

Outreach to Young & Underserved Ranchers

Focus Group Report

Prepared For

Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition



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Executive Summary

The Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition contracted with DJ Case & Associates (DJ Case) to conduct a series of ten young rancher focus groups across Kansas. The intent was to discover what outreach methods work for young and other underserved ranchers and assess their knowledge of conservation, agronomics and other ranching related topics. The focus group discussions were lively, and the participants shared many interesting thoughts and ideas.

The participants didn't make the decision to become ranchers lightly. They feel a sense of responsibility to the land, their families, and the ranching community. They work hard and do everything they can to leave the land better than they found it, and many hope that it remains with their family and continues to be a family farm in the future.

They are hungry for practical information that they can put to use to improve the land and their ranches. They are willing to invest their time and money to attend virtual or face-to-face sessions that they feel will be useful. They prefer conservation efforts that will improve ranch profitability by reducing costs or raising revenue over incentive programs.

They look to family, friends and other members of the ranching community for information. They prefer informal gatherings (like breakfast at a local diner) over organized events. They use both online and traditional media to find the information they need to run their ranch.

They would like to see the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition, Tallgrass Legacy Alliance and NRCS hold practical, educational events and do a better job of promoting them.

They respond most strongly to environmental messages that help them improve ranch operations but also report they are likely to respond to a message featuring the environment or wildlife, but a combination of the three is probably the most promising formula.



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Introduction

The Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition (KGLC) mission and vision is to regenerate Kansas grazing land resources through cooperative management, economics, ecology, production, education, and technical assistance programs. Recently, KGLC and its affiliates have seen generational changes in the ranching community and are concerned whether traditional methods of informing and influencing landowner management of their grasslands are still relevant. The next generation of ranchers, as well as “nontraditional” ranchers (e.g., people without a long family history of ranching) appear to seek and receive information in different ways than the more traditional ranching audience.

This effort was designed to discover:

- What outreach methods work for young and other underserved ranchers?
- Which social media communication works for the majority of the current ranching community (including young and other underserved ranchers)?
- Who does each group seek out to get knowledge about conservation, agronomics and other topics of interest to the ranching community?

With funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), KGLC contracted DJ Case & Associates (DJ Case), communication specialists in natural resources conservation—to research young and underserved ranchers across Kansas—specifically: to conduct focus groups with this important target audience.

Methods

KGLC and NRCS identified the following research objectives and approach for the project.

Research Objectives

To interact with young and underserved ranchers and grazing landowners across Kansas to better understand:

1. Their attitudes about and motivations for ranching and range management;
 2. Their knowledge and understanding of grassland management and natural resource sustainability;
 3. Barriers to and their willingness to adopt conservation practices on their lands;
 4. Where and from whom they get information about ranching (credible sources);
 5. The relative appeal of several conservation-related messages regarding native vegetation. (This fifth objective was added at the request of the Native Grasslands Alliance).
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Focus Group Research

Based on the stated research objectives and situation analysis, DJ Case determined that face-to-face focus groups were the best tool to collect the desired information.

Focus group interviews are well established and commonly used *qualitative* social science tools for gaining insights to why people think (or behave) as they do. A properly designed focus group draws out the motivational factors critical to understanding what is driving opinion or behavior.

In addition to collecting in-depth information from participants, focus groups also serve as powerful communication tools in their own right. By asking questions and facilitating discussion, participants will often share large amounts of critical information in a non-threatening and communicative way.

Note: Focus groups are not *quantitative* research. Participants are not randomly selected, nor are they statistically representative of entire populations. In fact, sometimes particular participants are selected precisely *because* of a particular viewpoint or situation they represent that may not be “usual” in the broader population. Focus groups do not generate “statistics” the way surveys do. But most importantly, focus groups allow participants to express their concerns, fears, and hopes in ways that survey methodology cannot, and generate information and insights regarding local audiences and issues that otherwise might be overlooked.

Locations

KGLC staff selected locations for ten focus groups (Figure 1). The meetings were held in hotel and restaurant meeting rooms, NRCS offices and local community centers—places that invitees were familiar with. Most focus groups were conducted in the evening, but a few morning and noon meetings were scheduled, depending on local availability. Regardless of timing, participants were offered a free meal as an incentive to attend. They were asked to arrive 30 minutes before the set meeting time so they could become acquainted with each other and get settled in. Immediately following the meal, each formal focus group was started, and ran for approximately two hours.

Figure 1: Locations of February 2020 rancher focus groups in Kansas.



Identifying and Inviting Participants

The KGLC asked local partners—ranging from NRCS, Kansas State Extension field staff, Kansas Conservation Districts, affiliates like Tallgrass Legacy Alliance and agricultural organizations including Farm Bureau and Kansas Livestock Association—to provide names of landowners they could invite to focus groups. KGLC staff or their partners invited the contacts by phone, in person and through email.

Topic Guide

Working closely with KGLC, DJ Case developed a script or topic guide to elicit attitudes and opinions to inform the research objectives (Appendix A). The topic guide was used to guide discussions at every focus group, although the facilitator could ask a variety of probing and follow-up questions based on responses. A representative of KGLC opened each focus group with a brief explanation of background and objectives; followed by the DJ Case facilitator leading the group through topic guide. Upon completion, the KGLC representative answered any questions that may have arisen during the meeting, described the next steps for the research, and thanked all for attending.

Results

Focus Group Participants

KGLC and its partners recruited 84 participants to ten focus groups. A total of 66 participants actually participated (Table 1).

Table 1. Numbers of participants in ten focus groups held across Kansas in February 2020.

Location	Date	# Recruited	# Participated
Howard	2/3/20 5:30 pm	11	8
Council Grove	2/4/20 11:00 am	10	9
Westmoreland	2/4/20 5:30 pm	9	7
Pretty Prairie	2/5/20 11:30 am	8	6
Salina	2/5/20 5:30 pm	12	12
Medicine Lodge	2/17/20 6:30 pm	11	11
Jetmore	2/18/20 10:00 am	5	5
Hays	2/18/20 6:30 pm	6	6
Oakley	2/19/20 8:30am	7	7
Tipton	2/19/20	5	5
TOTAL		84	76

Key Findings

The range and scope of landowner attitudes and opinions were very similar across all focus groups, so the following key findings are based on combined results from all ten focus groups. Findings are organized by the five main issues addressed in the focus group topic guide (Appendix A). These responses are not in the same order as the questions were asked during the discussions, but rather are grouped into similar topics, as follows:

- Issue 1: Attitudes and Motivations Regarding Ranching
- Issue 2: Understanding of Grassland Management/Sustainability
- Issue 3: Conservation Barriers
- Issue 4: Information Sources
- Issue 5: Testing Potential Messages

It is important to remember that this “coarse-scale prioritization” is a subjective assessment by the researchers, based on focus group responses, verbal and non-verbal cues, discussions before and after the focus groups, etc. It is an attempt to provide KGLC with a coarse sense of priority to help with implementation, without implying that the qualitative nature of the research can provide fine-scale prioritization.

A few nuances or unique responses heard in individual focus groups are reported in the *Differences by Location* section.

Issue 1: Attitudes and Motivations Regarding Ranching

Question: Why are you a rancher? (What are the rewards of ranching? What makes you feel good about what you do?)

Responses ranged widely on this question, but certainly a love of the work and the lifestyle came through in many of the responses.

