The American Dream: Living on the Land—Stewardship for Small Acreages in Idaho!

The Situation
Urban sprawl. It’s a phenomenon so pervasive in our society today that it was featured in the July 2001 issue of National Geographic as an offshoot of the American dream. As communities grow, land at the urban fringes is being rezoned from large, agricultural enterprises to smaller 1 to 40+ acre parcels that maintain some agricultural uses while attracting a more diverse population of owners. The conversion of rural land to urban use from 1992-1997 in Ada County was 26 percent or 24,200 acres and Canyon County was 14 percent or 13,000 acres. This conversion rate (Ada: 4,480 acres/year; Canyon 2,600 acres/year) impacts transportation, land use and the environment. At this rate of conversion, the two counties have converted over 50,000 acres from rural to urban between 2000 and 2005.

Small acreage landowners have a significant impact on the condition of soil, water, plants, and other natural resources through their cumulative effects. As the population increases, with more and more residents now “living on the land” who were formally disconnected from the land, there is a huge demand for information and technical assistance to help them “do the right thing” for their wildlife, land and water resources. Placing the land into the hands of many diverse owners has created a new challenge: How do we reach this audience and teach the importance of land stewardship? The Living on the Land (LOTL) curriculum addresses these issues and is targeted to the future leaders that will be making decisions in our communities.

Our Response
This course is primarily presented as a non-formal Extension education program to small acreage landowners in Southwest, Idaho. It is designed to provide adults with information and skills to implement best stewardship practices. Over 90 adults and three youth from nine Southwestern Idaho Counties have participated in the LOTL class from 2002-2005. The registration fee is $250 per unit or $160 with 30 hours of volunteer work. For the registration fee each unit receives water, soil, and forage test, tour transportation and one participant/unit notebook. Registrations can be for individuals or cover two people in a unit, such as a husband and wife, mother/daughter or two neighbors working on the same stewardship issue.

The course is coordinated by University of Idaho Cooperative Extension Small Farms Team members in cooperation with: Nuri-Vet Nutritional, Zamzows, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Ada, Owyhee, and Canyon Counties and

To enrich education through diversity the University of Idaho is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer and educational institution. University of Idaho and U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating
Tours, hands-on activities, expert speakers and events are used to reinforce the learning. Advertising is by word of mouth. Over 20 individuals registered for the LOTL class that started January 11, 2005.

**Program Outcomes**
After attending this course, participants report gaining basic knowledge and skills to: implement an inventory of the resources on their small acreage; understand soils, soil interactions and basic soil testing; understand water, water interactions and basic water testing; understand plants, plant interactions, identify weeds, insects and diseases, basic forage testing; and understand animal-soil-plant-water interactions. Participants also share information about stewardship for small acreages with others in their community.

Four years of exit testing and focus group data suggests LOTL:
- Presents useful information about all aspects of land and resource management applicable to small 1-50 acreages.
- Addresses and solves critical stewardship problems of the Treasure Valley.
- Brings together the resources of the University, Industry, U.S.D.A. Agencies, Extension, and local experts.
- “It is the best single resource for learning what is involved in managing a small acreage.”

2002-2005 LOTL Alumni report that they have sited and built farm structures, selected and planted appropriate forages, improved pastures and used livestock management methods advanced in LOTL. They note improving domestic and livestock water quality, establishing market or CSA gardens, establishing fencing and irrigation systems. Most reported that they had gained a greater understanding of weeds, land use, and resources in their community to address environmental concerns.

Since 2004 four new LOTL modules (Selecting, Maintaining And Managing Farm Equipment; What To Do About Weeds, Bugs And Diseases; Rodent & Wildlife Management/Animal-Human Diseases; and Marketing Your Farm Produce—Ways & Means To A Sustainable Enterprise) have been developed for Idaho by organizers for the program based on focus groups with 2003 & 2004 LOTL alumni and instructors. Six new instructors have been added to the program delivery structure, including three Idaho LOTL Alumni. In 2005 a LOTL Market Gardening Mini-series is being offered to the public the last four weeks of class.

**The Future**
Organizers will continue to expand the LOTL instructor base with a goal of conducting the course at multiple locations in the Treasure Valley by 2007. Exemplary LOTL Alumni outcomes will continue to be featured on tours and through the media to advance Stewardship for small acreages for all of Idaho.

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