

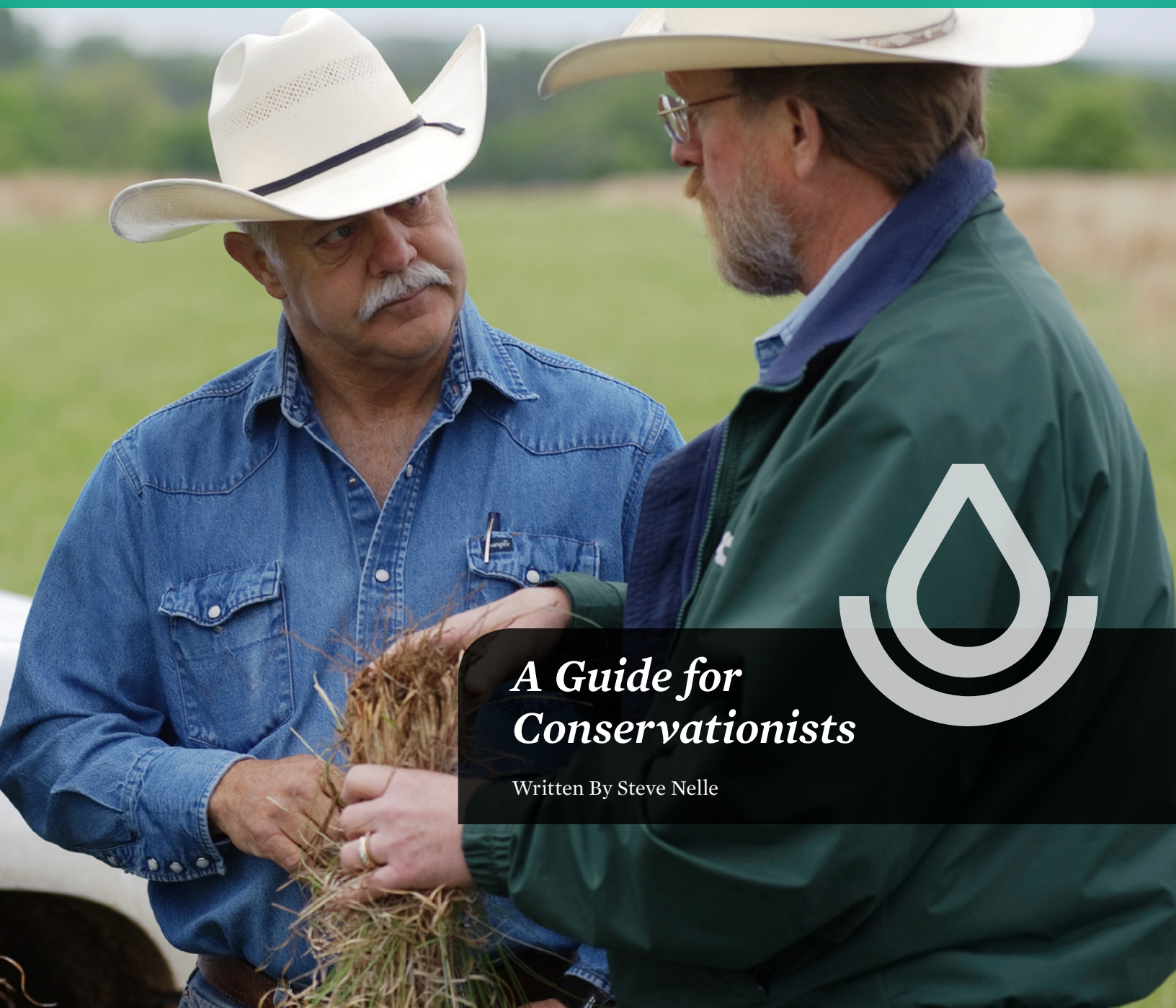


United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

# Working Effectively With Private Landowners

Natural Resources Conservation Service • Texas

*Helping People Help the Land*

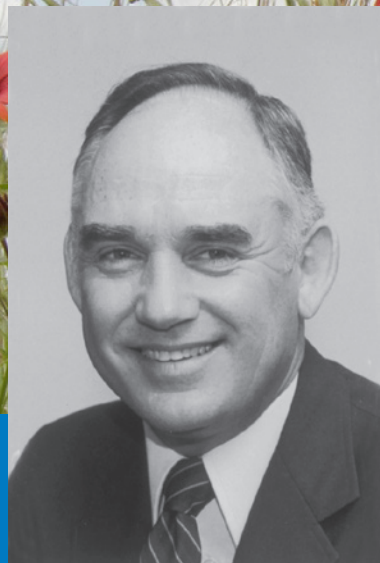


## *A Guide for Conservationists*

Written By Steve Nelle







# Dedication





Many times we hear the word “Dedication” and find it synonymous with words like devotion, commitment, and loyalty. In the circles of conservation and rangeland management no person has been more dedicated to the cause than John L. “Chip” Merrill of Crowley, Texas. Mr. Merrill operated the XXX Ranch in Tarrant County for many years, which has been used to teach and demonstrate sustainable and profitable ranching to thousands of landowners and students. He was the director of the Texas Christian University Ranch Management Program for 33 years, which provided the education and inspiration to lead hundreds of young men and women into successful ranching and private land stewardship.

Mr. Merrill’s leadership in the field of rangeland management is unparalleled. He is a Past President and Fellow of the Society for Range Management and has been a recipient of the Frederick Renner Award, its highest recognition for contributions to the profession. In addition, he was the first recipient of the W.R. Chapline Land Stewardship Award from SRM.

Mr. Merrill has served and provided leadership in the ranching industry for over five decades. He has served as a director and member of the executive committee of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association and is a Past Director of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association. Mr. Merrill received the Golden Spur Award from the National Ranching Heritage Center. He has also served as director of the Texas Wildlife Association.

Mr. Merrill has been the consummate leader with respect to promoting the stewardship and sustainability of our country’s natural resources. He is a founding member of the National Grazing Land Coalition, established to improve grazing management while maintaining property rights and personal stewardship.