Family: The largest category of responses to this question revolved around family. Many participants alluded to the desire to raise their kids on a farm, often the way they had been raised. Also, many farmed because they were committed to their family farm – being a second, third, or even fifth generation of a family on the same piece of land. Leaving a legacy for their children was a common theme.

There was also some discussion about how being part of the farming community was important. This was similar to the connection between family and farming. Although not a prevalent theme, more than one mentioned the idea that they felt pressure from the family to remain on the farm or to come back to it.

Independence: The next most popular reason listed for wanting to be a rancher was the independence of the job, being their own boss, making their own decisions, setting their own schedule.

Challenge: Another fairly common reason for wanting to be a rancher was enjoying the challenge of the work – whether it was figuring out and improving on the genetics of their herd, or the physically grueling labor of installing fencing – the physical and mental challenge was important to many of the participants.

Higher Purpose: Some of the ranchers felt it was a calling. They mentioned the nobleness of a job that feeds the nation and the world, as well as serving people and their love of animals.

Stewardship: Some participants mentioned an appreciation for the natural world, being stewards of the land, being outdoors, seeing the cycle of nature and life and death was also important to them.

Reasons for being a rancher (with number of occurrences):

- Family – 29
- Independence - 17
- Challenge - 13
- Higher Purpose/Love of animals – 7
- Steward of the land - 6
- Part of the natural cycle – 6
- Legacy – 5
- Being outdoors – 5
- Variety in the work – 5
- Community – 5
- Feeding people – 4
- Part of something bigger than self – 4
- A calling – 3
- Family pressure - 3
- Serving people – 1

**Question: How do you view your relationship to the land?
(job, vocation or calling)**

The conversations following this question covered a lot of ground.

Family/Generations: Some groups talked about how land gets passed down (or doesn't), how older or competitive ranchers interact with each other. Some talked about how it's hard for young people to get land and get into the business of ranching. There were also conversations about expectations of staying on or leaving the land – particularly about how parents expected kids to go to college and how college doesn't encourage ranching as an occupation for graduates.

Relationship to the Land: There were several comments about man's relationship to the land and about bettering the planet. This was often in reference to soil health specifically but also to climate issues. Most did feel an emotional and/or spiritual connection to the land. Often this was related to the idea that their own family had sacrificed and created this legacy of land or that they wanted to honor previous generations (usually family but not always) by being good stewards so the land could continue to be passed down and taken care of.

Topics discussed included (with number of occurrences)

- Part of family's legacy – 16
- Emotional connection – 14
- A steward – 13
- Bettering the planet – 7
- Part of the evolution of the land – 1
- Part of improving health - 1
- Just a business – 1

Question: What do you want the status of your land to be after you're gone? How will it be viewed by the next generation? (Do you have plans to pass it on, sell it, protect it with easements, etc.?)

Overwhelmingly, people definitely want their land to stay in agriculture.

People want to pass their land down to family if possible, but not necessarily. They want to pass it to someone who feels a connection to the place and who will work to protect and take care of the land. They don't want their land to become part of a large agricultural conglomerate, or even worse, to be "converted to condos." They want it to go to and be taken care of by someone who will care about the land.

Passing land down to their children can be legally complex, but they wanted to pass their land on to a child who wants the land and wants to work it. Many of them seem to have worked for or seen land that was poorly managed by an owner who inherited the land and really wasn't interested in being a rancher.

While in general they want their land to stay in the family, there were many examples of how hard that can be. Examples included:

- Family that has no interest in working the land wanting a share of the inheritance.
- Splitting the land up so siblings get equal shares, but then none of the smaller parcels are big enough to sustain a family.
- Those who inherit the land leasing it to others who don't care about the land.
- Incorporating the ranch so that one sibling can buy the others' shares over time or as a means of distributing revenue from the operation to other family members.

Question: What perceptions does the public have about ranchers that you would like to change?

The most popular response was the public thinks all ranches are factory farming and that ranchers don't care about the welfare of their animals.

The use/abuse of GMOs and hormones was another big topic. The participants felt consumers don't have a good understanding of those issues and think all the food coming from ranchers/farmers is bad. They also didn't like the perception that their world is easy and idealized and that they are all rich because they get government incentives and because they have a lot of land.

Topics included (numbered by occurrences):

- Care about their animals – 6
- GMO's (and hormones) – 3
- It's easy – 3
- Just get government handouts – 3
- Make a lot of money – 3
- Ethical people – 2
- Polluters – 2
- Uneducated – 1

Attitudes and Motivations Conclusions/Recommendations:

The participants didn't make the decision to become ranchers lightly. They feel a sense of responsibility to the land, their families and the ranching community. They work hard and do everything they can to leave the land better than they found it and many hope to pass it on to their children and hope that it remains a family farm in the future.



This discussion uncovered many powerful motivators that can be used to persuade ranchers to undertake land management and conservation practices.

Issue 2: Understanding of Grassland Management/Sustainability

Question: What information do you need to be successful?

What speakers do you *most* want to hear from?

How far would you travel to attend a training you were interested in?

Participants were very interested in high quality, practical learning opportunities. While expense, travel and other issues are considerations, they were not deal breakers if the ranchers felt the content would be useful.

Topics: Topics they said they were interested in included:

- Environmental sustainability
- Soil health
- Business fundamentals (markets, cash flow, profitability, book keeping)
- Transition/succession planning

Speakers: Specific speakers mentioned that are doing things in new ways

- Jim Gerrish
- Joel Salatin
- Allan Nation
- Jay Parsons (seems to be a sheep expert)
- John Kemp
- Brandon Rocky
- Michael Thompson
- Chad Basinger
- Corbitt Wall
- David Cole

Most importantly, they were interested in offerings from people with real world experience. A few said they appreciated “university research,” but the majority much preferred actual ranchers presenting their experience. Some even said they had no interest in presentations from researchers who did not have to make a living from the land. Participants in Salina didn’t seem to have much respect for Kansas State.

Travel: Most participants were willing to travel, even internationally, for good helpful information and tools depending on the time of year and their schedule. But, they would also like some more local opportunities (but still won’t go if not good, worth the time). During the busy season they are willing to change their schedules for programming they see as very high quality. They want quality – info they can relate to and use - much more than worried about how far something is. In order to attend, sometimes sponsorship is important to help financially. Also, more willing to drive for hands on workshops than just a talk.

Participants in the Hays focus group said they would rather look up information on YouTube than go to a presentation. Some would go if it was not during busy season, but it would need to be really good.

The use of incentives was a mixed bag. Some participants said incentives were important to convince them to attend; others said they made no difference.

Topics Mentioned included (number indicates the number of mentions)

- Learn from folks with real world experience – 10
 - Want to learn through hands on and in small groups – 6
 - Grazing info – 6
 - Environmental sustainability – 6
 - New ways of doing things – 5
 - Trusts and land transitions – 5
 - Business fundamentals – 5
 - Cattle care and profit – 1
 - Chance to learn from others – 3
 - Alternative income streams – 3
 - Burning – 3
 - Marketing products – 3
 - Cover crops – 2
 - People skills – 2
 - Improving weight on cattle – 2
 - Finding and keeping good labor – 2
 - Executive Link – 1
 - H2A visa and labor – 1
 - New grazing tech – 1
 - Ranching for Profit – 1
 - Resource management – 1
 - Sheep – animal health – 1
 - Small group get togethers – 1
 - Water quality issues – 1
-

Grasslands/Sustainability Conclusions/Recommendations:

The ranchers who participated in these focus groups love their land and honestly desire to care for the creatures (domestic and wild) that live there. They are hungry for practical information that they can put to use to improve the land and their ranches. They are willing to invest their time and



money, even during the busy season, to attend a session they feel will be useful. Because of their straightforward, practical nature, they are more interested in advice from real world ranchers like themselves rather than scientists, politicians or “business types.”

