

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

Rancher to Rancher: Building a Community for Conservation in Montana



Ranchers often work in isolation and with limited support systems. Sparsely populated, eastern Montana lacks the rancher support system necessary to assist adoption of practices recommended by agricultural experts for the area. Regenerative grazing practices in eastern Montana could enhance forage productivity and rancher flexibility in response to their climate. Thus, a support group was created for ranchers to meet regularly, share experiences, and promote mentorship among new and experienced regenerative grazing adopters.



KEY ISSUES ADDRESSED

Although regenerative practices appear to be a promising practice in certain locations, transforming from business-as-usual can be a daunting task and requires navigating much uncertainty for ranchers. Regenerative grazing is relatively new to eastern Montana, making those who adopt it unique among the ranching community. Embarking in contemporary ranching practices can be isolating, especially in eastern Montana where the population is sparse. While workshops and other events hosted by Natural Resource Conservation Services frequently bring ranchers together, they don't always foster the consistency in meeting or devotion to social support from which the community might benefit.

PROJECT GOALS

- Create an accessible setting for ranchers in eastern Montana to meet regularly
- Facilitate peer-to-peer knowledge exchange
- Increase the number of ranchers using regenerative practices to improve soil conditions, increase forage availability and decrease reliance on purchased hay

STATE-WIDE INFLUENCE

Participants from each county relay what they learn to others in their area, fostering knowledge transfer across the state.



Participants on a Tour of Meyer Ranch/Abbey Bruski

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Meetings to Date: Group leadership has hosted two 4-hour meetings. Roughly thirty people attended, and a leadership committee was formed.

Ranch Tours: In addition to regular meetings, the group organizes visits to local ranches that practice regenerative grazing to visualize on-the-ground results.

Investing in Facilitator Training: Moderators who garnered some form of facilitator training prior to the meetings felt more confident in their ability to manage discussion and navigate conflict. Moderators established meeting rules for respectful exchange of ideas.

Transparent Goals and Objectives: Providing a detailed agenda and introductory discussion prompts prior to the meeting demonstrated respect for participants' time, structured the meeting, and reinforced the meeting goals and objectives.

Making The Time Spent Meaningful: The meeting structure follows a 4-hour agenda. The first two hours provide opportunities for introductions through discussion on "challenge questions." The second half of the meeting includes presentations by local practitioners of regenerative agriculture.

Collaborators

- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service – Montana

Funding Partner

- A local bank

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LESSONS LEARNED

The size of the group and meeting room layout influenced the style of conversation and participant involvement. Smaller groups (less than 30) for initial meetings ensured everyone had an opportunity to contribute to conversation. Round tables and circular seating improved the conversation space.

Participants preferred to lower the cost of attendance by opting for a "potluck"-style menu rather than catering. Committee members worked with local businesses who support regenerative agriculture to help fund other expenses, such as the venue.

The work necessary for coordinating this group was surprisingly minimal. Once it got started, the momentum was driven by invested members who volunteered their time to present, host tours, and serve on the committee. New member interest is also growing.

Members were thrilled to learn, share experiences, and help each other. Despite much of the group previously being strangers, many have guided others both inside and outside of meetings, sometimes divulging "trade secrets" without expectation of reward or fear of advancing their competitors.

NEXT STEPS

- Establish a mission statement and descriptive name for the group that reflects the regenerative practice-centric mission
- Continue to expand reach and influence by expanding the invitation list
- Diversify regenerative practice skills and knowledge, including hiring a consultant to teach a specialized topic

For more information on this project, contact Sue FitzGerald:

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Round Tables to Promote Discussion/Sue FitzGerald/NRCS