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Bi-National Ranchers Conference in Laredo is a Success

Many learned that the concerns and issues facing ranchers on both sides of the border are the same at the Bi-National Ranchers Conference on June 24-25 in Laredo. The conference and tradeshow drew more than 140 attendees, including Texas and Mexico ranchers, academia, elected officials, agriculture businesses and others interested in the latest developments in livestock and wildlife management, conservation practices, technical and financial assistance programs, and disease updates.

“South Texas and northern Mexico ranchers deal with a very similar ecosystems and the only thing between us is the Rio Grande River,” said co-organizer, Flavio Garza Jr., Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) district conservationist in Webb County. “As the saying goes, the Rio Grande River doesn’t divide us, it joins us. And this was the case as producers came together to discuss topics affecting them on both sides, as well as opening dialogue and sharing ideas among the ranchers.”

“It was clear at the Bi-National Ranchers Conference that the ranchers identify themselves more with the ecosystem in which they ranch than with the country in which they ranch,” said Ellen Humphries Brisendine, editor of Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association magazine, *The Cattleman*. “Everyone in the room seemed to have shared interests in cattle and wildlife, and everyone seemed to understand that they must manage their resources under primarily drought conditions.”

“This commonality of issues and concerns cuts across nationalities and come to rest squarely on the effected ranchers’ business,” said Omar J. Garza, Executive Director of the Texas-Mexico Border Coalition CBO, which helped sponsor the meeting. “Meetings such as this can lead to effective dialogue between both Mexican and American ranchers who face the same type of problems on a daily basis.”

Since the conference speakers and attendees included both English and Spanish speakers, Arturo May, of Monterrey, Mexico, provided translations via headsets to attendees. May who has been translating for more than 30 years, amazed all by keeping within a few words of what the speaker had just said.

This was the first time a bi-national conference of ranchers has been held on the U.S. side of the border. In past years, AgriLife Extension Service had held meetings on the Mexico side in conjunction with ranch tours. Talks are underway for future bi-national agricultural producer meetings to address additional challenges faced on both sides.



In addition to the ranchers, four agricultural students from the Laredo Community College (LCC) were in attendance with Rosario Martinez, USDA Grant Administrator at LCC. Martinez also works with recruiting high school students and informing them of available opportunities with USDA.

“It was very educational bringing our USDA students from Laredo Community College,” said Martinez. “We learned so much about agriculture and careers in these areas by listening to all of the presenters and visiting with the exhibitors. Being bilingual helped us to enjoy hearing from the U.S. and Mexico ranchers.”

A special recognition was also held for speaker, Dr. Wayne Hanselka, to thank him for his years of service and assistance to South Texas ranchers. Hanselka, who has served as associate department head, professor and Extension range specialist in the Department of Rangeland Ecology and Management at Texas A&M University, for 33 years, was presented a plaque by Carroll Summers, president of the Webb Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) for his work with the SWCD/NRCS and landowners during his career. Webb County agriculture and natural resources agent, George Gonzales, also presented a plaque of recognition for his dedicated efforts in South Texas.

Some of the other thoughts from the workshop included:

“On a practical note, it is evident that good planning is fundamental to all aspects of ranch management in South Texas and Northern Mexico,” said Brisendine. “Ranchers must start planning today for a prescribed fire they want to conduct in 2010 or 2011. Wildlife managers must plan today how they will use cattle to open up habitat for quail and whitetail deer. After listening to the speakers, I was reminded that planning is a fundamental tool in a successful ranching operation.”

The Webb Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) chairman, Guillermo "Memo" Benavides, said the conference was an important step in reaching landowners about the technical and financial assistance available through the NRCS and SWCD programs.

“I was extremely pleased to see such a plentiful and diverse turnout for our conference,” said Benavides. “My gratitude goes out to all attendees as well as a multitude of financial sponsor and program participants.”

“I was very impressed with the large turnout as well as with the quality of the presentations,” said Carroll Summers, Webb SWCD secretary.

The USDA- NRCS, Webb Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and Texas AgriLife Extension Service appreciate the sponsors who helped with the two-day workshop: Texas/Mexico Border Coalition CBO, BBVA Compass, Asociación Ganadera Local de Nuevo Laredo, ANGADI, Rio Bravo Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), and Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI).

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