or is it part of your overall plan for achieving your value goals? “Any time you can be more proactive with your decision making allows for progressing ahead. It is much more effective to prevent ‘fires’ rather than be constantly putting them out.”
2. **Focus on low-cost.** Keeping costs minimal can help producers move toward independence and sustainability, says Dukart. Relying less and less on inputs can put the producer back in the driver’s seat when making decisions, and most importantly brings the tool of human creativity to the forefront, he adds.
3. **Work with nature.** “Realize that the most powerful teammate we have is Mother Nature and working within her natural ecosystem. Focusing on improving soil health can result in less stress and less work,” he concludes.



5th National Grazing Conference Set for December 9-12, 2012

Plans are underway for the 5th National Grazing Conference to be held Dec. 9-12 in Orlando, FL. The conference is being hosted by the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) and a number of sponsoring organizations. The conference objective is “To Heighten Awareness of the Economic and Environmental Benefits of Grazing Lands,” and its theme is “Grazinglands, a Magical Environment,” in keeping with Orlando and the Magic Kingdom.

The conference is designed to provide a forum for discussions and exchange of information, technology transfer, identification of research and program needs, marketing of products, services, and other benefits of grazing.

During the event, oral and poster papers will be presented in the following categories:

- Issues concerning the agricultural – urban interface
- Successful “cutting edge” management technologies for grazing practices
- Economic/marketing implications of grazing
- Public Policy implications of grazing
- The optimizing of grazing land health for environmental and social benefits

The call for papers has been released and is available at www.glci.org and then clicking on Grazing Conference. Abstracts are due by May 1, 2012.

If you have any questions regarding the conference or abstracts, please contact John W. Peterson, 5NCGL Conference Manager, at 703-505-1782, or jwpeterson@cox.net.

2012 FARM BILL TALK

USDA SECRETARY SHARES HIS COMMENTS ON CHANGES AHEAD

By Kindra Gordon

For ag producers all eyes will be on Congress this winter as the 2012 Farm Bill is crafted. Amidst the current budget deficit, the five-year bill could be trimmed by as much as \$23 billion – which many fear could have a negative effect on farm programs, conservation and research.

This fall at various speaking engagements across the U.S. Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack has made several comments about what farmers can expect from the new Farm Bill. Speaking at a John Deere plant in Des Moines in late October and at an agriculture symposium in Illinois in early November, Vilsack stated, that the Farm Bill “has a profound effect on the whole country.”

He added, “If we want this legislation to have the support of the other 98 percent of Americans who don’t farm, we’ve got to remind those Americans why this legislation matters to them and to their families,” he stated.

The Good News

Vilsack stresses that agriculture remains a bright spot for the American economy. “Farm income this year will be at its highest level since the 1970s. This will be a record year for ag exports. The trade surplus (subtracting imports from exports) on ag products will be \$42 billion this year. Five years ago, that trade surplus was just \$5 billion.”

He adds, “Agriculture is responsible for one out of every twelve jobs in our economy. What we do on the farm ripples through the economy and helps create jobs, particularly when agriculture is thriving. What’s more, the productivity of American farmers and ranchers help American families stretch their paychecks.”

Along with that, he emphasizes that a strong safety net must remain in place to protect the people who raise our food and fiber while maintaining conservation programs that have proved so effective in recent years.

Less Spending Ahead

Despite that, Vilsack notes that the new Farm Bill will be “thinner” – indicating the need to reduce the federal budget. He stated, “There will be a redesign of the safety net for farmers. You can expect changes in the direct payment system (to producers).”

As a means of reducing costs, Vilsack said USDA will look to reduce its workforce of 120,000 by as many as 10,000 people next year. He also acknowledges that USDA budget cuts would impact research efforts, but at the same time he notes the value of that research. “It’s important that America maintain its productivity in agriculture. No other country has the food resources we do,” he said.

“It’s more than a farm bill. It’s a jobs bill, a food bill and an environmental conservation bill...It’s also going to determine where our energy supply comes from and if we all eat. So we need to think bigger than the words ‘Farm Bill.’”

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack

Priority Areas

Vilsack identifies three key principles for the new legislation: 1) We need to maintain a strong safety net, 2) we need to support sustainable productivity, and 3) we need to promote vibrant markets.

He stated, “As they work on this bill, Congress must agree on the right mix of policies to provide an adequate safety net for those who need it. High input costs means agriculture will always remain a high risk. A bad crop, ruined by a natural disaster or an unpredictable price collapse, can put a hard-working farm family out of business quickly. These families rely on a strong safety net.”

