

From the minutes of the July 18, 2015 board meeting.

Motion: Myron H. made a motion to approve the proposed ranch plan through stage one except eliminating 3C and 3D. Geneva M. seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

Everson Ranch Management Plan

Draft: 6-30-15

Purpose: The purpose of the Ranch Plan is to establish a long-term vision how the ranch will be operated as well as the near term steps to be implemented towards achieving the long-term vision. Upon approval by the Board of Directors, the Ranch plan will be used by OLT staff as a guide for conducting operations and establishing priorities for new projects. It is anticipated that the Ranch Plan will be updated periodically to provide new priorities to OLT staff as progress is made towards the long-term ranch management vision.

Goals and Objectives

The following goals and objectives were developed to guide the management plan for the Everson Ranch.

Maintain integrity of soil and ecological processes

- Promote soil stability and watershed function
 - Increase retention of precipitation in order to build resilience against drought
 - Increase live vegetative cover and the amount of litter on the soil surface to reduce bare ground
- Increase diversity of age-class distribution and species diversity (recruitment for maintenance and recovery)
 - Increase cool-season grasses (density, production and diversity)
 - Promote native flora and fauna

Restore ecosystem conditions to within range of natural variability while allowing for economic uses of natural resources

- Restore wet meadows where appropriate
- Maintain a connected wildlife habitat corridor in the region
- Restore the structure and function of the riparian area
- Control invasive, non-native species where possible and prohibit the introduction of new non-native species
- Protect and improve habitat of native, endemic fish species

Maintain agricultural heritage and working landscapes of San Luis Valley by promoting ranching as sustainable agriculture

- Maximize conversion of solar energy for production of forage
- Manage domestic livestock as a tool to modify ecosystem processes in order to maintain or improve the diversity and productivity of the rangeland resources
- Improve efficiency of water delivery mechanisms for irrigation of hay crops
- Manage the ranch through adaptive management

Background

The Everson Ranch is a 760-acre working cattle ranch which was subdivided into residential lots and placed on the market in spring 2001. Orient Land Trust (OLT) purchased the property in September 2004 to protect it from development and permanently manage for conservation values, maintaining the agricultural heritage and open spaces of the northern San Luis Valley.

The Everson Ranch has been a working ranch since it was homesteaded in 1872, and was held by the same family for most of those years. Sheep grazing ended on the ranch in 1979. Changes in plant communities (species composition and abundance) likely occurred due to the cumulative effects of decades of sheep grazing. One of these changes is the sharp decline in forbs on the ranch. Historical land use and management on the property appears to have impacted cool-season grasses, traditionally grazed heavily in the spring as soon as they green up prior to moving onto BLM for summer grazing. The majority of grasses on the ranch are warm season.

in 2010 the ranch (along with the hot springs, the land on which the hydro-electric plant is located) were placed under an easement with the Nature Conservancy (TNC). TNC monitors the easements in late July.

Vision

The Everson Ranch will continue to be a working ranch. Beginning in the 1800s, when it was first carved out as private property, it has been predominantly a sheep or cattle ranch. A variety of crops and flowers, as well as livestock have been raised at the ranch. When the Orient Land Trust purchased the ranch in 2004 the transaction reunited the Everson Ranch with the Hot Springs lands, which had historically been one parcel. Working towards financial and eventual energy independence is a key goal for the ranch. As soil health and productivity are achieved, the ranch will evolve as laboratory for research and become a source of information for ranchers looking to improve their health of their land. The ranch will be part of the public relations showcase and a credible teaching tool for sustainable, organic practices. A cornerstone of Valley View Hot Springs culture has been how people can be a real community and treat each other and the land with love and respect. The Everson Ranch vision is a natural extension of that basic ideal. OLT will continue to foster partners on the ranch like The Nature Conservancy (TNC), The USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Colorado Division of Wildlife(DOW) as well as schools, and local land-owners.

Current Status

Completed projects include the reservoir construction. The first reservoir was completed in 2007 and was then reconstructed in 2010 to place it entirely on OLT deeded land. The ideal when constructing the reservoir was to reestablish a historic pond the Everson's maintained and for use as an irrigation source and providing head for irrigation water coming out of the reservoir, but it has yet to prove very useful for irrigation due to slow recharge rates. The reservoir does provide increased habitat for native fish, stabilizing the water available in the event that the hydroelectric facility went down and water stopped flowing. It also increases the area available for fish to hibernate during harsh winters. The cottonwood trees surrounding the reservoir now thrive with increased available water providing nesting and/or resting habitat for both year-round and migratory birds.

In partnership with the NRCS and the CO Division of Game and Fish, OLT added stream meanders to the stretch of stream that runs from the hydroelectric plant to the existing meanders, replacing a straight ditch to create habitat ideal for fish. The meanders project was carried out to provide habitat for two species of fish that are endangered or protected (Rio Grande Chubb and Rio Grande Sucker).

The representatives of NRCS and Colorado Parks and Wildlife pleased with the success of the fish habitat. Unfortunately there is still a substantial amount of water that is being lost in the meanders, percolating into the ground water. This water loss is a challenge for OLT. Hopefully as the channel becomes more established, there will be increasing amounts of water that make it through the meanders to fill the reservoir. As this process evolves, there should be more water available for irrigating. Assuming, of course, that the volume of water draining from the springs stays the same. The meanders require routine maintenance to keep them from filling in with sediment.