It is likely that practical, immediately applicable educational events, both face-to-face and virtual, will attract ranchers. These events should feature other ranchers sharing their experiences, and should be timed to avoid “busy seasons,” which vary across different ranch types. If presenters can show how land management and conservation practices could be implemented in ways that benefit (or even just not hurt) a rancher’s bottom line, they would persuade the ranchers to take action.

Participants gave some indications about who the best “spokespeople” should be in messages meant to persuade ranchers into action. The “ideal” spokesperson would be (or at least represent) a rancher’s father, mentor, neighbor or some other experienced, trusted source of information. The use of testimonials could be effective, especially if they could feature local ranchers. Actual ranchers should be featured not only in events but in ads, websites, videos and any other media meant to communicate with ranchers.

Issue 3: Conservation Barriers

Question: Do you currently engage in any conservation practices on your rangeland? (providing habitat, grazing native grasses, etc.) Why or why not? If not, what would it take to get you to participate?

Nearly all focus group participants said that they currently engaged in one or more conservation practices on their land.

Grazing Practices: Rotational grazing came up the most—including grazing goats for brush control.

Government Incentives: There was a sort of bipolar reaction to conservation easements. Some participants used them and liked them; others felt they were only appropriate in certain circumstances; and others were opposed to them completely. Even if they were using incentives, most participants shared some kinds of concerns about it—mostly centered around the loss of control of their land and/or government meddling. Many of the participants did not care for CRP or other similar programs either. Many seemed leery of government programs for conservation in general.

Burning: Burning came up most often in Salina (possibly because of proximity to the Flint Hills). Overall, burning was viewed as a positive thing and most participants seem to do it regularly. A few participants mentioned that burning was probably being done too frequently, and that there was no need to do it every year. Burning was certainly a topic of high interest.

Water: Preserving water was important to the participants, and they were engaged in protecting ponds and installing tanks and water lines. One rancher in Council Grove spoke of receiving an award for fencing out a pond and installing a tank. Water issues came up across all of the focus groups, but water was not discussed as often as grazing practices for conservation.



Chemicals: There was some talk of reducing chemical usage—to be more organic. One rancher said: "You know these Flint Hills, we don't have to fertilize those things to make them productive. I don't think the system was created that way. We've got to start working with it, but there's all kinds of conservation things out there that are available."

And it's just growing minute by minute. And like I said earlier, the consumer's ready to pay for that. They're willing to start paying a premium for that stuff. And the cool thing is with the internet, I know families that are supporting a whole family off of one quarter section today.”

Cover Crops: The use of cover crops also came up at all the focus groups, and seemed to be of special importance in Council Grove. This was related to no-till techniques as well, and these two topics were often discussed at the same time. The use of no-till techniques and cover crops seems to be fairly ubiquitous among these participants.

Conservation Barriers Conclusions/Recommendations:

Again, it is clear that these ranchers want to do right by their land and their livestock, and they want to improve the soil health and incorporate conservation measures whenever possible. At the same time, they clearly have laser focus on ensuring that their operations are profitable, both to feed their families and so they are able to pass on a thriving operation when their children are grown. For these reasons they are predisposed toward conservation, but their practical nature and the need to show a profit mean that they will quickly lose interest in any practices that don't produce results commensurate with the effort/cost.

The conservation community should put great emphasis on techniques and programs that will improve ranch profitability by reducing costs or raising the price they can get for their livestock. The conservation aspects should be secondary. However, it appears they will still be interested in conservation for its own sake—so long as it does not *subtract* from the bottom line. They are less motivated (and perhaps trusting) of government-sponsored conservation programs that don't improve ranch operations in any way other than the incentives themselves.



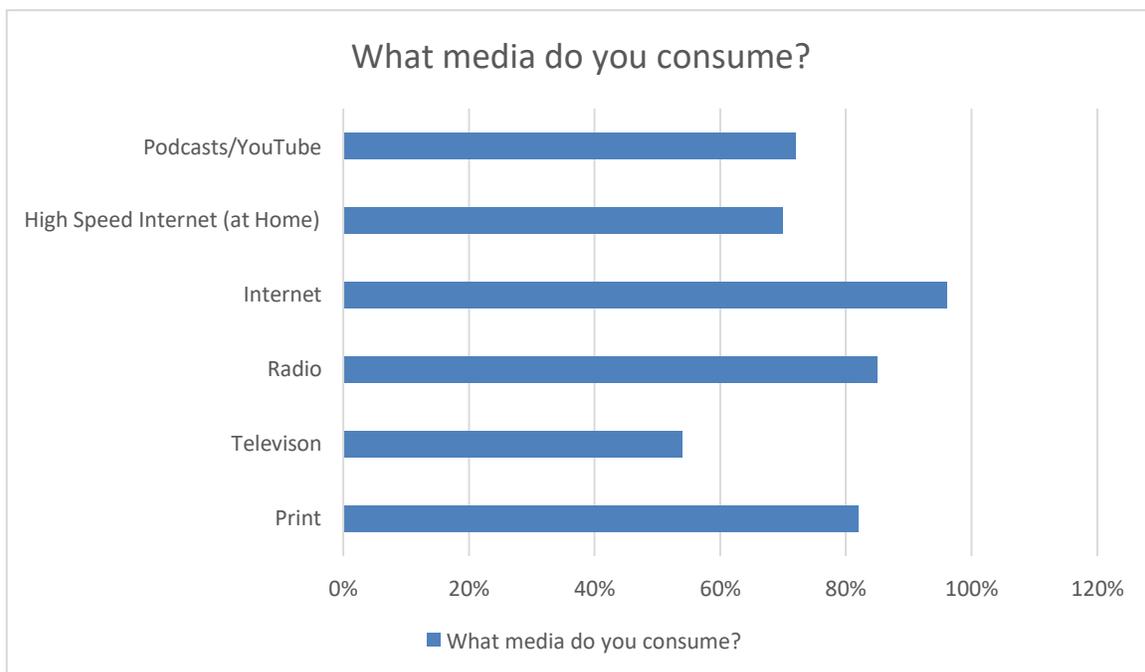
Issue 4: Information Sources

Question: What media do you consume?

“Traditional” (TV, radio, print, Web-based, etc.)?

Web-based or Social (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, other)?

Do you have access to high-speed Internet?



Media use:

Internet – Internet was the medium used most by participants, and it was used by nearly all of them. Many reported having high speed internet in their homes, although there were a few who did not have it or only had it intermittently. Many said they used **YouTube** and **Podcasts** to stay informed and learn new skills.

Radio – Radio was the second most reported media outlet. This could be due to the large amounts of time spent in a truck or tractor or both on the ranch or running ranch errands across long distances.

Print – Print was only slightly less popular than radio. Most participants received one or more print publications and seemed to rate the quality of the information fairly high.

TV – Participants rated television as the least-used media discussed. They didn't have much use for a passive medium they couldn't "take with them."

Here are a few specific media outlets brought up during focus group conversations:

Television:

- RFD (Ag TV)
- In Tipton, "Channel 12" was mentioned once

Journals:

- The No-Till Farmer
- Cover Crop
- Real Farmers
- High Plains Journal
- Progressive Farmer (Cattleman, Dairyman, Forage)
- Grass and Grain
- Cattle Range

Internet

- AgraPlus site
- AgWeb
- Seemed like a lot of folks looked things up on the internet rather than following or subscribing to specific sites.
- (Hays area folks seemed to have limited high speed)

Email newsletters

- Cow Calf Newsletter
- Hay and Forage

Social Media:

- Twitter seemed to be used more than Facebook, though it is used as is Instagram
- KLA on Facebook
- Feeder Flash on Facebook
- YouTube used by some
- Podcasts as well

Radio/podcasts

- Ag Talk
 - Bell Market
 - CRVN out of Lexington, Nebraska (mentioned for market reports)
 - AM 880 (in Oakley)
 - Market to Market is a podcast
 - People mentioned listening to market reports on the radio
-

Question: Who (or what) do you turn to for reliable information on ranching techniques and programs?

Who is the first person (or office) you would ask for information?

Is there a specific resource you would go to (website, online forum, etc.)?

Family: Most commonly mentioned, and most often first mentioned, was family. In particular, participants often mentioned their dads as primary go-to's for reliable information. Also, if they had family that worked for a seed company or NRCS or some other farming/ranching-related entity, then this was often their go-to. But, they would first mention that the person was somehow related and then where they worked.

Peers: Peers were the next most common group that was discussed. These were often friends or other ranchers of a similar age and often shared a similar approach to how they cared for their land. Similar to responses about family members, sometimes a friend was referenced that had expertise or a position in a given area (soil, agronomist, etc.), but just like with family, they would first refer to them as a friend and then say the position of that person.

Mentors: The category of mentors was similar to peers, but we separated it out because sometimes participants referred to someone specifically as a mentor. These folks were also often called "old timers."

Neighbors were mentioned next most often, this group seems similar to the peers and mentors but also have the geographic similarity to the focus group participant.

Veterinarians and distributors (particularly seed distributors) were mentioned next most often, though much less than the previous categories.

Here are a few other groups resources that were mentioned:

- Extension offices
- Universities
- Soil for Climate
- Ranching for Profit alum group
- Publications (generally)
- Google
- Nutritionist
- NRCS
- KS Ag Leadership Program
- KLA
- Farmers Business network
- Farm Bureau
- Allied Genetic Resources
- Agronomist

There are several items of note in this discussion: The reliance on personal contacts makes referrals a potential strategy, but from a messaging/communications perspective, it is an indication that testimonials (especially local testimonials) would be a good method for communicating with ranchers about conservation practices. It is also interesting to note that in this process, no one mentioned the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism.

Question: How do you feel about communicating with your peers concerning ranching issues of mutual interest?

Question: Are you interested in forming a private rancher's group to share information and content?

The answers to these questions were similar enough that we combined the analysis. Overall, it seemed like folks would really like to get together with their peers in an informal way. There was quite a bit of talk about how their dads used to meet at the coffee shop with other farmers and that is not really happening anymore. There was some really interesting discussion on the need for this because of how high the suicide rate is for those involved in agriculture.

Notably, however, it seems that while there is a desire get together and help likeminded individuals, it needs to come about organically, not labeled or linked to a specific organization. There were some who felt that an online option would be nice simply because they have too much else on their plates. Others felt online is too impersonal. There were some that were worried about people feeling competitive and not wanting to get together to share information, but this seemed like a minority view and overall they liked the idea of peers coming together informally.

Some mentioned that it would be particularly good for “progressive” ranchers (ranchers with “out-of-the-box” ideas) as they often feel as if they are all alone.

The challenge for any organization trying to support this concept is keeping the organic feeling the participants discussed—keeping it from feeling like it is tightly connected to a particular organization.

Question: What could Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition, Tallgrass Legacy Alliance and NRCS do to better serve your needs?

The groups tossed around several ideas. There was a consistent request that these organizations do a better job of advertising/promoting who they are and the programs they offer. The ranchers also wanted more events and more information they could access on their own.

As in earlier discussions, these ranchers want to improve their ranches and they know they need to learn more to do it. They are willing to spend time attending events and studying information, but they need that information to be very easy access and user friendly. Organizations need to look for ways to get quality information in front of ranchers using trusted sources.

Organized by Organization

Specific to Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition:

- Advertise/promote better – 4
- Help to connect across generations – 1
- Farm visits – 1

Specific to Tallgrass Legacy Alliance

- Advertise/promote better – 1

Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition and Tallgrass Legacy Alliance combined

- Workshops – 3
- Farm tours – 2
- Provide easy-to-access information on the benefits of different crops – 2
- Get people together more – 2
- Grazing school – 2
- Address Red Hills grazing (not just Flint Hills) – 1
- Conferences – 1
- Connect the county boards – 1
- Info on cover crops – 1
- Info on electric fencing - 1
- Info on Rotational grazing – 1
- Info on viability of different grasses – 1 (similar to point on plants)
- Help folks acquire land – 1
- Facilitate interactions with consumers – 1
- Be an intermediary with NRCS – 1
- More outreach – 1
- Stocksmanship schools – 1
- Streamline paperwork – 1

Specific to NRCS

- Advertise – 3
 - Streamline paperwork – 3
 - Consistency of employees – 3 (some offices very helpful, some not and employee turnover)
 - Clarity in programs – 2
 - Get into the schools – 1
 - Improve access to information – 1
 - Don't be so picky (this person didn't want so many guidelines) – 1
 - Workshops – 1
-

Organized by Topic

Communication (10 Requests)

- Advertise – 3 (NRCS)
- Advertise/promote better – 1 (TLA)
- Advertise/promote better – 4 (KGLC)
- More outreach – 1 (KGLC & TLA)
- Facilitate interactions with consumers – 1 (KGLC & TLA)

Events (12 Requests)

- Farm tours – 2 (KGLC & TLA)
- Get people together more – 2 (KGLC & TLA)
- Grazing school – 2 (KGLC & TLA)
- Stockmanship schools – 1 (KGLC & TLA)
- Conferences – 1 (KGLC & TLA)
- Workshops – 1 (NRCS)
- Workshops – 3 (KGLC & TLA)

Information (8 requests)

- Address Red Hills grazing (not just Flint Hills) – 1 (KGLC & TLA)
- Info on cover crops – 1 (KGLC & TLA)
- Info on electric fencing – 1 (KGLC & TLA)
- Info on Rotational grazing – 1 (KGLC & TLA)
- Info on viability of different grasses – 1 (similar to point on plants) (KGLC & TLA)
- Easy-to-access information on the benefits of different crops – 2 (KGLC & TLA)
- Improve access to information – 1 (NRCS)

1 on 1 Assistance (2 Requests)

- Farm visits – 1 (KGLC)
- Help folks acquire land – 1 (KGLC & TLA)

Youth Related (2 Requests)

- Get into the schools – 1 (NRCS)
- Help to connect across generations – 1 (KGLC)

Operational Improvements (12 Requests)

- Consistency of employees – 3 (some offices very helpful, some not and employee turnover) (NRCS)
- Don't be so picky (this person didn't want so many guidelines) – 1 (NRCS)
- Be an intermediary with NRCS – 1 (KGLC & TLA)
- Clarity in programs – 2 (NRCS)
- Streamline paperwork – 1 (KGLC & TLA)
- Streamline paperwork – 3 (NRCS)
- Connect the county boards – 1 (KGLC & TLA)

Information Sources Conclusions/Recommendations:



Ranchers are practical people who want to improve the operations of their ranches. They seek that information first from their family, friends, mentors and other members of the

ranching community. They like the idea of informal gatherings with fellow ranchers but are resistant of turning these gatherings into “clubs” or turning them over to the control of sponsors. They are independent and slightly untrusting of the government and other large organizations and would rather share their concerns and get their advice from fellow ranchers without interference or supervision.

They use online and traditional media to find the information they need. Despite their rural, somewhat isolated locations, they are migrating from traditional to digital media outlets like the rest of America.

When asked how the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition, Tallgrass Legacy Alliance and NRCS could better serve them, ranchers wanted more educational/networking events, more information they can access on their own and that these opportunities be better communicated so they can take advantage of them.



Issue 5: Testing Potential Messages

At the request of the Native Grasslands Alliance, KGLC added a written exercise to the end of each focus group, in which participants were asked to rate the relative appeal of several conservation-related messages regarding native vegetation.

It is important to note that most focus group participants were already managing native grasses on their ranches, so they were perhaps not the ideal target audience for this

test, but researchers still hoped to learn about the relative value of the various messages from this group.

Three basic messages were tested, each with multiple supporting messages.

Native vegetation is good for your ranch

- Cattle grazing on native grasses gain an additional 50 to 150 lbs. per head
- Grazing on native grasses lowers your cost per pound of meat produced
- Native grasses are more drought tolerant (reducing your risk during dry weather)
- Native grasses produce more hay tonnage/acre
- Native grass hay is harvested during a less busy time of year

Native vegetation is good for wildlife

- Native vegetation provides habitat for healthier wildlife populations
- Native vegetation provides food for healthier wildlife populations
- Native vegetation is good for:
 - Bees, butterflies, and other pollinators
 - Beneficial soil organisms
 - Game birds and songbirds
 - Deer/Pronghorn/elk
 - Turkey/quail/prairie chickens/grouse

Native vegetation is good for the environment

- Native grasses improve water quality by filtering groundwater through extensive root systems
- Native grasses reduce flooding by holding water in extensive root systems
- Native grasses sequester more carbon due to increased biomass
- Native grasses decrease erosion due to extensive root systems
- Native Grasses increase soil organic matter and overall soil health

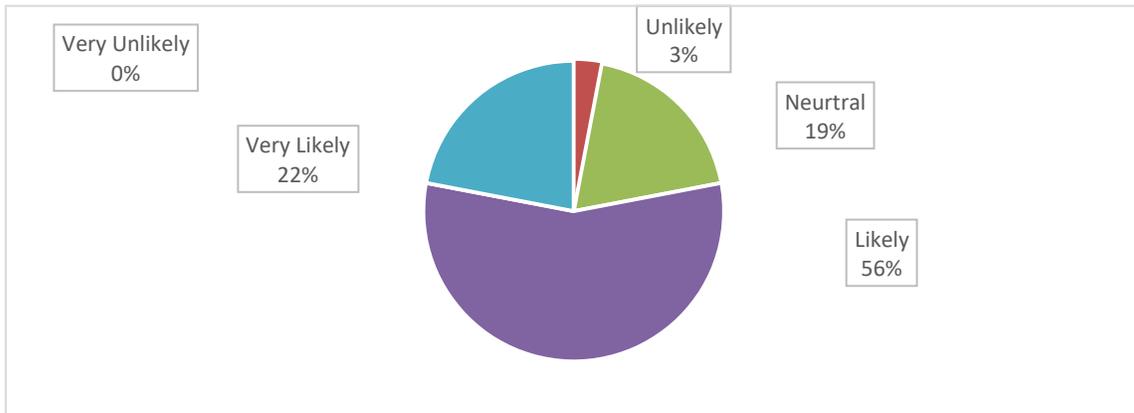
These test messages were developed at the inaugural workshop of the Native Grasslands Alliance. The full questionnaire is included in Appendix B.

The results of the exercise are included here along with conclusions/recommendations.

Message 1: Native Vegetation is good for your ranch

- Cattle grazing on native grasses gain an additional 50 to 150 lbs. per head
- Grazing on native grasses lowers your cost per pound of meat produced
- Native grasses are more drought tolerant (reducing your risk during dry weather)
- Native grasses produce more hay tonnage/acre
- Native grass hay is harvested during a less busy time of year

Please consider the main message and all the bullets underneath. Assuming this message came from a trustworthy source, how likely is a rancher like you to contact them (via phone, email or website) for information on adding native vegetation to your land?



Now please consider each bullet individually. How likely is each statement to motivate a rancher like you to consider switching part of your ranch to native grasses?

	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very likely	Likely & Very Likely
Native grasses are more drought tolerant (reducing your risk during dry weather)	0%	3%	11%	45%	41%	86%
Grazing on native grasses lowers your cost per pound of meat produced	0%	1%	15%	48%	36%	84%
Cattle grazing on native grasses gain an additional 50 to 150 lbs. per head	3%	5%	15%	50%	27%	77%
Native grasses produce more hay tonnage/acre	9%	15%	35%	28%	13%	41%
Native grass hay is harvested during a less busy time of year	7%	19%	37%	28%	9%	37%

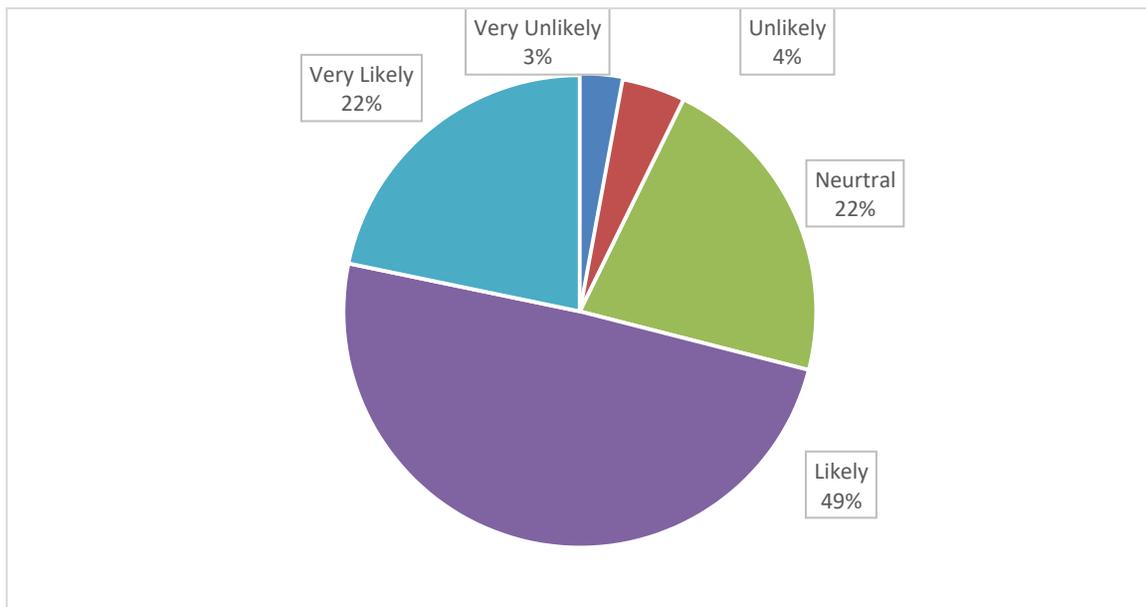
Conclusions/Recommendations:

This was a popular message. A few comments indicated some disbelief, so crediting a source for the statistics would make the message even more effective. The supporting messages regarding hay were significantly less motivating than the others, possibly because not all the participants harvest hay off of their land rather than simply grazing it. This could be a topic worth investigating in the future.