Mr. Merrill’s accomplishments are numerous, but do not compare to his legacy of countless land stewards, ranchmen and natural resource managers that continue to follow the path that he has built. This publication “Working Effectively with Private Landowners” was written to assist conservationists by providing decades of insight, lessons learned and success stories by fifteen collaborating authors, most of which have been inspired by the dedication and leadership of Mr. Merrill.

Beyond his vast contributions to the art and science of ranching, conservation and land management, Mr. Merrill has encouraged and motivated multiple generations of conservationists working for the Soil Conservation Service, now known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Much of the material in the publication can be traced directly back to the teachings and values of Mr. Merrill. It is with a great deal of respect and fond appreciation that we dedicate this publication to him.

***Jeff Goodwin***

State Rangeland Management Specialist,  
Natural Resources Conservation Service  
Temple, Texas

# Introduction



Since 1976, it has been my privilege to work with hundreds of landowners across Texas. During a career with the USDA's Soil Conservation Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service and afterward in private practice, I have enjoyed many opportunities to work with landowners for the purpose of conserving and managing natural resources. It has been, and continues to be a very rewarding experience, both personally and professionally.

I have also had the privilege of working with some of the very finest natural resource professionals. The individuals listed below have generously shared their perspectives on working with landowners. Each of these people has enjoyed successful careers in natural resource management, spending countless days working with landowners and their managers. Most of their work has been in Texas, but also includes experience with landowners in Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Louisiana, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Mexico. Their ideas and philosophies are woven throughout each paragraph of this booklet. Their experience and wisdom in working with landowners, and sharing their knowledge has greatly improved the content and usefulness of this booklet. The combined professional experience of all of us put together is well in excess of 500 years. Some brief biographical information for each of them is provided at the end of this booklet.

## Contributors

J. R. Bell | Rory Burroughs | Larry Butler, PhD  
Dan Caudle | Bill Eikenhorst, DVM  
Kent Ferguson | Donnie Frels  
Dee Ann Littlefield | Dalton Merz  
Gene Miller | Kent Mills | Poncho Ortega, PhD  
Stan Reinke | Jimmy Rutledge | Russell Stevens

This booklet is a summary of the important elements necessary or helpful for effectively working with private landowners or their managers. The goal in this document is to share some of the things we wished we had realized or known earlier in our careers. Some of it may be obvious, some of it may be insightful, but most of all, I hope it inspires you to view your role as a natural resource conservationist a little differently.

This material contains general principles that are applicable to nearly every situation; however, it is not a cookbook approach since each landowner and each piece of land is different and unique. The material is divided into four parts with considerable overlap and dovetailing between the parts.

**Steve Nelle**  
San Angelo, Texas  
2015

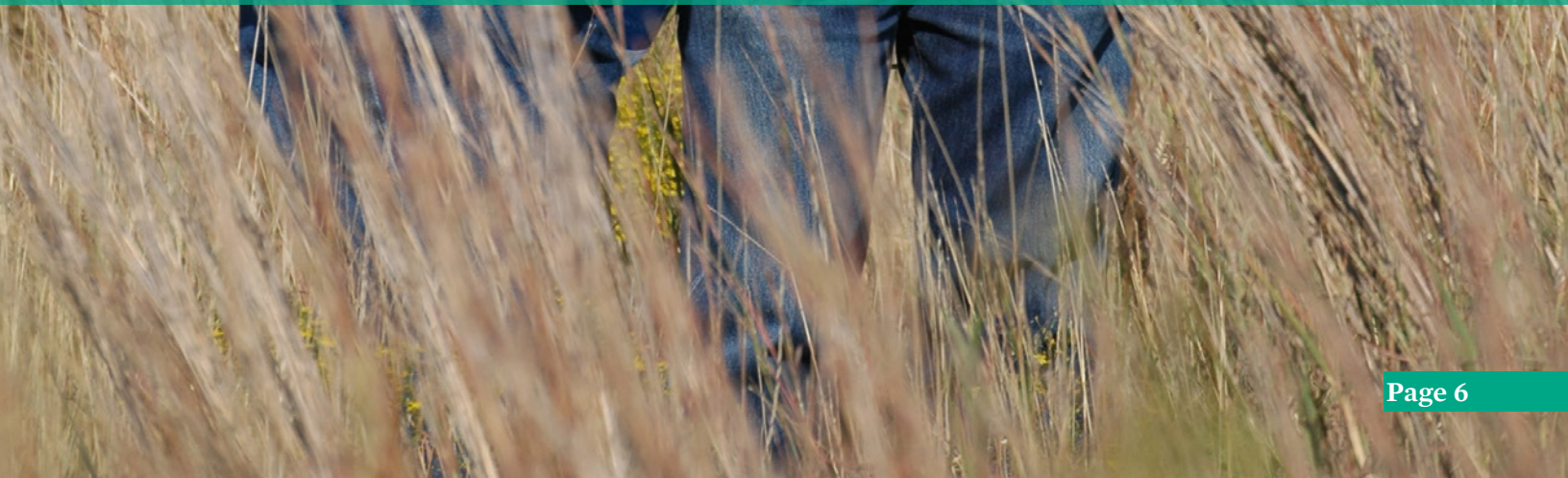




# PART ONE

## *Building a Relationship*

*As a conservation professional, one of the first things to understand is that you are in the people business.*





As a conservation professional, one of the first things to understand is that you are in the people business. Your technical expertise may be in range management, agronomy, forestry, watershed management or wildlife management, but make no mistake – you are in the people business as much or more than the conservation business. Before any meaningful long-term conservation assistance takes place, a relationship of trust must be established. Trust and confidence is the cornerstone of landowner assistance.

### **Earning Their Trust**

Landowners in general are not impressed by your title, your degree, or where you went to school. You will have to work hard to earn their trust. Landowners are impressed

**Trust and confidence is the cornerstone of landowner assistance.**

by someone who knows what they are talking about and who demonstrates that they are ready to help. Starting out on the right foot and making a positive first impression are important.

