



WESTERN SUSTAINABILITY EXCHANGE:

15 Years of Preserving Open Space and Quality of Life

Above: Lill Erickson, Executive Director of Western Sustainability Exchange

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PHOTO BY ROYCE GORSUCH

When it comes to sustainability, Lill Erickson is no rookie. Fifteen years ago, while working part time for the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and caretaking a ranch, Erickson recognized that groups working to balance sustainability with economic viability seemed to only work together when there was conflict; commonalities and proactive solutions to problems were rarely discussed. She recognized that people with broad interests and diverse backgrounds needed a platform, a model for working together toward the common goal of preserving our landscape while boosting commerce, particularly in rural communities. Hence, the Corporation for the Northern Rockies (CNR) was formed, with Erickson as the executive director.

“The Greater Yellowstone is the last intact temperate-zone ecosystem on the planet,” Erickson explains, “meaning we still have all of the plants and animals that were here when Europeans came. In order to maintain this—to keep the pressure off the land—we need to understand the economic drivers behind degradation. We want to preserve this for future generations.”

Today, the non-profit, now called Western Sustainability Exchange, is driven by the same mission: To advance sustainable choices that preserve open space, wildlife habitat, farm and ranchlands, and quality of life for future generations. And the success stories they have under their belt are impressive.

In the Beginning: Creating Sustainability

Western Sustainability Exchange’s first project revolved around a group of ranchers in Southeast Idaho with a mission to improve the quality of the Blackfoot River through sustainable ranching practices. The ranchers, who agreed to forgo other crops, instead rotated the grazing of their herds. They also migrated their calving and lambing times back into the natural spring cycle as opposed to the conventional method of calving in early February for heavier, more valuable animals. As time went on, the ranchers found that the health of their soil improved, producing more forage, and their input costs to raise animals lessened. The elimination of hormones, antibiotics, pesticides, and herbicides saved money while allowing them to generate a premium price for more natural meat. Forgoing some crops also eliminated the cost of heavy equipment needed for planting and harvesting.

For the first time in their lives, these ranchers had more time to manage their livestock and more free time on their hands—a rare commodity in the agricultural world. They also enjoyed an increase in profitability. “We made money in one of the worst cattle years,” one rancher said.

Now, 12 years later, the group has continued to monitor and study the effects of this change and have found that sustainable practices increase profitability by an average of 22 percent.

The Next Step: Creating Relationships & Community Involvement

Erickson realized that marketing was essential to increase the demand for the product, which also involved increasing consumer awareness. Western Sustainability Exchange facilitated training and education sessions to link producers with chefs and buyers, helping the ranchers understand that when they sold directly to consumers, they could achieve much higher premiums.

Erickson believes this education and outreach is essential for a local food system to flourish. “The importance of relationships can’t be underrated,” she says. “When communication is better, there is more tolerance for imperfection, which allows producers to make the shift needed to move from conventional production to local production.”

Western Sustainability Exchange identified local chefs and buyers and began building a network where they worked together directly. “This circle of relationships is an essential foundation for a sustainable food system,” says Erickson. “When people have relationships, they want to help one another.”

The work of Western Sustainability Exchange didn’t stop there. They started a successful Farmer’s Market in Livingston and began the Northern Rockies Sustainability Fair, a two-day educational trade fair. Both events focus on area youth, allowing them to have booths and even a Children’s General Store where kids bring their food or crafts and learn how to manage money in a real time setting. “Kids are so open, there is so much genius. They don’t know something is impossible, so they figure out how to make it work,” Erickson says.

Western Sustainability Exchange also spearheaded the Montana Farm to Restaurant Connection, an initiative that requires local restaurants to agree to “Sustainability Criteria,” and, in turn, they are promoted throughout the community for their commitment to sustainable food and business practices.

The Proof is in the Pudding

Through marketing and producer training programs, Western Sustainability Exchange has helped conserve 500,000 acres of grassland and riparian ecosystems. They have trained over 450 farmers, ranchers, and chefs on sustainable practices and have generated nearly \$500,000 in sales for over 70 producers in 2008 alone. Through their sustainability education and outreach program, they have trained over 400 real estate professionals about the value of conservation easements and private land habitat enhancement and continue to educate over 35,000 people each year through the Sustainability Fairs. Their media outreach has generated exposure to over 600,000 people throughout the region.

And on February 15, 2009, Western Sustainability Exchange celebrated their 15th anniversary. Congratulations on a job well done. We look forward to your future endeavors. *eB*