

# New Roles

PHOTO BY ED HAAG

## A USDA program is retooling its efforts to build awareness for rangeland and grassland attributes.

by *Kindra Gordon*

**A**s concerns about urbanization, rural economies, and clean air and water continue to challenge society in the future, rangelands and grasslands could play an important role in addressing those issues.

That's the thinking behind renewed efforts by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) to develop a national program in rangelands and grasslands.

"America's increasing population requires land managers to view rangeland as a source of many benefits," says Jim Dobrowolski, who was named the national program leader for the CSREES effort last September. He points out that while rangelands and grasslands are important for production-based outputs such as energy, grazing and minerals, they also need to be considered for offering aesthetics, wildlife habitat and recreation.

He believes building awareness for rangelands and grasslands will help people

recognize the "ecosystem services" these lands provide — such as helping maintain air and water quality, open space, and providing open lands around urbanization.

"Our goal is to design a program that meets the needs of society by integrating research, outreach and education programs and enabling land managers to make appropriate decisions about the most effective uses of the land," Dobrowolski says.

Based in Washington, D.C., Dobrowolski is helping coordinate the Rangelands and Grasslands program by developing partnerships with university, USDA and other federal, state and private entities to deliver research, education and outreach efforts. He anticipates the new program will help promote a broader education of land managers and the general public about the positive benefits of properly managed grazing lands, as well as provide insight into rangeland watershed management and restoration efforts.



**Jim Dobrowolski**

### Why now?

Dobrowolski reports that few new initiatives in rangeland and grassland research, education and outreach were introduced during the last 15 years. "The timing was right, and the need was there to combine rangeland and grassland ecosystems into a single national program." With 22 years of experience in both the Extension service and as a teaching/researching university professor, Dobrowolski was recruited from Washington State University to lead the new program.

With the growing concerns of weeds, fire, fragmentation, drought, watershed management and sustainability among the many issues challenging today's land managers, Dobrowolski believes the renewed interest in developing the program could have much to offer.

Through a three-pronged approach focusing on rangeland and grassland research, education and outreach, Dobrowolski believes possible outcomes may include:

- ▶ improved public perceptions about the value of rangeland and grassland

### Program under construction

In developing the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) National Rangelands and Grasslands program, Jim Dobrowolski is holding listening sessions with researchers, educators and stakeholder groups to gather input on the needs they've identified in the areas of rangelands and grasslands research, education and outreach.

He cites some of the goals for the program as being:

- ▶ Continue to improve assessment procedures for rangeland and grassland health and status in ways that are faster, better and cheaper.
- ▶ Continue research efforts in the areas of ecology, physiology and biotechnology of both plants and animals to aid in fire and

weed restoration efforts; help preserve biodiversity; assist with sustainability; and provide ecosystem services such as water, habitat and aesthetics.

- ▶ Improve key sustainability factors that will ensure flexibility in addressing future demands for products and services.
- ▶ Identify employment potential in rangeland and grassland careers and relay that information to universities and students.

If you'd like to visit with Dobrowolski about the CSREES Rangelands and Grassland Ecosystems program, contact him at 202-401-5016 or [jdobrowolski@csrees.usda.gov](mailto:jdobrowolski@csrees.usda.gov).

ecosystems and the people who manage them;

- ▶ slowed weedy invasions and improved production and biodiversity;
- ▶ sustainable rangelands and grasslands, both kept as large unbroken landscapes and smaller sustainable parcels linked by riparian and other corridors;
- ▶ maintaining appropriate fire cycles and ecological status; and
- ▶ thriving human communities.

As an example of such outcomes, he shares that two national Conservation Effects Assessment Project watersheds, including one related to the drinking water supply for Wichita, Kan., cite proper management-intensive grazing (MiG) practices that help enhance watershed quality. Through the national Rangelands and Grasslands program, more strides could be made in research for similar projects, as well as providing technical assistance to landowners to implement new science-based technologies.

He's hopeful the program will also help identify the critical issues in which rangeland managers and scientists need to be trained for the future, so university curricula can be adapted to meet those needs. For instance, the increasing trend for people to own small acreages or ranchettes presents unique land issues that future land managers need to be able to address.

