



Working Landscapes in the West

PIONEERING NEW CONSERVATION APPROACHES

The mission of the Sonoran Institute's Working Landscapes Program is to protect in perpetuity all that working lands achieve – socially, culturally, economically, and ecologically – throughout the Rocky Mountain West.

“Partnering on land conservation through a working landscapes model is exciting and innovative. We look forward to sharing knowledge and expertise.”

~ John Wessels
Intermountain Region,
National Park Service



Shaping the Future of the West

OUR VISION & GOALS

Working farms and ranches can add substantial value to landscape conservation. However, their role in resource stewardship is often overlooked.

There is little doubt that farmers and ranchers are finding it increasingly difficult to make a living off the land. As the number of farms and ranches lost to demographic, economic and political shifts around land and water use, food production, and recreation escalate, the West loses vital pieces of its natural and cultural heritage.

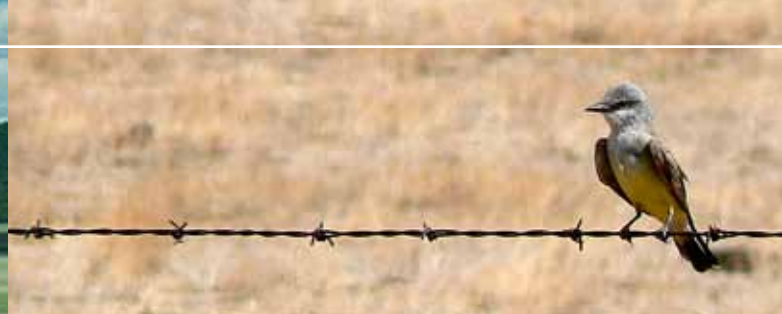
The Sonoran Institute's Working Landscapes Program seeks to collaborate with farmers and ranchers to creatively integrate traditional goals for working lands with conservation goals for healthy landscapes.

Our Working Landscapes demonstration project with the Fort Union Ranch in New Mexico exemplifies the three key objectives of this program:

1. Increase **economic and ecological resilience** on working lands. Resilience is the capacity to readily recover from stress or change.
2. Foster a culture of **stewardship** among working landowners throughout the West. Stewardship is an ethic that embodies responsible management and use of natural resources.
3. Empower the **political voice** of working landowner communities. Local, state and regional policy can substantially influence the capacity of individuals and communities to make a living off the land and to adopt stewardship practices. Influencing policy, however, requires that landowners be heard by policymakers.

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Vision & Rationale

In addition to sustaining the families that work and own them, farms and ranches play an important conservation role by sustaining natural resources like clean water, healthy soils, and native plants and wildlife. The Sonoran Institute's Working Landscapes Program is teaming up with private land owners throughout the West to develop a new approach to conservation – one that recognizes the basic economic needs of farms and ranches as well as the integral connection between economic productivity and land health.

Why focus on working landscapes?

- The role of traditional private working lands in natural resource management is frequently overlooked. There is a need to acknowledge that ranch and farmlands are an important component of the ecological landscape, valuable to wild and human communities alike.
- Farmers and ranchers hold generations of knowledge about their lands and the environment, and exemplify cultural values that are a substantial resource for conservation.
- Protecting resources and being a good steward of the land depends on the capacity of the farmer or rancher to make a living off the land, and the availability of good information and resources to support their efforts.
- Farmers and ranchers are a special group of landowners. They must face the challenges posed by demographic, economic, political, and environmental changes that are increasingly affecting land and water use, food production, and recreational activities in the West.

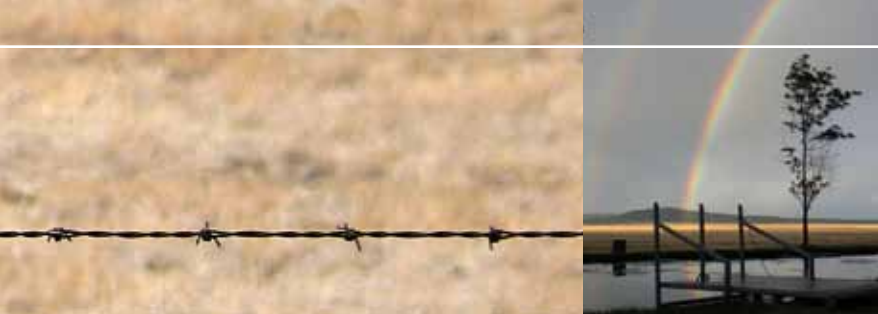
How the Sonoran Institute is fostering change:

- **Research & Analysis:** Conduct place-based research that links the economics of working-land management to the ecology and conservation of rangeland ecosystems.
- **Communication & Capacity-Building:** Share information gained from research and analysis to improve the capacity of private landowners to access resources, connect with partners, and enhance their potential to live sustainably with the land.
- **Policy Reform:** Empower the political voice of working-land communities by facilitating collaboration and providing the type of technical assistance required to create change at local, state, and regional levels.

“For many Americans, the rural West conjures a vision of mountain vistas, open meadows, cows, horses and abundant wildlife. Thankfully, these scenes are still a reality, but they are under threat. Climate, government policies, unpredictable economies and human interaction threatens the future of these working landscapes and the ability of ranchers and farmers to continue to live and work on them.”

~ Diane Snyder
Sonoran Institute
Northern Rockies Program Director





THE FORT UNION RANCH Building a Legacy of Sustainability

The Fort Union Ranch in Northeastern New Mexico is situated where the Sangre de Cristo Mountains give way to the Great Plains of the Southwest. Ranging in elevation from 6,500 feet to more than 8,400 feet, and receiving an average rainfall between 12 and 16 inches per year, this is a semi-arid landscape dominated by short-grass prairie, rugged mesas and pinyon-juniper woodlands.

It is also a landscape of unexpected diversity that is steeped in early Western American history. It is a place where bison roamed, where hunter-gatherer tribes survived, and where the U.S. Army outpost, Fort Union, defended the Santa Fe Trail and the expanding frontier.

Before the industrial revolution, agriculture, along with fishing and forestry, made up one third of the Rocky Mountain economy. Today, farming and ranching account for just one percent of employment in the Rocky Mountain states. This dramatic decline in economic impact obscures the essential role that traditional working lands continue to play in western economies and native ecosystems.

Facing a future of challenges and uncertainties posed by fluctuating economies, drought, and shifting land-use patterns, the Fort Union Ranch approached the Sonoran Institute for help in 2010. The owning family, descendants of General Adelbert Ames and his wife Blanch Butler Ames, wanted to ensure the viability of their land and ranch over the long term by better integrating their economic and ecological goals for the property. In addition, they hoped to work with the Institute to create a positive, lasting impact beyond the boundaries of the Ranch itself.

For the Sonoran Institute, the challenge posed by the Fort Union Ranch offers an exciting opportunity to illustrate that working lands can be financially viable while simultaneously sustaining the natural, human, and wild aspects of whole landscapes.



The Fort Union Ranch surrounds the Fort Union National Monument. Over the course of 40 years (1851-1891), three different forts were established to guard the Santa Fe Trail, a major trade route and frontier gateway.

“That a National Park Service unit can participate with local area landowners in landscape conservation will be exciting, challenging and very rewarding.”

~ Marie Frias Sauter

Superintendent, Fort Union National Monument,
National Park Service

Now in its sixth generation of family ownership, the Fort Union Ranch is an icon of the old West. It is also a pioneer in the New West – where the legacy of traditional ranching is being challenged by sprawling development, industrialized beef markets, and a growing population of ‘hobby’ ranchers.

The Path Ahead

The Sonoran Institute has years of experience working with private landowners to develop creative solutions for economically and ecologically sustainable land-use. The Institute's staff, several of whom come from a ranching background themselves, offer a collective wealth of knowledge in ecology, economics, GIS, communications, outreach, education, and land-use planning. The new partnership with Fort Union Ranch offers a distinctive opportunity for the Sonoran Institute to put ideas and theory into practice. With the Working Landscapes Program, the Institute intends to heighten awareness and knowledge about the vital role that working ranches and farms can play in large landscape conservation. Today, a lot of conservation resources are dedicated to designating public areas like National Parks or Wilderness, improving management regulations, buying land, or acquiring conservation easements. Although these are all important strategies, they do not fully recognize the inherent and ongoing protection offered by traditional working lands.

Fort Union Ranch – Short-Term Project Goals:

- Assess the current ecological and economic status of the Fort Union Ranch (e.g., through review and analysis of existing information).
- Identify specific land-use management strategies to maintain and improve rangeland habitat and ecosystem resilience on the Ranch (e.g., restoration and enhancement of wetland areas).
- Identify opportunities for the Ranch to diversify its sources of revenue (e.g., explore alternative niche markets such as grass-fed beef, 'carbon ranching,' and/or ecotourism).
- Establish a network of local landowners and stakeholders to collaborate and work together on issues like wildlife management and drought.
- Research opportunities for valuing ecosystem services on working lands (e.g., placing a monetary value on the capacity for a property or group of properties to store and filter water resources or sequester carbon from the atmosphere).

Long-term Foundations:

The following long-term foundations will guide the Working Landscapes Program in crafting solutions to the economic, environmental, and political challenges faced by private working landowners across the West:

- **Ecological and Economic Resilience.** Recognize the interconnection between human economies and natural systems and commit to a standard of resilience in both to accomplish effective and enduring conservation.
- **Stewardship.** Honor the cultural, historic, and natural heritage of working landscapes by encouraging responsible land-use practices and by working to sustain the vital connection between land and people that make working landscapes distinctive.
- **Integration of People and Nature.** Highlight the fundamental role that humans play in natural systems – both as agents of change and as consumers of natural resources. Nurture the connections between people and wildlife, community and land, and culture and nature that foster stewardship.
- **Innovation.** Promote creativity to illustrate the capacity for working lands to be financially viable while simultaneously conserving the natural, human, and wild aspects of whole landscapes.

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“At Fort Union Ranch, owned by my family since 1882, land-use from the mid-1800s has left visible scars, including wagon tracks, quarries, timber cuts and lime kilns. More significantly, the occupancy by the army tended to dry out the landscape, which was once far greener and wetter than it is today. By 1895, when my great grandfather rode the range, the high prairie was already stressed and vulnerable to drought, and much of the wildlife had been slaughtered or driven off by habitat change.

What we have learned is that any long-term interest in range management demands attention to ecosystem trends that go well beyond those related to cattle grazing. We also need to assess the impact of cattle and timber cutting on riparian areas and surface water. At stake is developing an economic use of the landscape that is sustainable in a time of climate change.”

~ Ned Ames

Owning Member of The Fort Union Ranch

The Sonoran Institute inspires and enables community decisions and public policies that respect the land and people of western North America.

CONTACT:

Katie Meiklejohn
Working Landscapes Program Manager
tel 406.587.7331 ext 3012
fax 406.587.2027
email kmeiklejohn@sonoraninstitute.org

Diane Snyder
Director, Northern Rockies Region
tel 406.587.7331 ext 3010
cell 541-398-1297
email dsnyder@sonoraninstitute.org