Message 2: Native Vegetation is good for wildlife

- Native vegetation provides habitat for healthier wildlife populations
- Native vegetation provides food for healthier wildlife populations
- Native vegetation is good for:
 - Bees, butterflies, and other pollinators
 - Beneficial soil organisms
 - Game birds and songbirds
 - Deer/Pronghorn/elk
 - Turkey/quail/prairie chickens/grouse

Please consider the main message and all the bullets underneath. Assuming this message came from a trustworthy source, how likely is a rancher like you to contact them (via phone, email or website) for information on adding native vegetation to your land?



Now please consider each bullet individually. How likely is each statement to motivate a rancher like you to consider switching part of your ranch to native grasses?

	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very likely	Likely & Very Likely
Native vegetation is good for beneficial soil organisms	2%	2%	11%	55%	31%	86%
Native vegetation is good for turkey/quail/prairie chickens/grouse	1%	4%	23%	45%	26%	71%
Native vegetation provides habitat for healthier wildlife populations	3%	4%	22%	49%	22%	71%
Native vegetation is good for bees, butterflies, and other pollinators	1%	4%	28%	42%	24%	66%
Native vegetation provides food for healthier wildlife populations	4%	6%	24%	46%	19%	66%
Native vegetation is good for game birds and songbirds	1%	4%	32%	35%	26%	62%
Native vegetation is good for deer/pronghorn/elk	1%	9%	30%	36%	24%	60%

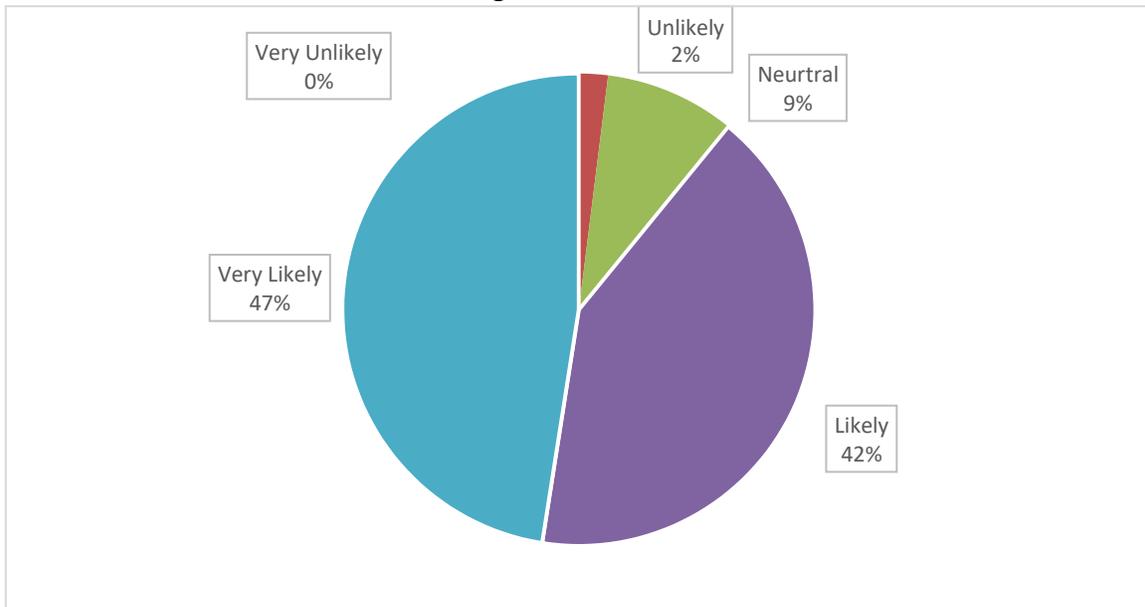
Conclusions/Recommendations:

This is a popular message as well. Several individuals mentioned that wildlife had to take a backseat to production and/or profitability. We could add a supporting message like “Good for wildlife *and* your ranch” or maybe “Good for your ranch *and* for wildlife” in future versions of this message.

There was an interesting trend regarding the “soil organisms” and “pollinators” supporting messages. Some of the participants who indicated they enjoyed wildlife did not rate these two statements as high as the “typical wildlife” statements, while individuals who felt that wildlife was not a priority still tended to rate these two statements as more motivating. We could consider including the “soil organisms” and “pollinators” supporting statements in message 3 on the environment as well.

Message 3: Native Vegetation is good for the environment

- Native grasses improve water quality by filtering groundwater through extensive root systems
- Native grasses reduce flooding by holding water in extensive root systems
- Native grasses sequester more carbon due to increased biomass
- Native grasses decrease erosion due to extensive root systems
- Native Grasses increase soil organic matter and overall soil health



Please consider the main message and all the bullets underneath. Assuming this message came from a trustworthy source, how likely is a rancher like you to contact them (via phone, email or website) for information on adding native vegetation to your land?

Now please consider each bullet individually. How likely is each statement to motivate a rancher like you to consider switching part of your ranch to native grasses?

	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very likely	Likely & Very Likely
Native grasses decrease erosion due to extensive root systems	0%	0%	5%	45%	51%	95%
Native grasses improve water quality by filtering groundwater through extensive root systems	0%	2%	11%	45%	43%	88%
Native Grasses increase soil organic matter and overall soil health	0%	2%	11%	40%	48%	88%
Native grasses reduce flooding by holding water in extensive root systems	0%	2%	11%	42%	46%	88%
Native grasses sequester more carbon due to increased biomass	0%	4%	25%	46%	24%	70%

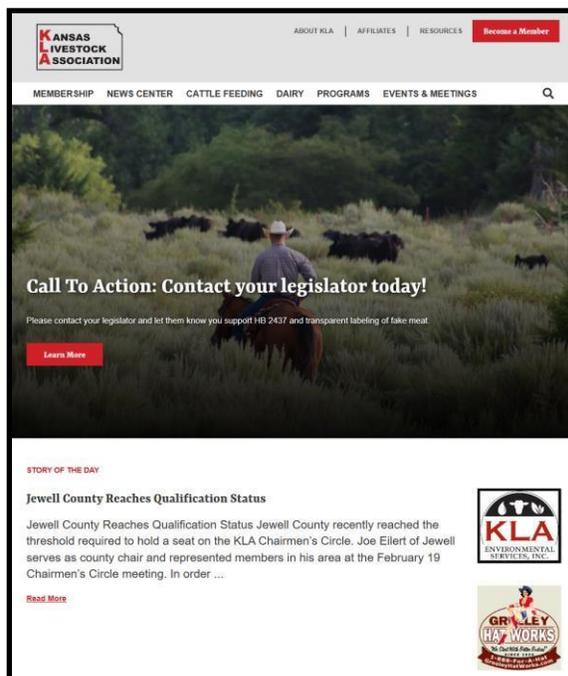
Conclusions/Recommendations:

Based on participant ratings, this was the most motivating message of the three. It seemed to hit a sweet spot between environmental concerns and ranching. Participants saw it as a positive message because it was about protecting the environment, but from a purely practical perspective, protecting the environment also protected their ranch and improved productivity. We might want to consider modifying this message to include something like “what’s good for the environment is good for your ranch” to solidify that idea with readers.

