

Sharing the difference CSU Extension makes in people's lives and their communities.

Small acreage, big know-how

Small acreage landowners learn to manage natural resources and raise animals through strategic educational programming.

Situation

In recent decades large tracts of farm and ranch lands along the Front Range of the Rockies have been subdivided into small acreages. Often, land is purchased by people seeking a lifestyle change. Many small acreage owners—unlike their agricultural predecessors—may have never raised animals or managed land. These new landowners increasingly need guidance on diverse management topics to prevent unintentionally impacting soils, water, plants, animals and other natural resources.

Extension's Response

Building on the success of past programs from Colorado State University Extension, in 2009 Extension and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) partnered to create a joint field position to address natural resource goals for the Front Range: educate small acreage owners; provide on-the-ground conservation assistance; and, support other small acreage conservation field staff. Jennifer Cook was hired as the first CSU Extension/NRCS Small Acreage Management Coordinator.

To ascertain landowners' educational needs and learning preferences, Cook conducted a survey at fall 2009 tree seedling sales in Larimer, Weld, Boulder, Adams, Douglas and Elbert counties. She learned that small acreage owners prefer e-newsletters, online courses, a dedicated small acreage website, workshops and conferences. Cook then established the following initiatives:

- Developing and launching a Small Acreage Management (SAM) website that features information, links, images and short educational videos: www.ext.colostate.edu/sam.
- Distributing a quarterly e-mail newsletter that features seasonal SAM articles written by Extension agents, conservation professionals, and small acreage landowners from around the state. More than 2,500 landowners and conservation professionals now subscribe.
- Coordinating free, hour-long SAM webinars presented by CSU professors, Extension staff and other experts. Webinars are recorded and available for instant viewing.
- Producing short online educational videos on topics such as creating wildfire defensible space, running irrigation pumps on solar energy and pasture management.
- Organizing and presenting more than 20 small acreage workshops, often in collaboration with other Extension staff, NRCS and conservation districts from across Colorado.
- One-on-one landowner field visits that address more complicated needs and concerns.



The Bottom Line

- Small acreage owners are increasing their knowledge to sustainably manage land and animals as a result of targeted, CSU Extension communications and programming.

By the Numbers

- According to the National Agriculture Statistics Service's 2007 Census of Agriculture, small farms account for about 48 percent of total farm and ranchland in the US.
- Small acreage landowners in Colorado own two to 100 acres and may be lifestyle farmers who work outside the home, retired farmers, or operators of a small farm or ranch.

Results

CSU Extension and NRCS efforts have increased access to SAM information by developing the kind of communications and programs that small acreage landowners want. As a result, owners have increased their knowledge about practices that will help them build healthy soils, properly manage well and septic systems, sustainably manage livestock, crops and pastures, and monitor and control weeds.

In December 2010, CSU Extension measured some of these gains by randomly surveying 450 recipients of the Front Range Sustainable Small Acreage e-newsletter. 64 surveys were returned (14 percent response rate).

- 91 percent reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the newsletter.
- 86 percent indicated the newsletter has increased their knowledge of managing small acreage.
- 78 percent said they read the majority of articles in each issue.
- 44 percent reported changing one or more of their management practices as a result of information learned in the newsletter.
- The most reported changes to management practices included monitoring and controlling weeds, and rotational pasture grazing.
- Several respondents report using the newsletter to help them plan for managing their small acreage in the future.

Through outreach and educational programs, Cook has also broadened the scope of CSU Extension's expertise and supported the success of other land management by developing and expanding partnerships among cooperating agencies. She works closely with other state Extension and NRCS field staff to meet landowner needs.

Following a presentation Cook gave at a Teller-Park County small acreage workshop, Leon Kott of NRCS commented:

"I appreciated it because the same information [Jennifer] provided are the things that I have to provide to people. Plus anyone there who follows up with me will be grounded in the SAM principles, making my job easier."

Cook hopes that landowners will continue to improve their skills and knowledge in the years to come so that:

- With the proper education, tools, and best management practices small acreage managers will become better stewards of their property.
- Animals, livestock and wildlife are managed in a sustainable way.
- Landowners are building healthy soils and reducing erosion on their properties.
- Water quality and quantity are protected in wells, local streams, and other water bodies.

Cook's successful efforts to educate small acreage owners and support CSU Extension and NRCS staff and other conservation partners has led CSU Extension and NRCS to create a second SAM coordinator position that will serve Western Slope counties by late 2011.

"I just wanted to thank you on behalf of our Fremont County producers. I have been sending out your newsletter to all of my producer contacts and our office has received great feedback!"

– Melanie Scavarda, Fremont Conservation District

Learn More

Download newsletters, replay webinars, view educational videos and read about small acreage management at:

www.ext.colostate.edu/sam



With offices in nearly every county in the United States, NRCS works with landowners and communities to improve our soil, water, air, plants, wildlife, and energy use.

www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/home



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