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ECO-LABELS ON THE RANGE AND IN THE FORESTS OF THE INTERIOR NORTHWEST

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For more than two decades, advocates have been developing programs to certify products as coming from well-managed lands. However, participation in certification programs is fairly low among landowners in at least some western states. Among the 800 landowners we surveyed in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana, fewer than 10 percent had participated in a livestock or crop certification program (e.g., Salmon Safe, Certified Organic, Predator Friendly), or a forest management certification program (e.g., Forest Stewardship Council, Sustainable Forestry Initiative, American Tree Farm). In comparison, 10 percent participated in environmental credit markets, and 27 percent in cost-share or grant-funded conservation programs. To better understand the value and potential of certification programs for enhancing ecosystem services, we examined barriers to participation as well as emerging opportunities to make certification programs more accessible for landowners.

Approach

We conducted over 130 interviews in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana with landowners and staff from nonprofit organizations and government agencies. We asked about the opportunities and barriers for landowners in practicing land management that enhances ecosystem services, including participation in forest and range land certification programs. We also surveyed 800 ranch and forest landowners in the interior northwest about land management and participation in conservation programs, including certification.

Results

Barriers to Participation

We found the following hurdles that contributed to the relatively low landowner participation in certification versus other conservation programs:

Difficulty of obtaining price premiums

One significant challenge with certification is finding enough consumers willing to pay enough

of a premium to justify the additional costs of participation. Changing operation practices and certification requirements such as audits can create significant costs for landowners, and consumers are price-sensitive regarding staples like meat and wood. This is particularly true for meats like beef and lamb, for which commodity prices are at historic highs. As one Idaho rancher said, “It really has made the idea of adding premiums in exchange for good practices or certain attributes almost impossible to manage or to sustain.”

Landowner uncertainty

Many landowners are skeptical about the benefits of certification, given the costs of compliance and increased scrutiny. They are hesitant to commit and invest in certification practices with no guarantee of consumer buying-power to cover their investments. Interested landowners may also be unsure of how to reach new markets, or they may lack the resources to bring final products to those markets.

Opportunities for Certification Markets

Although landowner participation in certification programs was low compared to other types of conservation programs, strategies are emerging that make these markets more accessible to both landowners and consumers. Nearly a quarter of landowners in our survey reported that they were at least somewhat likely to enter a certification program in the near future. We found the following factors that were helping to make certification viable for more landowners:

Growing importance of market share

For some products, certifications are expected to be increasingly important to acquiring and maintaining market share. This is particularly true for timber markets. As one Montana mill manager explained, “At some point in time, it will be no different than a grade stamp on lumber. Everyone will have to be certified.” As more and more buyers demand certified wood, certification is important for ensuring market share even if price premiums are lacking. In the study area, American Tree Farm was cited as the most accessible certification for small, private landowners. The Sustainable Forestry Initiative was the common certification for industrial timber landowners and the sawmills that source from certified lands. Forest Stewardship Council certification was widely cited as too expensive and complex for individual landowners.

Importance of aggregators and middlemen

Landowners who produce raw commodities like timber and cattle typically lack the resources and time to bring finished wood and meat to market.

Aggregators—sawmills and brands like Country Natural Beef and Lava Lake Lamb—play a key role for landowners involved in certification by assembling enough consistent volume of product and managing the supply chain.

Branding instead of certification in local markets

Certification is not necessarily important for all conservation products, especially those going into local and regional markets where the landowner has a more direct connection with the consumer. Value added markets like juniper furniture are like this, as is local beef production—grass-finished and grain-finished—from ranches in areas like the Blackfoot Watershed. There, urban customers value not only product quality but also conservation land management practices and non-lethal predator control.

Implications

Despite lower participation rates than other types of conservation programs, certification offers landowners promising opportunities to benefit from sustainable management while maximizing ecosystem services. In cases where the increased cost of management can be transferred to the final cost of the product, or where certification can help create access to higher value markets, it is increasingly appealing to landowners.

More information

A description of the project, briefing papers, and fact sheet examples of projects on the ground can be found on the project website at: tinyurl.com/SNWEcosystemServices.

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