

A Guide to Small Acreage Land Management In The Colusa Basin Watershed

By Mary Fahey, Colusa County Resource Conservation District



There are many reasons that people decide to live on small acreage parcels of land (in this case, 1 to 40 acres). Most often, people come from urban areas looking for peace and quiet and a taste of the country life. Many new small acreage landowners have never managed more than a backyard garden and they are unaware that living on acreage requires a completely different approach. Although owning acreage is an exciting opportunity to fulfill the owner's vision of rural life, it requires plenty of thoughtful planning and decision making to create a sustainable and manageable system that meets the owner's needs while protecting the land's vital natural resources.

Where to Begin?

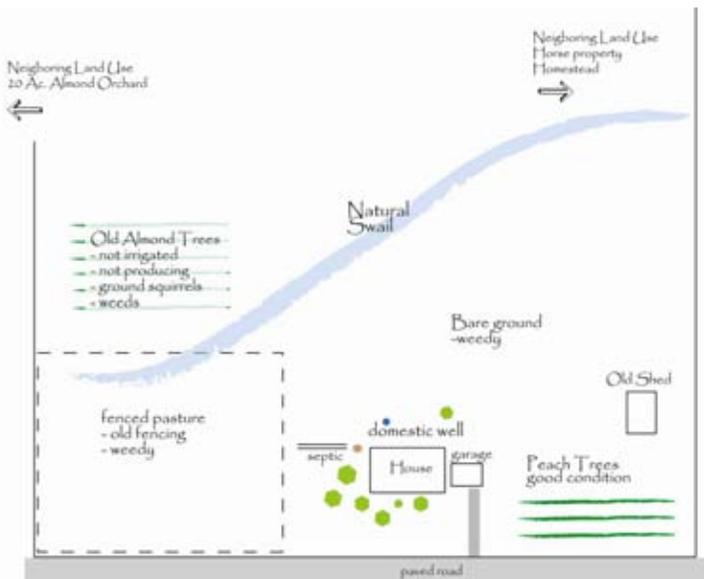
Congratulations! You are a new small acreage landowner. Or perhaps you have owned a small acreage parcel of land for several years, but have lacked the time or knowledge to make the most of it. Either way, the following information will get you started down the path to achieving your vision while making smart land use decisions.

First things first: assess your situation

It's best to have a plan before diving into a small acreage venture. Your plan doesn't have to be fancy or involved, but should be a long range road map to a healthy and sustainable system.

First, look at what you have, both structural elements and land conditions. Make a list of existing conditions such as total acreage, fencing, water supplies (domestic and irrigation), septic, streams, ponds, weeds, soil erosion, trees and shrubs, pastures, homestead, neighboring land use, etc. Also take an inventory of equipment that you own such as mowers, weed eaters and chain saws.

Next, list your ideas for the land, your vision of what you want the land to look like in the next five to ten years. Include things like crops, livestock, wildlife, open space, ponds, gardens, etc. During the planning phase, it's helpful to draw out a map of your property and make several copies that you can mark up. A simple drawing like the example below will help assess current conditions and aid in developing a plan for your land.



Managing Natural Resources

As a landowner, it is important to realize that your property works as an interrelated system and that protection of natural resources should be an integral part of your overall land management plan. All land management decisions have an effect on water quality, soil quality, air quality, wildlife habitat, animal health and overall health of the land. Proper vegetation management, including weed control, pasture maintenance and habitat establishment, should be a key component in your plan. Improperly managed vegetation can cause a slew of problems including soil erosion, degraded water quality and proliferation of noxious weed.

No bare ground

To prevent soil erosion and water quality issues, you should avoid having areas of bare ground on your property. During the rainy season, fertilizers and pesticides can easily run off of bare ground into creeks and streams causing harm to water supplies. Bare ground also contributes to soil erosion which causes loss of land and degrades water quality when the erosion is near a water source. Great benefits can be achieved by maintaining well-managed vegetative cover over your land. The roots of plants help to hold soil in place and allow water to infiltrate into the ground. Vegetation also acts as a natural filter for water flow, trapping soil particles and chemical residues.



Another benefit to vegetative ground cover is that it improves soil structure by adding organic matter, and depending on the type of vegetation, it can provide added nutrients, such as nitrogen to the soil.

Don't ignore the weeds

While developing your plan, one element you will need to focus on immediately is weed management. Once you lose control of the weeds, soil and water quality as well as habitat value begin to degrade. If weeds are allowed to grow unchecked, they will create a source of seed that will spread far and wide and remain viable for many years, making future control extremely difficult.

Make an effort early on to learn to identify the noxious weed species in your area so you can control them before they reseed and spread. You should be extra diligent with weed control, making sure you utilize control efforts early and often. You may be surprised at how aggressively annual weeds grow in the spring, and how quickly noxious weed populations can “take root” and spread on your land. During your planning stages, put together a weed control plan. Your local NRCS, RCD or Cooperative Extension offices can help you.

Mowers (riding mower or tractor with mower attachment), brush cutters and herbicides are common weed control tools. Check your equipment inventory (see above) to make sure you have the proper tools to combat weeds. A push mower will not get the job done, and herbicides must be used properly. If you choose not to use herbicides, you can utilize mowing, brush cutting and burning to combat weeds. Livestock can also be put to work as “weed eaters.” Keeping livestock does require a commitment of time and proper management, which we will discuss in more detail in a follow-up article.

Good Neighbor Policy

Keep in mind that the land knows no jurisdictional boundaries and the actions you take on your land affect your neighbors too. Responsible land management and communication with your neighbors will make for a positive land ownership experience.

In a follow-up article, we will discuss small-scale crop and livestock production alternatives and possibilities for creating wildlife habitat on your small acreage parcel.

Resources for Assistance:

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Colusa Office: 100 Sunrise Blvd., Suite B, Colusa, CA 95932
530.458.2931 X112

Resource Conservation District (RCD)
Colusa Office: 100 Sunrise Blvd., Suite B, Colusa, CA 95932
530.458.2931 X3