



Can Public and Private Lands Be Managed Together Under an Ecosystem Management Plan – Challenges & Opportunities: *A NATURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS) PERSPECTIVE*

By Lincoln E. Burton

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin by commending the Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association (Association) and all of the presenters for an outstanding tour and symposium. All of the speakers did an outstanding job of presenting their topics, which were all relevant to ecosystem management.

I also commend the Association for their initiative, courage, vision, leadership, and commitment to collaborate and cooperate. You epitomize what the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) hopes to achieve in terms of landowner conservation, ethic, and commitment to conservation.

Let me briefly explain why I feel this way: The NRCS's mission is to help people conserve America's private and nonfederal land resources in a voluntary, cooperative partnership manner. In the words of Hugh Hammond Bennett, "To treat every acre according to its need and within its capability and have a viable economic return at the same time." If you will, "Harmony between people and the land."

We primarily achieve that purpose by providing directly, or by partnering with others, conservation planning assistance to individual landowners, groups, or even on a watershed basis. We help them develop conservation plans and then implement them to achieve their conservation objective from generation to generation on the land.

DISCUSSION

Without going into detail, our planning objective is to assist the landowner to achieve the appropriate balance of soil, plant, animal (wild and domestic), air, and water components of the ecosystems within their operation while, at the same time, maintaining economic viability. In practice, this process is more a journey than an end.

We do this with a voluntary approach. NRCS is not the decision maker, but rather the facilitator or salesperson, if you will, to assist landowners in making good decisions and implementing them.

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- We begin by sitting down with the producer and determining their objectives.
- The next step is to complete a sound resource inventory, or assessment, and evaluation of what is happening on the landscape, what exists on the landscape, and everything we can learn about the resources, operations, why, etc.

- NRCS's role is to speak for the land and its associated resources, but also to stand in the shoes of the landowner (there is full involvement of the landowner in this process). We will not go out on a place, prescribe it and develop a plan without the landowner's involvement.
- NRCS does not tell producers how to manage lands.
- Our people then evaluate this inventory in light of producer objectives, resource problems, and conditions so that we are well prepared to take the next step if the producers desire.
- From this information, common sense, science-based, and cost-effective alternatives are developed to achieve landowner objectives, solve resource concerns, and enhance the health of the land striving for that ideal state.
- The producer and NRCS staff review alternatives and opportunities and work together to develop a conservation plan to meet landowner goals. This is a producer's plan—not an agency plan.
- The producer makes decisions. The plan is a reflection of that process.
- Based on the decisions of the operator, the plan is implemented, evaluated, and carried to the next phase.

Note: *Every step of this process is done with the landowner.*

Our focus is on private lands, but we recognize that there are often other ownership and decision makers such as the United States Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, or state land in most watersheds and that the ideal would be a plan that accommodates all of these lands in a coordinated, collaborative effort. In the past we have supported partnership efforts and we will do all we can to continue that support in the future. We also recognize the authority, role, and technical expertise of the public land managing agencies that have jurisdiction over these lands.

When this Association came to me for assistance—note that *they* came to *me*; we do not help unless invited—I was intrigued with their story and goals. I studied their efforts rather thoroughly; here is what I found:

- Landowner initiated; fully voluntary.
- Sound objective(s).
- Credible scientific approach and strategy with a good resource assessment.
- Ecosystem-management plan approach. Note—for NRCS to achieve its mission, we have to have this.
- Recognition by the Association that this will take a great deal of collaboration, cooperation, and partnering, including the recognition that the federal, state, and each private landowner are decision makers and will need to follow their respective process and procedures for plans. They know they cannot operate alone.
- Commitment and leadership to see this through.
- No agenda other than that stated. This is a good thing.
- Their cost estimate is reasonable.

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Local leadership is the foundation of NRCS's approach. We found out a long time ago that locally led means successful implementation and continuance of the conservation programs. If it is locally landowner led, the ethics and commitment to put and keep good conservation on the land is the highest it can be from generation to generation.

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CONCLUSION

We have an opportunity before us to do something really special in the areas of ecosystem management and conservation for the Thunder Basin area. Wyoming landowners and public land agencies are excellent land stewards and conservationists, but we have the opportunity to go a level beyond that. We will learn so much scientifically and socially about ecosystem management as we do this. If we see this cooperative planning effort throughout the landscape, all users will be better off. We will not only have achieved something good for the Thunder Basin, but the experience and knowledge will be transferred to other places with similar results being achieved again and again.

I do not intend to over simplify the conservation process, or gloss over all of the challenges and obstacles we will need to overcome, but it can be done. If those that are the decision makers in the process decide it can be done, it will be successful. I pledge NRCS's support and cooperation in any way that we can to help that to happen.

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