Earning the trust of landowners is not always easy and is usually a slow process. If you work for a government agency, you have to understand that many landowners have a built-in distrust or skepticism about the government and government employees. They may have had a negative experience with your agency or another agency. You will have to work hard to prove that you are there to help them and not just carry out the mandates of your agency.

According to J. R. Bell, “good things on the land happen over time and are seldom the result of a single encounter.” Since earning the trust of a landowner is a slow and gradual process, patience and persistence becomes key elements for success. You must have a long-term outlook if you really want to be effective in working with landowners. Dalton Merz, of pureblood German descent, says: “working effectively with landowners is a very slow process; in German, we would say; ‘If it don’t take much time, it’s not worth much.’”

### **Understand your Responsibility and Privilege**

When you are invited out to a farm or ranch, it is important that you understand the magnitude of your responsibility. In many cases, their property is worth several million dollars, in some cases many millions of dollars.







It is an extremely valuable asset. The things that you advise will affect the value of the property – not only the economic value, but also the ecological value of the land. Apart from the economic and ecological value, the land has a great deal of personal value to the landowner and his family, especially if it has been in the family for several generations.

In the words of J. R. Bell, “their land is sacred to them.” It is not just a piece of land. This is a great responsibility to know that your input has the capacity to either increase or decrease the value of their land.

The management decisions made on the land have impacts on neighboring properties, and even towns and cities downstream. In

effect, these decisions affect many people besides the landowner.

It is also important to acknowledge that it is a privilege to be invited on to someone else’s land. In addition to seeing their land, you will often get to know the family, share meals with them and hopefully over time, becomes a trusted advisor. You will see things that most people



never see. Some natural resource professionals get it backward – they think it is a privilege for the landowner to have you come out on their land. Landowners will be able to sense if you appreciate the opportunity and privilege of being asked to be of service, and if they sense this, it will help build the relationship.

### **Who Do You Really Work For?**

Another way to earn trust and build a relationship with landowners is to make sure they know who you are really working for. Your paycheck may come from a conservation organization, an agency, or a private company, but the landowner must know that your job priority is working for them. Yes, you owe allegiance to your employer, your boss and your organization, but in order to gain the trust and confidence of the landowner, it is important

to have the mindset that working for them is your job. They will notice it.


### **Learn to Listen**

Listening is a skill that must be learned. For many people, the ability to listen carefully does not happen naturally. For most of us, when we gain some expertise (or perceived expertise) in some area, our tendency is to talk too much and impress them with our knowledge. We have much we want to say that we think will help the landowner, but too often we say too much too soon.

Nearly all of the contributors of this booklet emphasized the importance of listening as a key to being able to work effectively with landowners. Rory Burroughs calls it the skill of “critical listening,”

meaning that it requires your full and undivided mental attention. Each landowner is different and each farm or ranch is different; therefore, each approach for assisting will be unique. Only by attentive listening and asking thoughtful questions will you be able to gain the proper insights and information. Before you can be of any real help to a landowner, you must invest the time and energy in listening to their story, their goals, their problems, their situation, their ideas, and you will probably have to ask some probing questions to get the information you need. Listening is a prerequisite for providing service and assistance and is essential for building a lasting relationship with landowners. Listening well is hard work and is absolutely necessary.

In the words of Clay County, Texas rancher Deborah Clark, “Having a conservation profes-

A photograph of three men standing in a grassy field. One man on the right, wearing a cowboy hat and a light-colored shirt, is pointing towards the left. Two other men, one in a red shirt and one in a blue shirt, are looking in the same direction. The background shows a line of trees and a fence.

**Nearly all of the contributors of this booklet emphasized the importance of listening as a key to being able to work effectively with landowners.**

sional come out on our land is a lot like dating. At first I ask them a few questions, then they ask me a few questions, then based on those answers, we decide if we want to continue the relationship. If the relationship continues, then trust develops and I invite them to our ranch and enjoy spending time with them learning more about conservation opportunities on our land.”

### It is Their Land; Honor Their Objectives

When providing assistance to landowners, it is tempting to tell them what you would do if it was your land. Don’t make this mistake – for the simple reason that it is not your land; it is **their land** and they have their own objectives. When landowners invite you for assistance, work hard to determine what **their land management goals and objectives** are, and then honor those objectives. You may or may not agree with their objectives for their land, but understand that your job is to help them achieve their objectives in a way that is consistent with conservation and sustainability. If they do not come right out and state their objectives, then you will need to work with them to help them define and develop what they really want for long range and short range objectives.

When discussing goals and options, it is important for

landowners to understand both the long term and short term effects and consequences for the practices involved.

A common mistake of some advisors is to impose their own preferences, opinions and favorite practices into land management assistance. Some of this is natural and unavoidable, but diligently work to help

it true original prairie condition. I questioned this since the ranch had a very viable hunting operation for deer, quail and turkey. I knew that the removal of the brush would severely impact these hunting enterprises. When I asked him why he wanted to do this, his answer was, ‘Because I want it that way’. Even though I thought the decision was wrong, it is his land and he



the landowner achieve their objectives (not yours) in the best way possible. Your job is to help facilitate the process, not determine the outcome.

Stan Reinke tells the following story: “I was working with a landowner in the Coastal Prairie. We were discussing brush control on his land and he stated that he wanted to restore the land back to

makes the decision and has to live with the consequences.”

Everyone who has worked with landowners has had similar experiences, and we might not always agree with the direction a landowner wants to go or the means to get there. But our job is not to set their objectives for them – it is to discern and then help them achieve their goals for their land



and to help them do so in a way that is consistent with long-term sustainability and conservation.

### **Learn to Read People**

In addition to your technical and ecological skills, you will need to learn the skill of reading people if you are to be successful in working with landowners. There is no single approach that works well for all landowners; you will

they want in terms of stewardship, productivity, economics and the time and resources they want to devote to accomplish it. In many cases you need to be able to read between the lines in order to discern what they want.”