Additional Areas

Opportunities for Beginners: Vilsack emphasized the need to make it easier for young people or older people, who have never done it before, to begin farming.

“Why is this important?” he asked? He notes that America has an aging farming community. In the past five years, there’s been a 20% decrease in the number of farmers under the age of 25; and based on the last ag census; the average American farmer is 57 years of age. Vilsack stated, “Some of these folks want to slow down or retire; but they have no one to take over the farming operation. That challenges us to find new ways, through tax policy, through regulations, through our credit programs or other programs, to help transition farms to the next generation.

Expanded Research: Vilsack spoke of the need to continue improving U.S. ag production and efficiency among all crops and livestock, namely through research

Vilsack added, “Studies have shown that public investments in agricultural research earn a 20 dollars-to-1 return of investment in the U.S. economy. Once that information is disseminated to farmers, ranchers, and producers, they take it and make it work. And these benefits extend beyond just economic returns. Research also leads to improved soil and water and air quality, and they help us to design strategies that will enable us to deal with the impacts of the changing climate.” Vilsack points out that public funding for agricultural research has remained basically flat-lined since the 1990s, which hinders productivity.

Conservation: Vilsack emphasized that conservation is also an equally important component and strategy for sustainable productivity. He stated, “USDA has forged voluntary partnerships with land owners yielding real public benefits. In the last 30 years producers have reduced soil erosion by more than 40%, and agriculture has now become the leading cause of restoring wetlands, whereas before, it was the leading cause of wetland loss.

Promoting Strong Markets: Vilsack said, “As Congress works on this bill, they should recognize we need vibrant, fair, and diverse markets at home and abroad for our farmers, ranchers, and producers of all types and all sizes. He reports that over the past five years, U.S. agricultural producers have doubled the total value of their exports; and this year will be the best year ever for American exports.

Food & Fuel: Vilsack spoke on the importance of creating avenues for local foods to be sold at local schools, hospitals and other entities. He also discussed the need to support specialty crop producers, food assistance programs for low income individuals, as well as the continuing commitment to renewable energy and biofuels.

SOIL CARBON CHALLENGE UNDERWAY

The Soil Carbon Challenge is a competition to recognize land stewards for growing water-holding soil organic matter, based on measured performance on small, representative sites over a ten-year period.

Peter Donovan of the Soil Carbon Coalition has been setting up and sampling the monitoring plots. As of early December 2011, he reports 50 land managers, mostly graziers, have had the coalition put in accurate, repeatable monitoring plots on their pastures, from California to Vermont, from Canada to Mexico. Donovan is in the southern states this winter, traveling slowly west in a converted school bus, doing baseline plots and workshops on the carbon cycle.

“Some people hear the word carbon and think it’s all or only about climate,” Donovan says. “Soils hold many times the water, as well as many times the carbon, of atmosphere, vegetation, and rivers combined. The center of gravity of both water and carbon cycling is soil, and graziers have a lot of leverage on how these cycles function.”

The Challenge is not a carbon “offset” scheme, but a way to see what’s possible with management, and to recognize success. “The Soil Carbon Challenge is not for everyone,” Donovan says. “We’re looking for above-average managers who are interested in improving the capacity of their land to absorb and hold water, to produce more with fewer purchased inputs, and who want accurate and repeatable monitoring of their progress. We’re looking for leaders, and future leaders.”

Donovan explains that the competition can supply creative solutions. “A competition can leapfrog the decades-long cycle of research, pilot projects, legislation, and incentives, and can showcase leadership based on knowhow and performance rather than on politics, promises, or predictions.”

“The best time to set up a monitoring baseline is 20 years ago,” Donovan says. “The second best time is now.” The Challenge monitoring includes permanent transects that track soil surface conditions as well as soil sampling for density and total carbon. “We measure carbon because it’s easier than measuring water,” he says. “Water tends to follow carbon, because carbon on the soil (plants and litter) and carbon in the soil (organic matter) create the conditions and microclimates for water retention, which moderates both floods and droughts. And water—either too much or too little—is the number one issue across the continent.”

For more information on the Soil Carbon Challenge, visit soilcarboncoalition.org or contact Peter Donovan at 541-263-1888 or info@soilcarboncoalition.org.

To have your GLCI activities or upcoming events highlighted in this newsletter, contact Kindra Gordon at phone 605-722-7699 or kindras@gordonresources.com.

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- National Association of Conservation Districts (202) 547-6233
- National Cattlemen's Beef Association (202) 347-0228
- National Farmers Union (202) 554-1600
- Society for Range Management (303) 986-3309
- Soil and Water Conservation Society (515) 289-2331

Contact these affiliated organizations: