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# Integrating Conservation and Financial Objectives on Private Rangelands in Northern Colorado: Rancher and Practitioner Perceptions

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## Abstract

Payments for ecosystem services and other approaches seek to expand conservation outcomes from working ranches in rangeland systems. Making these strategies attractive to ranchers and effective in achieving conservation goals requires information that is largely lacking about the human dimensions of aligning conservation, agricultural, and financial objectives on working ranches. This exploratory study addressed this knowledge gap about perceived strategies, barriers, and opportunities by interviewing a purposive sample of 23 ranchers and natural resource practitioners (e.g., government agencies, conservation nonprofits) involved in a collaborative stakeholder group in Larimer County, Colorado. Interviewees' responses demonstrated a wide range of potential strategies for ranchers to adopt, yet their discussion of ranch-scale and regional concerns demonstrated the multiple interlinked ecological, financial, and social factors that pose challenges for mainstreaming opportunities. All interviewees expressed interest in developing a regional payment for ecosystem services program, seeing an opportunity to simultaneously support ranchers and improve conservation stewardship. However, substantial concerns were expressed regarding possible restrictions to the ranch operation, profitability, and other management and legal factors that would diminish attractiveness to ranchers. Our findings suggest that characteristics of our study system, including proximity to urban areas and the presence of a collaborative stakeholder group, contribute importantly to the opportunities and challenges perceived by interviewees. Furthermore, interviewees' responses highlighted how factors beyond the ranch-scale can affect the viability of ranch business strategies to achieve conservation and agricultural objectives. Future research with representative populations across rangeland systems in the American West and in contexts with and without collaborative groups will build constructively upon this exploratory study.

**Key Words:** costs, environmental markets, incentives, payments for ecosystem services, revenue

## INTRODUCTION

Profound changes in population size, land use, agricultural and energy markets, and other factors are transforming rangeland ecosystems across the United States and globally (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005). These factors are driving land-use change (e.g., exurban development; Theobald 2001) and impacting the livelihoods of private landowners who steward over half of the 770 million acres of rangelands in the United States (US Department of Agriculture [USDA] Forest Service 2011).

Ranchers, as stewards of private rangelands, have conventionally derived ranch-related income largely from their livestock operations, rather than from conservation practices that produce a broader array of ecosystem services (e.g., carbon sequestration, water quality; Goldstein et al. 2011). For ranchers who implement conservation practices, such practices may be a burden on a ranch's financial portfolio rather than a positive contribution (Didier and Brunson 2004).

New incentives, broadly termed payments for ecosystem services (PES) or environmental markets, may provide an opportunity for ranchers to align conservation, agricultural, and financial objectives in land management (Engel et al. 2008; Daily et al. 2009). A recent report from the USDA Office of Environmental Markets and EcoAgriculture Partners on the "Farm of the Future" (which encompasses working farms, ranches, and forests) profiled five case studies of private landowners receiving PES, while still earning agricultural income (EcoAgriculture Partners 2011). For example, one working farm is receiving revenue from wetland mitigation banking, hunting permits, water quality enhancement, and row crops. In examining what PES may mean for rangelands and ranchers in the future, it is important to acknowledge the many important publicly funded programs through which ranchers are already being compensated for ecosystem services. Examples include the National Resources Conservation Service cost-share programs and a variety of tax incentives (e.g., for conservation easements).

To examine the plausibility of these types of working ranch business strategies, it is important to understand ranchers' motivations for ranching, challenges they face, income sources and cost-reduction strategies supporting ranches today, and new financial opportunities being developed. Ranchers are motivated by multiple factors internal and external to their ranching operation, with frequently cited motivations being related to family tradition, lifestyle, connection to the land, and amenity values such as scenic beauty and recreation (Smith and

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