Kent Mills states, “The most important element for working with landowners is to listen to them and be able to determine their goals, motivations, abilities,

have gained their trust. Reading people is an art that needs to be cultivated if you are going to be successful and effective.

### **Don't Tell People What They Should Do**

Bill Eikenhorst says, “Landowners by nature are most often contrarians, who pride themselves on independent actions and self-reliance.” Private landowners do not usually appreciate being told what they should do, especially by an outsider or a government agent. People want to make their own decisions. Our job as their advisor is not to tell them what they should do, but rather, to clearly present them all of the information necessary for them to make good decisions. We may think we know what they should do, but the best and most lasting adoption of ideas involves the ability to lead, guide, motivate and inspire people to consider all of the options so that they can make the best choices based on their unique circumstances. Avoid the mistake of being the big expert and telling landowners what they should do with their land. This approach does not work.

**It is a privilege to be invited on to someone else's land. In addition to seeing their land, you will often get to know the family, share meals with them and hopefully over time, becomes a trusted advisor.**

have to be flexible enough to work with all kinds of different people and to understand how best to communicate with them and gain their trust. As mentioned, learning to read people does require the skill of critical listening, but it also requires the ability to discern what is unspoken. Poncho Ortega says, “The most difficult part of working with landowners is to be able to get a clear idea of what

potential, desire, dedication and their financial capability.” Landowners will usually not come right out and tell you these things directly and you will probably not want to come right out and ask, but your success in working with them will depend on your ability to discern these things. Learn to ask appropriate probing questions, but be mindful not to cross the line and get noseey or probe too deeply before you





# PART TWO

## *Personal Character Qualities*

*As you begin to build working relationships with land-owners, there are some character qualities that will help you be effective and gain their trust and confidence.*



As you begin to build working relationships with landowners, there are some character qualities that will help you be effective and gain their trust and confidence. These character traits are like a catalyst in a chemical reaction – they make the process happen much faster and with a better outcome. If these traits are weak or missing, it will hinder or prevent you from being effective.

## Humility

Genuine humility is a trait that will take you a long way with most landowners. Landowners usually do not appreciate arrogant people who think they know everything. They do appreciate someone who is knowledgeable yet humble. Humility involves the realization that you do not have all the answers and that you are always still learning. Humility acknowledges that other people often know a lot more than you know and have better insights.

Everyone has an ego, but the humble person has learned to suppress his or her ego. For some of us, it takes constant reminders that we are not nearly as smart or as good as we think we are. If you come across as if you are the big-shot expert on everything, landowners will usually take offense and you will most likely not be invited back. Even when you are very good at what you do, a humble attitude will help people accept your ideas and input.

## Integrity and Trustworthiness

Those who work most effectively with landowners tend to be people of high personal integrity and completely trustworthy. Most landowners possess these traits and they expect and appreciate these traits in others, especially their advisors. You will often live in the same small community as some of the landowners and your behavior and values away from work will become known in the community. Integrity and trustworthiness involves who you are 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

## Work Ethic

Landowners and/or their managers are usually hard working people. You will gain a great deal of respect if they see that you have a great work ethic and if you work hard to help them. Too many people today believe that a job involves only 40 hours a week. Seldom will a successful person put in only 40 hours. In working with landowners, you must have the willingness to work long days when necessary, often 12 – 14 hours, and some long weeks. If you are in the 40-hour rut, your effectiveness will be reduced.

A prime example of a great work ethic comes from my dad, George Nelle. When Dad had worked for his employer for 40 years, the boss recognized him for his

exceptional service with a big dinner. During the dinner, the boss told the crowd “If George were to get run over by a truck, we would have to hire three men to replace him.” Few people will ever match that level of performance and service, but having a great work ethic will help make you irreplaceable with landowners and your employer.



Dad went on to work nine more years and greatly helped the company become successful and profitable. One of the core purposes of a work ethic in our profession is to **help others** to become as successful as possible.

## Respect and Empathy

Always show genuine respect for the landowner, his family, his employees, his land, his animals, and his ideas. Even if you disagree with them on some things, showing respect will be noticed and will help you gain their respect. Learn to empathize with landowners by putting yourself in their boots. Being a landowner is not as glamorous as some people think; there are many hardships and difficulties to endure. Especially be mindful when people are going through calamities such as drought, wildfire, health problems, loss of loved ones, or other difficult times. Russell Stevens says, “They need to know that you care about them, and can understand their needs. Showing them you care is paramount to building their trust.”

## Handling Disagreement

In 1948, Aldo Leopold said that “conservationists are notorious for their dissensions” and this is still true today. There are many opinions and perspectives regarding the best land management practice and you will frequently be faced with disagreements both from landowners and from fellow professionals. There is not just one right way to do things, so be prepared for differences of opinion.

It is sometimes tempting simply to go with the most

popular viewpoint and avoid disagreement. Renowned range ecologist E. J. Dyksterhuis offers these words of wisdom: “The professional conservationist must often make an independent and even unpopular stand. The non-professional is content with promotion of that which is currently acceptable or popular.”

In some cases, you will have to be thick skinned, enduring the criticism, but sticking with your convictions. In other cases, you will need to accommodate other viewpoints. In all cases, be gracious, professional and always willing to reevaluate your position.

## Do not Improvise; Be Honest

There will be many occasions when you will not have an adequate answer or solution. Landowners appreciate honesty and the admission that you do not know the answer to all of their questions. Do not improvise or “wing it” when you are unsure of the best response to a difficult question, and do not speak beyond your level of knowledge. Landowners can generally spot a phony and it will immediately harm your credibility. Be quick to admit when you don’t know something and be sure to research the question and get back to them promptly.

There will be other times when you inadvertently give



a landowner bad information. Sometimes in our zeal to be helpful, we speak prematurely and give bad advice. As soon as you discover you have given bad information, be quick to fess up and tell the landowner of your mistake. Don’t rationalize or make excuses, simply admit it and then work to find the right answer. Landowners are usually very forgiving when you demonstrate this kind of honesty and it can help build trust and credibility.