As mentioned earlier, we could consider repeating the “pollinator” and “soil organism” supporting messages from the wildlife message in this message as well.

Overall Message Conclusions/Recommendations:

All three key messages (and all but two of the supporting messages) were seen as likely or highly likely to motivate a rancher to inquire about switching some of their land to native grasses. With the changes indicated above, they could become even more convincing. These messages are best used in combination so as to appeal to both the practical nature of the rancher and his/her desire to be a steward of the environment. The messages could be run in a combination of online and traditional media. If possible, the content should feature real ranchers and promote practical programs that promise landowners a reasonable return on the time, effort and expenses.



Differences by Location

In general, responses by focus group participants were very similar to each other, regardless of location. However, some nuances as well as a few differences or “outlier” comments did arise, and these are noted below.

Howard

Participants here felt ranching was a calling and they enjoy the challenge. They feel part of the cycles of life by ranching, and the idea came out that “there is nothing more fundamental than raising food.” Like other participants they want their land to stay in ag, but some were dealing with family problems of who ‘deserves’ the land based on inheritance and who is working the land. They liked the idea of getting together with peers, but not necessarily with immediate neighbors (“Good fences make good neighbors.”). Due to time constraints, some offered the idea of making get-togethers

more family oriented to make it easier to balance other commitments (the only focus group to propose this format). Like other locations, these participants were interested in training/workshops, but this is the only location where participants encouraged the participation of absentee landowners. Only half of this group had high-speed Internet—the lowest percentage of all the locations. This group suggested that KGLC could provide a great service by being an intermediary between ranchers and the federal government agencies.

Council Grove

Just as in other locations, Council Grove participants expressed an emotional connection to their land, and that ranching was often about improving the planet and human health, and that they are stewards and part of the evolution of a place. This translated into a desire by some to connect directly with consumers, and conservation practices included reduction of chemicals on their land, the only group where either of these things was mentioned. “Change public misperceptions about ranching by the ways that I ranch.” Recognized that higher yields were not the key, but rather higher profitability. They would like to get together, informally, with their peers, but there were concerns about feeling competitive and not always wanting to share information (intense local competition for land and leases). To be successful, any such peer groups would need to grow organically—could not be “sponsored” by an agency or organization. Were very interested in field days, ranch tours, chances to visit other working facilities—especially those with non-traditional or progressive ideas.

Westmoreland

In Westmoreland, folks are ranchers due to similar reasons above, but also a love of the agricultural community itself and getting to be part of that. “I owe it to the ones who came before me.” Everyone in the group shared a general dislike for deer hunters (lock up the land and don’t discourage invasive species, etc.) but they all agreed that every landowner has the right to do whatever he/she wants with the land. It came up that they wish the public knew that ranchers love their animals and are ethical people trying hard to be good stewards of the land. Similar to Council Gove they were somewhat concerned about competition—especially among immediate neighbors.

Pretty Prairie

The stewardship aspect of ranching came out very strong in Pretty Prairie, as did the emotional connection to the land. This was one of three locations that mentioned they would like more information on being more environmentally sustainable in their ranching practices. Family, neighbors, and peers are who they turn to for reliable information and they don’t want people to think they are just taking government handouts. All felt strong competition with their immediate neighbors. They lamented that the local community relationships were stronger “in the old days,” but they sensed it might be getting better again. All were interested in the possibility of forming an informal peer group.

Salina

This was another group that placed great emphasis on the family connection or “calling” to ranching. “It’s an honor to continue the family legacy,” and “I don’t want to be the one to lose it.” They all wanted their kids to continue on after them, but some were reluctant to set up trusts or transitions for fear of limiting their kids’ option when their turn came. They would like more help on business fundamentals and how to market their products better. They use those close, personal connections for information but also distributors and extension offices. They showed initial interest the online option for connecting with peers, but after discussion mostly agreed it just wasn’t practical. They agreed that most ranchers were small operations, but the public paints all of them with the “big Ag” brush, and so they get a lot of bad media. The concern was raised that “Big Ag” is trying to pit consumers vs. small ranch operations.

Medicine Lodge

Here the issue came up that there are fewer and fewer people engaging in this work, and there was an obligation to keep it going that extended beyond just the family connection. They also had strong recognition of the sacrifices of previous generations that helped them to be where they are today. Most were eager to improve the health of the land and implement conservation measures, but were practical about the fact that the operation had to remain profitable. Reliable info comes from close personal connections as well as the extension offices. Recognized it was difficult to generalize good information, partly because Barber County was one of the most diverse counties in the state. This group was very interested in more information about marketing their product. They want people to know they love their animals and to be better informed about GMO’s. They discussed the need for more/better information about ranching outside of the Flint Hills. “There is other ranching in the state of Kansas, such as Red Hills Grazing.”

Jetmore

Here there was a very strong interest in having kids take over the farm in due time (“I wouldn’t work near as hard if I didn’t want my kids to get into it”), although all said they would not pressure their kids. All wanted information on trusts and succession planning. All agreed it was difficult to talk to neighbors—mostly because of intense competition for access to land. But all said they would share what they have learned and most were interested in some sort of informal peer network, even if it were online. Labor issues were discussed more in Jetmore than any other focus group. Difficulty in finding and keeping good labor (drugs, work ethic, cost). They wanted information on how to deal with H2-A Visas. They agreed that ranchers in general don’t know how to communicate very well, but they also didn’t think communications training would probably be worth the time investment.

Hays

Hays was the only focus group that had a person who admitted their relationship to the land was just a business one, not emotional. The others all had strong attachments. All agreed that land was the most important resource, and there was a strong dislike of hunters and oil companies that leased up ground so it was not available for grazing. "Young ranchers can't compete for the price of land or leases." Similarly, most disliked CRP program and other related set-aside programs. "It's government-funded weeds." They saw it as retirement money for older ranchers, and again, they could not compete with pricing. All agreed it was nearly impossible to make a living without another source of income. They'd like to get together with peers but don't have time and think doing it online would be too impersonal.

Oakley

In Oakley there were very strong family connections to the land over many generations. "The land is the only constant in life." There was very strong interest in having their kids stay actively involved. Few knew anything about trusts or the specifics of succession. "It's hard, I try not to think about it." This group listed their neighbors as part of their reliable information network and did not have the competition issues that came out elsewhere. Many of this group were already meeting with their peers in a non-labeled sort of way. This group also expressed the thought that their fathers/elders were often very set in their ways, which was both good (they had made it work all these years) and bad (difficult to get them to try anything new or different).

Tipton

Because of logistical glitches, the Tipton focus group was very short, and most of the feedback was similar to what was said in other groups. One point that came out was that CRP acres often become infested with invasive cedar trees. The contract requires ranchers to keep cedars out of CRP ground, but the federal agencies don't have the staff needed to check them all or enforce compliance. Like some other groups, they saw CRP as a retirement plan for older ranchers, and agreed that younger ranchers could not compete with the government for access.



Appendix A. Focus Group Topic Guide

Focus Group Topic Guide
Outreach to Young and Underserved Ranchers
Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition
1-29-20

Research Objectives

Conduct face-to-face focus groups with young and underserved ranchers and grazing landowners across Kansas to better understand:

1. Their attitudes about and motivations for ranching and range management;
2. Their knowledge and understanding of grassland management and natural resource sustainability;
3. Barriers to and their willingness to adopt conservation practices on their lands; and
4. Where and from whom they get information about ranching (credible sources).