Additionally, Dobrowolski believes that the program may be beneficial in identifying strategies to landowners that can boost rural economies. For example, value-added income streams may include water leasing, grass banks, supplying native seed, fee hunting, and/or paid nature and agritourism experiences.

### Linking land and people

Dobrowolski says another important area where the CSREES Rangelands and Grasslands program can have an important effect is in connecting people — especially youth — to the land.

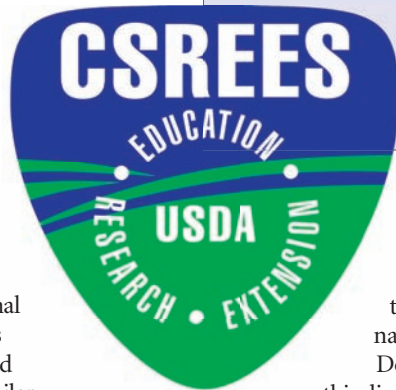
He points out that fewer young people have the opportunity to grow up with exposure to agriculture and nature — which is leading to a new challenge in today's society referred to as "Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD)." That term was coined by author Richard Louv in his book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, where he

### Educational tools available

The new Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) Rangelands and Grasslands program leader is a liaison to the Renewable Resources Extension Act (RREA)-funded web-based learning center at [www.forestandrange.org](http://www.forestandrange.org). Coordinated by the University of Tennessee, with input from several other land-grant universities, the center offers educational opportunities for private forest and range landowners. It includes interactive learning modules that allow participants to improve their knowledge of natural resources.

Teachers interested in including rangeland and grassland principles in the classroom also have a new curriculum available that they can use. The publication is called "At Home on the Range," and it is targeted toward 4-H and/or K-12 youth. Initiated in 2005 by a group of individuals who convened at Montana State University representing Cooperative Extension, the Nature Conservancy, 4-H, primary schools, universities, and others, it is the first national curriculum for rangeland that meets National Science Education Standards.

To obtain information about this curriculum, contact Kirk Astroth, director, Montana 4-H Center for Youth Development, Montana State University, 210 Taylor Hall, Bozeman, MT 59717-3580.



argues that kids are so plugged into television and video games that they've lost their connection to the natural world.

Dobrowolski points out this disconnection could create a risk to ag and rural economies in the future. "When youth don't have a grasp of the importance of agriculture and natural resources and what rangeland and grassland ecosystems can provide," he says, "the result is that as adults they aren't concerned with issues like maintaining land from being fragmented by urbanization."

He adds, NDD could produce a future generation that does not have the knowledge or understanding of dynamic environmental processes and that humans are an integral part of ecosystems. He's concerned this growing disconnect with nature has serious implications for the future stewardship of our public lands and waters that may endanger our country's conservation legacy.

Dobrowolski believes rangeland programs could help bridge the gap between that disconnect. "We have kids in society who will never have the opportunity to be on a farm or ranch — unless they [farmers/ranchers] provide that to them," he says. "If they have experiences with nature, they have a better chance of understanding the societal value that rangelands and grasslands provide."

As an added benefit, exposing youth to rangelands and grasslands may stimulate career choices in natural resource fields as well, Dobrowolski says.

### Building relationships

As the CSREES Rangelands and Grasslands program is developed, Dobrowolski anticipates new methods

of providing research and management knowledge to land managers and the public must also be developed.

"We need to be able to provide knowledge that people can use today to help their bottom-line or their management planning without a tremendous amount of interpretation," he says.

He believes that means developing relationships with land managers who foster behavioral change. "Often, Extension folks get tapped to provide larger and larger workshops," he says, "reducing their ability to build trusting relationships that might eventually lead to adoption of new practices and behavior changes that make a real impact."

He points out that in today's web-based world, people can easily go to the internet to find information. "We must develop new tools that combine current and future education technologies with a relationship of trust to help landowners sort through the information and make decisions for their operation."

To that end, Dobrowolski suggests educational materials of the future must be developed and delivered so they are user-friendly and available to youth — downloadable as podcasts, for example. He cites what he calls the four R's for successful Extension — reliability, relevancy, response time and research base.

Educators and rangeland managers also need training in social issues and working with people, he adds, so they can facilitate relationship building and foster technology adoption and change.

Of the CSREES Rangelands and Grasslands program, he says, "It's time for us to retool and see how we can be more effective."