## Learn from Mistakes

Each of us who contributed to this booklet has enjoyed some success in working with landowners, but we have also made plenty of mistakes. In fact, much of the advice presented can be traced to mistakes we have made and bearing the consequences



**Just remember the old adage - “A person who makes no mistakes is a person who is not doing anything.”**

of those mistakes. Mistakes can be very good teachers and character builders if you learn from them. Just remember the old adage – “A person who makes no mistakes is a person who is not doing anything.” You will make mistakes if you are actively involved with landowners. The right response to mistakes is to acknowledge them and figure out how to avoid repeating them. By discovering our flaws, we can each learn how to overcome our weaknesses and turn them into opportunities for improvement.

### **Continual Self Improvement**

The professional conservationist is always aware of his or her need for continual self-improvement. Never get to the point where you think you have all the right answers – this is

arrogant and foolhardy. Nature and natural resources are far too complex for anyone to think they have it figured out. Dan Caudle offers these words of truth regarding complacency, “Anyone who is completely satisfied with himself either has an enormous ego, a short memory or very low standards.”

Self-improvement should include improvement in technical skills, and improvement in people skills, especially communication (listening, speaking and writing). Make self-improvement a priority, even if you have to do it on your own time and own expense.

### **Confidence and Assertiveness**

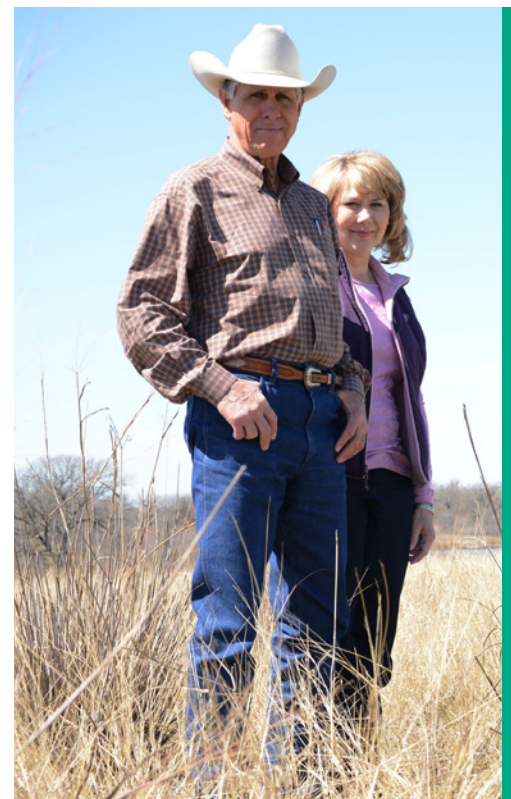
As you strive for excellence and self-improvement, and as your skills and abilities develop, you will naturally gain a degree of confidence. The proper degree and use of confidence and convictions will help your message be taken more seriously. Confidence is a positive quality when correctly expressed. However, false confidence and over confidence are negative qualities, so be mindful of the fine line that exists between confidence and arrogance.

After you have earned the trust of landowners and gained some confidence and credibility, there may be occasions when you will have to be more forceful

in expressing your message. According to Russell Stevens, “There are times and places where we need to be assertive in order to protect a resource or to ensure that the landowner is able to continue operating.”

### **Character Matters**

Landowners are usually a good judge of character. They can tell if you are a person of sincerity, honesty, integrity, humility who is respectful and will work hard to help them. It is not good enough to have excellent ecological and natural resource skills – effective work with landowners requires many character qualities in addition to technical ability.







# PART THREE

## *Professionalism and Exceptional Service*

*In all facets of assistance, go beyond what is required; go out of your way to provide the very best service and assistance.*



## **Go Out of Your Way**

In all facets of assistance, go beyond what is required; go out of your way to provide the very best service and assistance. This requires an intentional focus on excellence. Some organizations and agencies seem content with average, mediocre performance, but when working with landowners, the standard should be one of exceptional service. Landowners will take note of the extra effort you put forth and this will help build trust and confidence. The excellent advice of Bill Eikenhorst is straightforward: “Undersell and over deliver – Always.”

## **Give a Genuine Compliment**

During the course of your visits to the property, be observant and look for things that the owner or manager is doing well. Brag on them when you notice something that is noteworthy. Landowners like to know that you have noticed the good things they are doing. However, don't go too far and gush with false or insincere compliments. Landowners can tell the difference between flattery and genuine compliments.

## **Written Reports**

When your day on the property has ended, your work is only half done. The professional will find the time to promptly develop

a written report summarizing the discussions of the day. Landowner's usually appreciate this kind of extra effort and it helps reinforce and document the major issues. The report also gives you the opportunity to follow up on things that may need more research or investigation. Do not wait too long to develop the report – do it while everything is fresh on your mind. Take the time to write thoughtful, thorough, practical, and informative reports after each visit. The value of these reports is often greater than what we think, for both the landowner and ourselves.

## **Always Thank Them; Always Be Gracious**

At the end of the day, always thank the landowner for the privilege of spending time with them on their property. Although this is just a common courtesy, it will also help reinforce your good character and help build the relationship. Likewise, always be gracious, not just to those who are kind and considerate, but also to the old belligerent hardhead. Being gracious means treating people better than they might deserve and going out of your way to be helpful even for those who are ungrateful.

## **Professional Etiquette**

Several other items fall under the category of normal professional etiquette. These are the

expected norm for a professional relationship and failure in any of these will hinder effectiveness:

- Always be on time and be well prepared.
- Promptly return all phone calls and messages.
- Don't check phone messages, texts or email while out with a landowner; doing so is a sign of disrespect.

Be careful how you dress, how you speak, and with your mannerisms. You are trying to fit into their culture, not stick out like a sore thumb. Dress should be similar to the norm for landowners of the region and should generally be conservative and not drawing attention to yourself. Speak slowly and distinctly (many older landowners are hard of hearing). Men – leave your earrings at home; men and women – cover your tattoos; don't wear a “Save the Wolf” T-shirt or anything that might be offensive to their way of life.