OLT also has a ten year lease with Arrowpoint Cattle of Chaffee County. This lease was implemented in 2013. OLT leases our BLM grazing allotment to Arrowpoint. In addition to the BLM allotment, Arrowpoint cattle also graze the hayfields after they have been cut and baled. In 2014, Arrowpoint applied for a grant from NRCS to build fence on the south sections of ranch property to pursue a holistic grazing program modeled after the Savory Institute's grazing program of high impact, short duration grazing. While fences are unsightly to some, they provide a low impact method that allows us to test theories regarding grazing practices. Hopefully this will provide valuable information for future grazing schedules. It is also imperative that OLT be considered a good neighbor by surrounding landowners, and cattle at large threaten our relationship adjacent properties. Thus it is imperative that fences be implemented where necessary to keep Arrowpoint cattle on OLT lands and allotments.

The OLT ranch manager is also in the early stages of raising black pigs for sale. The passel of pigs requires irrigated browsing acreage. The small paddocks around the ranch house are being irrigated by six inch gated pipe to provide the with pigs good forage and promote soil health. The BOD approved the six-inch

diameter gated pipe line in 2015 and it was installed in early summer to the three, 2 to 4 acre grazing paddocks.

Plan Stage One:

This section provides a discussion of near term actions to be pursued by OLT staff at the Ranch. OLT staff are encouraged to discuss implementation challenges, priorities and outcomes with the conservation committee as these actions are being implemented and evaluated.

1. Restore hayfields and improve dry-land pasture for cattle.
 - a. Irrigation and maintenance
 - i. board approved purchase of straight pipe, valves, and gated pipe to distribute the water to an increasing acreage with a target of 55 acres of hayfield irrigated by this method.
 - ii. Harvesting of hay-Irrigated hayfields in 2013 and 2014 totaled 8 acres. In 2013 and 2014, the cutting and baling of the native grass hay was contracted. Ideally, OLT would have the equipment (Mower or swather, and baler, with a big enough tractor to power the implements) and do that work in house.
 - iii. Use cattle to restore the grazing acreage to a healthier state with planned impacts to introduce more organic material into the soil to improve soil ecology with a more concentrated but shorter interval of hoof impact to stimulate the growth of grasses and forbs.
 1. Explore other possibilities for enhancing soil health.
 2. Explore a variety of livestock (pigs, chickens, goats, sheep, ducks, other?) to provide diversity and for restoration and mitigation of weeds and invasive plant species.
 3. Develop Monitoring plan to measure soil health.
 - b. As our projects achieve completion and produce is available, OLT will have its own label for selling organic, healthy meats and produce.
 - a. Pigs to be slaughtered early July 2015
 - b. Everson Ranch Goodness logo created for use in sale and marketing of Everson Ranch products



3. Build capacity at the ranch

- a. Complete the bath/kitchen is a new structure (initiated in 2013) for sanitation and cooking. This infrastructure is necessary before asking for volunteers and/or paid ranch hands.
 - b. The metal storage container, brought in during the summer of 2014, is being fitted as grain storage and inventory storage for a shop that has been approved by TNC to be added at a later date.
 - c. Begin restoring and adding to the infrastructure to provide storage and accommodations for materials and personnel. The Bunk House, Beehive, and Dance Hall are existing structures that can be upgraded and restored. The reclamation and stabilization of these buildings is in process.
 - d. Evaluate and prioritize remodeling and upgrading of existing interiors as well as complete other construction and maintenance. There are other existing structures with potential.
4. Increase plantings (trees).
- a. Fruit trees have been planted, dead cottonwoods have been cut and dead sections have been pruned.
 - b. Increase woodlot plantings for a wider dispersion of trees and for a broader ecosystem as contrasted with narrow rows.

Stage Two: Long range ideas to be discussed and approved by Board of Directors

Pivot irrigating equipment to efficiently place ~100 acres under cultivation. The electrical drop for this equipment is already in place. The pivot itself is not yet purchased and the necessary water is not yet available due to the immaturity of meander project and several years of drought.

There are many wide ranging ideas for how to proceed once the hay and livestock operations are successfully implemented. Produce plots? Gardens? Greenhouses? Flower beds? What options do we have for getting a crew to do the planting, the weeding, the maintenance and the work of a garden, greenhouse, or flower field? What are our ideas and how much of the direction depends on the successes of the projects we are doing now?

Energy independence via modeling and testing of alternative sources of energy (wind photovoltaic, methane, biomass, other?).

The ranch house was rented for half of 2014 and 2015 for housing for a veteran employee (bookkeeper) and family. This is an agreement that will be reviewed early next year. In addition to using the ranch house as a rental, there are other options for the ranch house. One proposal from Mike O'Donal is to use of the ranch house as a Bed and Breakfast accommodation. A B & B at a working ranch might be an attraction. Another option Mike suggested is to convert the ranch house to a B & B that would cater to equestrians with several membership structures possible. For example, people might want to trailer their horses to the ranch for brief stays, or we could set up a horse membership in which people buy interests in horses that are stabled permanently at the ranch. Other ideas/suggestions?

Combined with the installation and exploration of energy system and with the presence of a shop and accommodations, the efforts at the ranch will provide opportunities for research and education as interested people participate in the projects doing testing, maintenance, and monitoring of the various projects. Ongoing restoration, improvements, and produce using ranch and farm practices will also provide data for the efficacy of those explorations and be hands on examples for research and education.

Rather than leasing the BLM allotment and deeded pasture land to another cattle owner, OLT could have its own herd. If we have adequate forage production and plans in place to feed the animals over the winter (through hay, "migration," windrowed grasses that are grazed in short intervals, etc.) OLT could realize increased income with admittedly higher risk than through leasing the grazing rights to a separate cattle owner. A year round cattle operation would probably require another employee.