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PASTURE & LIVESTOCK MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP FOR NOVICES

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Background. Land ownership patterns in Texas are changing, and this new owner/manager change is accompanied by a general lack of knowledge about soil-plant-animal economic management systems. Where much of the rural property was once owned and passed from generation to generation by rural farmers and ranchers, urban-absentee landowners are purchasing more land each year. Since 1994, consumers interested primarily in recreational purposes have begun to dominate ownership of the rural landscape. There are several reasons for this change. Many children who were raised on farms or ranches moved to cities to find employment after completion of high school or college. Additionally, financial constraints and estate taxes have forced the liquidation of many farms and ranches. Finally, as elderly rural landowners retire, they are selling property to city dwellers to augment their retirement incomes. Urban people, whether they be "blue collar" workers, doctors, attorneys, other high income professionals, or simply retirees, seek escape, if only for the weekend, from life in the city and are purchasing land at unprecedented levels. Often, these new landowners have little regard for the price or production potential of their new investment. Also found in this new group of landowners are those who were absentee landowners that are returning to their property after retirement. These absentee landowners also need basic knowledge of land and natural resource management.

This land ownership change has created some potential environmental problems associated with natural resource management. Few, if any, of the new landowners have any formal training in the basics of the soil-plant-animal interface. Therefore, they may use improper natural resource management strategies based on faulty knowledge or poor advice from well meaning neighbors or popular press articles. Lack of knowledge regarding management of natural resources can also quickly translate into a poor economic situation. If the weekend property consumes too much of their disposable income, landowners can become discouraged with the venture and the property will eventually be sold.

One possible solution is to provide this new class of land owners with appropriate, basic information regarding resource management. Fortunately, the urban dweller is accustomed to taking advice and even paying for advice from attorneys, accountants, and other professionals. The new urban landowner generally has few erroneous preconceived ideas regarding natural resource management. Therefore, the urban landowner is often more open to natural resource management education than some of our more traditional landowners. An effective vehicle with

the proper format was needed to entice their involvement and provide for the proper education of this growing class of natural resource stewards.

Urban-absentee land owners needed to be linked with subject matter experts regarding the soil-plant-animal interface in a relaxed setting that allows for imparting the requisite information while providing the opportunity for question and answer sessions. Most faculty members of land grant university agriculture programs can provide the required expertise. One such program has been developed by a multi-disciplinary, multi-agency team at the Texas A&M University Agricultural Research and Extension Center at Overton, Texas (TAMU Center – Overton). The main goals in developing the program were to: a) provide basic information regarding management of soil-plant-animal resources, and thus, provide guidelines for sound economic decision making; and b) introduce workshop participants to the educational resources available to them through the land grant university system.

Research Findings. Faculty members from the TAMU Center – Overton representing both the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station and Texas Cooperative Extension as well as Departments of Soil and Crop Sciences, Animal Science, and Agricultural Economics developed the Pasture and Livestock Management Workshop for Novices. The program is a fee-based, intensive three-day event that targets novice or inexperienced ranchers who are interested in the proper management of their soil, plant, and animal resources. The registration fee is \$300 and enrollment is limited to 50 individuals each session to facilitate open discussion and interaction between participants and faculty members. The workshop advertises for novice ranchers, i.e., those with little or no knowledge regarding management of soil, plant, and animal resources, and thus far, novice ranchers have been the type of individuals that have enrolled in the workshop. Workshop attendees travel to the TAMU Center – Overton and spend three days learning basic fundamentals of pasture and livestock management and economic implications.

Application. Thus far, workshop participants have been represented about equally by men and women. To determine effectiveness of the program, pre-tests and post-tests, which evaluate the attendees knowledge about various soil, plant, and livestock topics were administered to the workshop participants. To date, pre-test scores have averaged 63.8 (D average) while post-test scores have averaged 80.3 (B average), or an improvement of two letter grades. The popularity of the workshop is such that subsequent Workshops have been filled nearly one year in advance since the inception of the first workshop in 2001. With the ongoing demand for information regarding natural resource management, there is little doubt the Pasture and Livestock Management Workshop for Novices will continue to be a popular program with urban-absentee landowners.