Don't invite yourself hunting, fishing, or even drop hints of such. If you do a good job with landowners, you will get plenty of invites. Don't hunt arrowheads. Ask permission before you take photos on their land.



# PART FOUR

## *Technical Expertise*

*Your job is to have the necessary natural resource skills, knowledge and ability to help landowners set a course for their land management, conservation and stewardship.*



Parts I, II and III of this booklet have to do primarily with people skills, providing service and building a relationship for effective working. These are vitally important. Developing technical expertise in your field is equally important and is the primary reason why you have been invited to a farm, ranch or piece of rural property. Your job is to have the necessary natural resource skills, knowledge and ability to help landowners set a course for their land management, conservation and stewardship.

In the digital age, natural resource workers have instant access to immense volumes of technical information that was not available a decade ago. This information can help us do our jobs better, however, Dan Caudle advises, “Don’t mistake access to information as an acceptable alternative for knowledge, understanding, or experience. Information is a supplement, not a substitute.” Nature and natural resources are one of the most complex disciplines, and those who provide assistance need to have technical skills and practical knowledge and be able to communicate it.

### **Become Well Rounded in Natural Resources**

You may consider yourself a specialist in one field or another (agronomy, native plants, forestry, grazing management, wildlife,

watersheds, prescribed fire, etc.), but in order to work effectively with landowners, you need to have a broad level of natural resource knowledge relevant for your region. Landowners often need and want assistance that involves more than your specialty. You can’t be an expert in everything, but you need to have a basic working knowledge of the natural resource and agricultural resources of your area. Donnie Frels says, “Be a good field biologist – plants, animals, livestock, soils, insects, birds and how they interact. Good field biologists, really good, are rare and always coveted by landowners, often resulting in successful programs.” Your title may not be “biologist,” but in the world of agriculture and natural resources we must all have excellent biological and ecological skills.

### **Learn to Read the Land**

The ability to read the land is both an art and a science. It takes time to learn the ecological dynamics of a certain region; take the time to study and observe the interactions of plants, animals, soil, water and how they are affected by management. Rory Burroughs notes, “The ability of reading the land will tell you a lot about the past management and the history of property.”

Learning to read the land starts with a keen sense of observation. Try to spend plenty of time alone,

without distractions, observing what has happened and what is happening with the land. At the beginning in a new geographic area, it will be important to spend time with someone who has this ability to read the land. Reading the land starts with observation but goes much deeper. Dan Caudle says, “Don’t just observe, but learn to evaluate, investigate,



analyze, and ask why.” Natural curiosity and the desire to understand how the land works are an important element for successful natural resource professionals.

### **Learn Plants**

One of the most fundamental aspects of reading the land and providing landowner assistance

is the knowledge of plants. The “language” of the land is written with plants. The person who knows the plant life of a region will be in high demand – this is a skill that is highly respected and sought after among landowners. According to Rory Burroughs, “Sharing your knowledge of plants is almost always a great icebreaker experience with



landowners.” Plant knowledge begins by learning to identify and name plants and deepens as a person learns the ecological value and function of the plant, where it tends to grow and how it responds to management. No single skill is more important than a working knowledge of the plants of your area.

## The Tools of the Trade

An imperative skill for those who want to be effective with landowners is a good working knowledge of the land management techniques and practices used in your region. These tools will vary from region to region and will vary by land use. For rangeland and wildlife habitat purposes, the tools will include the familiar axe, plow, cow, fire and gun espoused by Aldo Leopold along with all of the variations of these tools.

A common mistake for land management advisors is to promote only a few favorite practices, or in some cases, over-emphasize only one tool (such as prescribed burning or brush control), while ignoring other essential practices. Using the analogy of a woodworker’s toolbox, each of the tools is needed and appropriate for certain jobs. No one tool does everything; hence, the craftsman needs to be adept at choosing and using the right tools in the right situation.

Another mistake to avoid is the badmouthing of certain tools that you may have a personal bias against (such as rootplowing, herbicides, summer burning, or high fences). All tools have their proper place and should be considered when they fit the need. Remember that the choice of which tools to use is up to the landowner. We may advise, but it is not our place to decide.

## Appreciate Economic Realities

Those of us who provide assistance to landowners are often removed from the economic realities of owning and managing land. Poncho Ortega advises, “The ability to relate recommended practices to economic investment and return is very important; we must remember that many of these ranchers are making a living from their operations.” Many of the things we discuss with a landowner are expensive and often will not result in an economic return. We must be aware of the initial up-front costs of all practices used in the area in addition to ongoing management and maintenance costs. Some landowners have outside income they are willing to invest in the land without a direct economic return. Others, including most bona fide agriculture producers are on a tight budget and always carefully consider the financial ramifications of their plans. Economic constraints often trump even the very best conservation intentions.

## No Simple Solutions

“For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong.”

H. L. Menken.

Nature and natural resources are complex. On top of that, land management and landowners are complex. Simple solutions



to complex problems will not work most of the time no matter how promising they seem.

whether the new practice merits further consideration.

### **Flexibility, Innovation and Creativity**

Things do not always turn out as planned. Murphy's Law seems to be the norm for natural resource management and agriculture. Being flexible will help accommodate

the unexpected. If you are helping landowners develop a conservation plan, a grazing plan, a wildlife management plan, etc., realize that such plans may change the moment the ink dries. Landowners are often not in a position to make final absolute decisions and stick with them no matter what. Changes in the weather, markets, family situation, the economy, their goals, and a dozen other factors will alter plans. Landowners

and their advisors must be flexible and creative to accommodate unforeseen changes. Conservation planning is a never-ending process, always changing and never finished.

### **Cultivate Your Gifts**

Nearly everyone who ends up in this line of work has some special talents and abilities that have inspired your decision to work in natural resources. Whatever your innate interests and gifts may be, focus on these to develop special abilities and expertise. Cultivate what comes naturally and which you have a high ability and interest. This will often be the area in which you make the biggest impact and contribution.

