

# A Three-Prong Approach to Sustainability

Evaluating the economic, ecological and social parameters within your business may help yield more valuable outcomes.

by Kindra Gordon

**S**ustainability is an often-used word in today's society, and sometimes it may be overused. How does Joshua Dukart define it from a holistic management approach? He says, "In my mind sustainability means managing for the optimal balance of people, money and land."

Dukart, who is a certified educator in holistic management, probes people to think about those three aspects, which are often called the triple bottom line.

Based near Bismarck, N.D., he hopes that by asking producers to ponder their operation from a three-prong approach they will be given a reminder that — like the old adage says — money isn't everything.

## Your triple bottom line

Coined as a 21st century business term, the "triple bottom line" is designed to be a means for measuring economic, ecological and social parameters. To put it in cowboy terms, Dukart explains it as "making money, conserving your natural resources and having fun in the process." Dukart is a believer that



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the triple-bottom-line approach — or similar forms of holistic management — can be beneficial in helping farmers and ranchers

balance their workload and resources; become proactive; and, most importantly, move beyond crisis management into planned prosperity.

Along with that, the time and communication put into identifying goals and values related to a triple bottom line may help facilitate the transition of an operation from one generation to the next.

"The true test of sustainability has very little to do with land or money," Dukart points out. "The big question is: Does the next generation want to come back to the ranch?"

## Getting started

Starting the process of outlining your triple bottom line begins with identifying your goals. But, Dukart clarifies, these aren't traditional "number" goals like having a specific number of cattle or acres, or making a certain amount of money.

Instead, Dukart says, people need to focus on identifying "value" goals based on their beliefs, emotions and feelings. As they do this for a family farm or ranch operation, input and consensus needs to be gathered from the entire team involved.

He acknowledges this can be a challenge for many people. But Dukart says it's worth the effort. "Identifying in your own words why you farm or ranch in the first place can make social, financial and resource-based decisions easier to make," he says.

Dukart notes, "People get focused on specific number goals, when they really need to start with the bigger picture." The bigger picture encompasses overall goals related to quality of life, stewardship, financial security, family time, long-term vs. short-term goals, etc.

He explains, "This really focuses on

## Striving for sustainability

Joshua Dukart explains that working toward sustainability is a direction you take, and different people can be at different places in their journey.

"There is never a point where you have arrived; but if you are moving ahead toward sustainability you are making progress," he says. Dukart offers this advice for other producers striving for sustainability:

- **Aim to be proactive vs. reactive.** He gives the example: Are you just doing what seems urgent at the moment, or is it part of your overall plan for achieving your value goals? "Any time you can be more proactive with your decision-making allows for progressing ahead. It is much more effective to prevent 'fires' rather than be constantly putting them out."

- **Focus on low-cost.** Keeping costs minimal can help producers move toward independence and sustainability, says Dukart. Relying less and less on inputs can put the producer back in the driver's seat when making decisions, and, most importantly, brings the tool of human creativity to the forefront, he adds.

- **Work with nature.** "Realize that the most powerful teammate we have is Mother Nature, and working within her natural ecosystem. Focusing on improving soil health can result in less stress and less work," he concludes.

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getting the proper model in place before worrying about specific details. In other words, it is more important to make sure you are shooting at the right target, before you concentrate on hitting the bull's-eye. Hitting the bull's-eye on whatever target is in front of you may show signs of efficiency, but if it is the wrong target, it may actually move you away from your long-term goals."

Dukart's advice to families working through this goal-setting and evaluation process is that it's not necessarily about the answers. Rather, it's all about pondering the questions. "What's the best place to use your next dollar? What's the best way to use your next hour of time? What action will lead you toward your long-term goals?" he asks.

"Often, by working through this process and communicating, people find that not everyone was on the same page. But by identifying value goals for the farm or ranch operation, everyone can feel like they are part of the team, and once that ownership in the future of the family and business is accomplished, it can be amazing to watch people turn a corner," says Dukart.

And the real bottom line, according to Dukart, is this: "By concentrating on being effective with your time and money, you

should be achieving the number goals for a profit along the way."

Dukart provides consulting and presentations on holistic management topics. He and his wife stay involved with his family's cow-calf operation as well as manage some of their own cattle. He is also the field representative for the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition and works with

the Burleigh County Soil Conservation District.

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