Introduction

Hello and welcome. I'm Phil Seng, and I'll be the moderator for tonight's focus group meeting. I work for DJ Case & Associates, a communications consulting firm that specializes in natural resources conservation. We work with natural resources agencies and organizations throughout the country helping them communicate with the public about conservation issues.

For this project, DJ Case is working with the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to better understand young ranchers; specifically, your attitudes about conservation practices, what kinds of practices will work for you, how to best communicate with you, etc.

By the way, we're not trying to sell you anything or convince you of anything here tonight. Quite the opposite, in fact. We want to know what *you* think and feel about certain aspects of ranching. We are recording the meeting, but that's just to be sure we capture your comments correctly. The final report that we submit will contain your opinions, but they will not be attached to your names in any way, so I encourage you to be honest and candid with your responses.

There are a couple observers joining us tonight. [Introduce them and explain the ground rules.]

- They won't be participating, just observing.
 - Sometimes this may be frustrating—you may have a question that they could answer, but I won't let them answer until after we're done. The point is to find out what *you* know and think and feel in the absence of "professional" input.
-

- These folks will be available at the end to answer any questions you have.
- Feel free to jot down any questions or issues you'd like to ask them about at the end of the session.

The process is very simple—I will be bringing up some general topics or questions. Then I'll ask you to discuss those things. Sometimes I'll ask for your thoughts or opinions one by one; other times, I'll just throw something out there and anyone can comment. I encourage you to relax and enjoy this session. Please express your honest opinions—it'll be my job to be sure everyone has a chance to participate. I apologize in advance if I have to interrupt anyone or move things along, but we have a lot of material to cover and I need to make sure we get through it all in the 2 hours we have. Are there any questions about the process before we begin?

Okay great. I'd like to start with introductions, just so we know each other a little better for our conversation. Please tell us your name, where you live, and how you got into ranching in the first place.

Questions

1. Why are you a rancher? (What are the rewards of ranching? What makes you feel good about what you do?)
 2. How do you view your relationship to the land: a job, vocation or calling?
 3. What do you want the status of your land to be after you're gone? How will it be viewed by the next generation? (Do you have plans to pass it on, sell it, protect it with easements, etc.?)
 4. What ranching information do you need to be successful?
 - a. What speakers do you *most* want to hear from?
 - b. How far would you travel to attend a training you were interested in?
 5. Do you currently engage in any conservation practices on your rangeland? (providing habitat, grazing native grasses, etc.)
 - Why or why not?
 - If not, what would it take to get you to participate?
 6. What media do you consume?
 - a. "Traditional" (TV, radio, print, Web-based, etc.)?
 - b. Web-based or Social (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, other)?
 - c. Do you have access to high-speed Internet?
 7. Who (or what) do you turn to for reliable information on ranching techniques and programs?
 - Who is the first *person* (or office) you would ask for information?
 - Is there a specific resource you would go to (website, online forum, etc.)?
 8. What trade shows or conferences do you attend to learn about updated ranching techniques?
-

9. How do you feel about communicating with your peers concerning ranching issues of mutual interest?
10. Are you interested in forming a private rancher's group to share information and content?
11. What perceptions does the public have about ranchers that you would like to change?
12. What could the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition and Tallgrass Legacy Alliance do to better serve your needs?
13. What could the Natural Resources Conservation Service do to better serve your needs?

14. Native Grasslands Alliance Bonus Question

There are 3 messages on the page I am handing you. Take a minute and read them over and answer a few quick questions about them.

Appendix B. Message Testing Handout

Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition Focus Group

Messages about Native Vegetation

Please read the following messages and answer the questions. For the purposes of this exercise, answer as if you are a rancher without native grasses on his/her property.

Message 1: Native Vegetation is good for your ranch

- Cattle grazing on native grasses gain an additional 50 to 150 lbs. per head
- Grazing on native grasses lowers your cost per pound of meat produced
- Native grasses are more drought tolerant (reducing your risk during dry weather)
- Native grasses produce more hay tonnage/acre
- Native grass hay is harvested during a less busy time of year

Please consider the main message and all the bullets underneath. Assuming this message came from a trustworthy source, how likely is a rancher without native grasses on their land to contact the organization (via phone, email or website) for information on adding native vegetation to their land?

Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very likely
<input type="radio"/>				

Why?

Now please consider each bullet from above individually. How likely is each statement to motivate a rancher like you to consider switching part of your ranch to native grasses?

	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very likely
Cattle grazing on native grasses gain an additional 50 to 150 lbs. per head	<input type="radio"/>				
Grazing on native grasses lowers your cost per pound of meat produced	<input type="radio"/>				
Native grasses are more drought tolerant (reducing your risk during dry weather)	<input type="radio"/>				
Native grasses produce more hay tonnage/acre	<input type="radio"/>				
Native grass hay is harvested during a less busy time of year	<input type="radio"/>				

Message 2: Native Vegetation is good for wildlife

- Native vegetation provides habitat for healthier wildlife populations
- Native vegetation provides food for healthier wildlife populations
- Native vegetation is good for:

- Bees, butterflies, and other pollinators
- Beneficial soil organisms
- Game birds and songbirds
- Deer/Pronghorn/elk
- Turkey/quail/prairie chickens/grouse

Please consider the main message and all the bullets underneath. Assuming this message came from a trustworthy source, how likely is a rancher without native grasses on their land to contact the organization (via phone, email or website) for information on adding native vegetation to their land?

Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very likely
○	○	○	○	○

Why?

Now please consider each bullet individually. How likely is each statement to motivate a rancher like you to consider switching part of your ranch to native grasses?

	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very likely
Native vegetation provides habitat for healthier wildlife populations	○	○	○	○	○
Native vegetation provides food for healthier wildlife populations	○	○	○	○	○
Native vegetation is good for bees, butterflies, and other pollinators	○	○	○	○	○
Native vegetation is good for beneficial soil organisms	○	○	○	○	○
Native vegetation is good for game birds and songbirds	○	○	○	○	○
Native vegetation is good for deer/pronghorn/elk	○	○	○	○	○
Native vegetation is good for turkey/quail/prairie chickens/grouse	○	○	○	○	○

Message 3: Native Vegetation is good for the environment

- Native grasses improve water quality by filtering groundwater through extensive root systems
- Native grasses reduce flooding by holding water in extensive root systems
- Native grasses sequester more carbon due to increased biomass
- Native grasses decrease erosion due to extensive root systems
- Native Grasses increase soil organic matter and overall soil health

Please consider the main message and all the bullets underneath. Assuming this message came from a trustworthy source, how likely is a rancher without native grasses on their land to contact the organization (via phone, email or website) for information on adding native vegetation to their land?

Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very likely
<input type="radio"/>				

Why?

Now please consider each bullet individually. How likely is each statement to motivate a rancher like you to consider switching part of your ranch to native grasses?

	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very likely
Native grasses improve water quality by filtering groundwater through extensive root systems	<input type="radio"/>				
Native grasses reduce flooding by holding water in extensive root systems	<input type="radio"/>				
Native grasses sequester more carbon due to increased biomass	<input type="radio"/>				
Native grasses decrease erosion due to extensive root systems	<input type="radio"/>				
Native Grasses increase soil organic matter and overall soil health	<input type="radio"/>				

Thank you again for sharing your opinions!

Appendix C. Focus Group Transcripts

(under separate cover)