As you cultivate and improve your abilities in these areas, make certain that you become a good steward of your gifts. Pass along your expertise to others, both landowners and fellow professionals with humility, generosity and enthusiasm. Learn to communicate your passion and ability in these areas of special interest.

**“For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong.”**

**H. L. Menken.**

Practices and techniques that seem too good to be true usually fail and often backfire, actually making things worse. Instead of searching for and endorsing simple solutions, dig deeper to consider the ripple effects and unintended consequences of quick fix solutions. If a landowner is willing to take the risk to try new unproven techniques, a small scale test can be a good opportunity to determine



**“Good things on the land happen over time and are seldom the result of a single encounter.”**

**J.R. Bell**



## **Become an Expert - But Don't Get Tunnel Vision**

Although you will need to develop a broad range of knowledge about the natural resources of your region, most professionals also develop an area of expertise. Strive to become the recognized authority in your region in some aspect of your work. Developing this expertise and the reputation will take time and diligent effort, but it will pay off. As you become well known in your area for some special skill or ability, you will be in high demand, since landowners often seek out the experts. Your expertise can be a great foot-in-the-door, and then you can use your other natural resource skills to provide well-rounded assistance.

The downside to having expertise in some area is the danger of getting tunnel vision and thinking only of your specialty and ignoring other important aspects. Landowners seldom think in only one dimension – they are thinking about many things simultaneously and they usually need multi-faceted assistance.

## **Don't Try to be the Soloist – Work With Others**

With time, commitment and hard work you are likely to become well known in your region for your abilities, and your reputation may gain some notoriety. However, no matter how good you become, don't think that you can be a one-man show. There will always be areas outside of your skills where you need the input and expertise of others. Acknowledge your limitations and be willing to call on others for help. Work to develop a network of fellow professionals that have a wide range of skills in all facets of land management. Get to know them and avail yourself to them. Be willing to refer landowners to other specialists or call on them for advice and other perspectives. Gene Miller says, "We must be willing to stifle our territorial tendencies for the greater good of serving private landowners."

## **Seek Mentors**

Most long time successful natural resource workers



give a great deal of credit to the mentors that have helped them during their career. Seeking mentors and spending time with them will be an important part of your professional development and your self-improvement. In every area, there are people who are anxious to share what they have learned. Seek them out. Your mentors should include a combination of successful landowners as well as experienced

natural resource professionals. From these mentors, you can gain wisdom, inspiration, enthusiasm and benefit from their experience. According to Jimmy Rutledge, “A few key individuals will make a huge difference in your career and your effectiveness.” When they see that you are anxious to listen and learn, they will often take you under their wing and help you excel. When you have gained some degree of expertise and wisdom, then it will be your turn to be a mentor to the next generation.

### **Pursue Critical Thinking Skills**

Developing critical thinking skills is one of the most important things that will help you to be effective with landowners.

It is easy to recycle the

same old solutions, answers and perspectives of the past; it is much harder to think independently without the common professional biases. Critical thinking forces you to separate your emotions, opinions, paradigms, wishful thinking and traditions from what is factually true. It involves the skill of thinking things through carefully, logically and without preconceived outcomes. Too often, in natural resource management, we see what we want to see, or we see what we have been programmed to see, rather than a true picture. Critical thinking can help separate good science from bad science and can help you develop sound interpretations, conclusions and applications of scientific studies.

### **Speaking and Writing**

As you gain experience and expertise in your profession, you will want to develop the ability to speak in public and write well. Although most of us would rather spend time individually with landowners, our efforts can be greatly multiplied through speaking and writing. You will

**“Anyone who is completely satisfied with himself either has an enormous ego, a short memory or very low standards.”**

**- Dan Caudle**





**“Your reputation (good or bad) will quickly spread throughout the landowner network.”**

**Jimmy Rutledge**



be able to reach people that you would otherwise never meet. At first, your public speaking may start with helping at field days and local landowner events, speaking to small groups informally. As you gain skill and confidence, you will probably be asked to speak at larger events. Start writing by submitting articles to the local newspaper or various newsletters. Get the advice of a good editor to help you in your writing and do not get offended when they make suggestions for improvement. Learning to speak and write concisely, clearly, and convincingly will bear a great deal of fruit and will help many landowners. Photography will greatly enhance your ability to communicate; take your camera with you and use it often. A good picture is indeed worth a thousand words and photos will help landowners visualize and relate to your message of conservation and natural resource management.

### **Become a Great Teacher**

Our profession requires the understanding of complex ecological relationships. Science based knowledge of nature,

agriculture and natural resource management is what we deliver to landowners. The way in which we deliver this information is crucial and requires that we learn the skill of being a great teacher. A great teacher does more than transfer knowledge.

Dalton Merz, who has the reputation of being a great teacher says, “I am a show and tell teacher and landowners seem to learn well by this process.” Besides the important role of professional assistance, Merz has learned that “landowners learn best from other landowners; it is always best to see it on the land and have the landowners tell their success or failure stories.” Therefore, another facet of landowner assistance is to facilitate landowner-to-landowner learning through field days, informal ranch visits or other opportunities for landowners to learn from each other.

Our work with landowners and managers must go beyond telling, explaining and demonstrating natural resource information and ecological principles. We must also find ways to inspire and motivate landowners to incor-

porate the information we share into their everyday farming, ranching and land management activities. We must find ways to instill and encourage genuine and practical land stewardship ethics without being preachy and idealistic.

When landowners observe your skill, enthusiasm, professionalism and dedication to their cause and to the well-being of their land, they will value your assistance and will listen. As they gain confidence and appreciation of your abilities and expertise, they will be more likely to consider your message and adopt some of the ideas you have inspired.



