

Rangeland Monitoring Program

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The objective of the Rangeland Monitoring Program is to assist range managers with monitoring and improving rangeland health, thereby increasing their subsequent profits. The program was implemented during the summer of 2006 under the direction of Amanda (Hancock) Gearhart and was funded with a grant from USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. Some common techniques for monitoring rangeland health were explained and producers had the option to choose techniques that met their time and technical constraints. Permanent photoplots often were chosen to observe changes in plant composition and production because they are practical and require a minimum of plant identification. Rangeland monitoring materials and technical assistance were provided to approximately 20 cooperators in North and South Dakota. The project continued in 2008 with a grant from the North Dakota Natural Resources Trust (NRT).

During the summer of 2008, telephone follow-up conversations were conducted with producers first contacted in 2006. The major effort during 2008 was to expand the program to more cooperators over a wider geographic area. To achieve that goal, Extension agents were contacted in counties in the Missouri Coteau regarding potential cooperating producers. That effort resulted in the expansion of the program to several new counties and resulted in 20 new contacts, bringing the total number of participants to 40. The

levels of participation in the program are variable, but an extensive network of producers is being established.

An attempt was made to provide each new cooperator with individualized on-site assistance to explain the program offerings and how to initiate an ongoing monitoring program. Although time needed for visitation with a cooperator varied considerably, between one and two hours generally was used to explain the program and procedures. In some cases where individualized on-site visits were not feasible, an e-mail or letter was sent to the producer outlining the program and monitoring procedures, and providing other information.

At the on-site visits, cooperators received a book bag with a three-ring binder including: 1) a menu of monitoring techniques, 2) a notebook for record keeping, 3) information on selected cost-share and technical assistance programs available to producers, 4) a list and description of Web sites of interest to range and grassland managers, 5) portions of the Natural Resources Conservation Service ecological site description (state and transition model, production) for loamy ecological sites on the Missouri Coteau and 6) a copy of Perspectives in Grazing, a document produced by the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition profiling 10 innovative producers in North Dakota who have volunteered to serve as resources for other producers. The bag also contained a dry eraser board for use in photoplot monitoring, along with a ruler, flags and pen to monitor plant growth and regrowth.

Cooperators were encouraged to keep written records of their management activities and set up permanent photoplots for monitoring pasture health. Those cooperators who chose to establish plots received materials and assistance to set up the photoplots and take the first round of photographs.

The CGREC is committed to range monitoring. Follow-up visits with cooperators will be conducted in 2009.

An enhancement to the monitoring program was to provide more relevant information for producers on the research center's Web site. This included the establishment of the Range Managers Forum, now in cooperation with the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition. Also on the site is information on cost-share and technical assistance available to producers and links to other useful Web sites. This information can be accessed at www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu/streeter.



Chuck Lura visits with ranchers about proper rangeland monitoring.

Photos by Britt Jacobson, Project Coordinator, FARRMS