*“The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates.*

*The great teacher inspires.”*

*-William Ward.*





# Conclusion





**“If you want to be successful, it’s just this simple. Know what you are doing. Love what you are doing. And believe in what you are doing.”**

**Will Rogers**

As those who love the land and appreciate the vital role of private landowners and private land stewardship, the ideals presented here represent our best efforts to communicate the principles we have found important for working with landowners. The material, when properly understood and diligently applied

will help you be a more successful conservationist, specialist, advisor, or consultant. The information will help you assist landowners and their managers as they endeavor to produce crops, livestock, timber, wildlife, water and other natural resource values on their land in a practical and sustainable manner.

Your work with landowners lies at the intersection of agriculture, ecology, natural sciences, sustainability, human nature and social dimensions. Your work is important to the individual landowner and their family and is likewise important to society who benefits from well-managed private land. Give your utmost to this profession and

strive for excellence each day. If you do so, you will find it to be a rewarding and stimulating vocation, providing an important service to present and future generations and to your community, state and country.

## Contributors:

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**RORY BURROUGHS** is owner of Comprehensive Land Management, a private company specializing in mechanical brush treatments and other range improvement practices. He also provides real estate and wildlife management assistance to landowners, and is Manager of Hackberry Creek Ranch in Kent and Fisher County, Texas.

**DR. LARRY BUTLER** is Executive Producer & Host of OUT ON THE LAND, a weekly, half-hour television show dedicated to stewardship and conservation. He retired in 2007 from the Natural Resources Conservation Service after over 32 years assisting private landowners in numerous technical positions, serving throughout

the United States and as State Conservationist in Texas.

**DAN CAUDLE** is a Rangeland Management Specialist and Natural Resource Management Consultant/Advisor with more than 48 years' experience providing technical assistance to ranchers, natural resource managers, agencies, and organizations on all aspects of range and pasture management. He has extensive work experience throughout Texas and the Gulf Coast Marsh and Prairie areas of Louisiana.

**BILL EIKENHORST, DVM** owns a large, successful veterinary practice in Brenham, Texas and is a multi-generational landowner in Washington Country. He uses his extraordinary knowledge of animal ecology to teach people about the relationship of people and animals to the land. He has been instrumental in helping Texas Brigades become an effective youth conservation movement and has served in leadership positions in several conservation organizations including Texas Wildlife Association and Quality Deer Management Association. Dr. Eikenhorst has also become well known for his skill in restoring native prairie habitat across several regions in Texas.

**KENT FERGUSON** is retired Texas State Rangeland Management Specialist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service. He invested his 36-year public service range management career working with private landowners, and is currently involved in full-time ranching and consulting service.

**DONNIE FRELS** has been employed as a Wildlife Biologist for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department since 1987. He currently serves as the Project Leader for the Edwards Plateau Ecosystems Management Project where he oversees daily operations, management and research on three wildlife management areas in Central Texas. He and his staff interact with and assist thousands of landowners annually to encourage sustainable conservation and land stewardship.

**DEE ANN LITTLEFIELD** grew up being very involved on large multigenerational family ranches in Arizona, an experience that led her to occupations in the Agriculture Communications field. In 2003 she began a career with the NRCS as a Public Affairs Specialist, serving at the state level in Texas and Oklahoma, where she has helped provide environmental stewardship information to landowners and millions of the general public through various media outlets. With her diverse background



in ranching, the private sector, and NRCS, she brings over 20 years of business, professional and personal agricultural and conservation experience.

**DALTON MERZ** is actively involved in ranching, consulting and teaching after his retirement from SCS and NRCS. For 35 years, he served as Range Conservationist at various levels including Texas State Range Conservationist. He is well known for his special skills of communication with landowners and his practical knowledge of livestock and range practices.

**GENE T. MILLER** is a Certified Wildlife Biologist with 41 years of professional experience. He served as a Technical Guidance Biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, assisting private landowners. Currently, he is Regional Biologist with the National Wild Turkey Federation, working in West Texas and Oklahoma.

**KENT MILLS** is a Range Nutritionist with Hi-Pro Feeds, and formerly with Ezell-Key Feeds. He has extensive practical knowledge and experience in rangeland forages and ruminant nutrition in Texas, and the Southwest. His unique forage sampling service has helped hundreds of ranchers make informed decisions about stocking rates, forage availability, supplemental feeding

and livestock performance. Mills began his career in 1972 working on the Fuller Ranch near Snyder, Texas, then teaching Ranch Management courses at Western Texas College until 1982 when he began his work in the feed business.

**STEVE NELLE** began his career in 1976 and worked for the Soil Conservation Service and NRCS for 35 years as Range Conservationist and Wildlife Biologist working with landowners across Texas. Since 2011, he is involved in private range, wildlife and watershed consulting and assistance.

**DR. PONCHO ORTEGA** has been involved in ranching activities since he was a young boy growing up in Mexico. Following his formal education, Dr. Ortega directed agricultural and land management research at 82 experiment stations across Mexico. He is currently a Professor and Research Scientist at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, Texas A&M University-Kingsville. His research interests include livestock-wildlife interactions and habitat management on private ranches. He is actively involved in ranching as well as consulting for cattle and wildlife operations in Mexico and Texas for the past 23 years.


**STAN REINKE** is currently Range and Pasture Specialist with DuPont Crop Protection. He has worked with private landowners in the natural resources business for 48 years. He previously served as a Range Conservationist for the USDA/ Soil Conservation Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service and as a Range Specialist for Environmental Defense.

**JIMMY RUTLEDGE** has 37 years of experience working with landowners in natural resource management. He began his career as Range Conservationist with the Soil Conservation Service, then 22 years as a Wildlife Biologist for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. He currently serves as a Wildlife Habitat Specialist and Wildlife Biologist for a large private organization. His work has focused on directly assisting landowners in developing plans to help them reach their land management and stewardship goals.

**RUSSELL STEVENS** is a Wildlife and Range Consultant with the Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation in Ardmore, Oklahoma. His work with landowners and managers includes wildlife and range management issues such as habitat improvement, prescribed fire, grazing management, plant identification, and feral hog impacts on agriculture. Stevens joined the Noble Foundation in 1989.







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