

Program introduces kids to the land

By **CLAY COPPEDGE**

Country World Staff Writer

It would see natural that Peggy Maddox and Holistic Management International (HMI) should end up working together. HMI is dedicated to educating farmers about the benefits and methods of sustainable farming and how to preserve and conserve the land where they live and work. Maddox has been an educator most of her adult life. Her husband Joe, a lifelong rancher, was hired by HMI to manage the David West Station ranch near Ozona for HMI in 2001. Peggy was hired on as director of education not long after.

While Joe went about bringing the ranch back from dormancy, Peggy began wondering how the ranch could be used to educate school children about the outdoors. The desire came from observations she made as a teacher in Sweetwater for many years. Even in a rural district like that one, a lot of students had no connection to the land. The only kind of connection they wanted was an electrical connection for their computers, MP3 players and the like. Maddox saw a need.

"I had the idea to give children a hands-on learning experience on the land. I talked to administrators with the Ozona school district and we put together

a program for third, fourth and fifth graders from Ozona. El Dorado wanted to participate, and we ended up having different programs for grades K through six. We've done a lot more programs than that in different parts of the state. It just started here.

"The kids knew about the rain forest and the polar bears and the wildlife in Africa, but they didn't have a sense of the place where they lived. They didn't see it as interesting or valuable. You have some kids who are in 4-H and they're usually better with plant ID and things like that, but even a lot of kids who live in rural districts don't have parents who farm. Most of them start out not knowing anything about the area where they live."

The program started in 2003. Originally designed for the Trans-Pecos, Maddox and a dedicated team of volunteers, including several from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, have put on programs for schools over much of the state. Jacksboro, in Jack County, was the first program Maddox and the volunteers put on outside the Trans-Pecos region. Doing so requires a little homework on Maddox's part.

"I want the program to always be site-based with activities based on the local history and the

local land - a look at the past, present and future," Maddox said. "Our volunteers in different parts of the state are great about sharing their local knowledge with us and with the students. It brings the lessons home."

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, while the Kids on the Land program blossomed, Joe and HMI established new stands of native grass and water sites and constructed fences; the stocking rate improved by 67 percent. The Maddoxes stayed on at the ranch after the estate was settled in probate court, but a prolonged drought forced Joe Maddox and the new owners to sell the cattle and wait for rain. What they got instead was fire.

All but 1,000 of the ranch's 11,000 acres burned in a fire that eventually destroyed more than 200,000 acres. Members of the California Forest Service camped at the ranch's headquarters and saved the ranch house and buildings, but nearly everything else went up in smoke.

"We were wary about fire," Peggy said. "We had so much grass on the place and it got so dry. Joe said if a fire started out there the whole place might go up, and it did."

While the hard work of rebuilding fences and reestablishing grasses begins at home, Peggy continues to travel the state, conducting Kids on the



The Kids on the Land program is an extension of the efforts of Holistic Management International. The program teaches children about the land and where food comes from.

--Courtesy photo

Land programs for students that she believes desperately need to learn about the land that will have to sustain them for the rest of their lives. She recently conducted the first program for an urban school when Christ the King school in Dallas asked for a program.

"We went to a ranch about 70 miles from Dallas for the program, but I wanted them to realize that all that land, including Dallas, is or was part of the Blackland Prairie region. We called it 'This Land is Prairie

Land' to help them connect the soil under their feet with what they were learning in the program."

This year's most recent program, in Jacksboro, was attended by more than 200 students. Since its inception, more than 2,200 students have attended the program. Maddox has five Kids on the Land programs scheduled statewide this year.

For more information on HMI and/or the Kids on the Land program, go to the HMI website at holisticmanagement.org.

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break at a recent "Battleground to Breaking Ground" program in Seguin.

"I got sick about the time I was ready to retire and start farming full-time," he said. "I went into surgery thinking I would be able to walk after I went through physical therapy, but when I came out, the doctor told me I was probably never going to walk again...The combination of the treatments and the depression got so bad that on Christmas, I didn't even get out of bed."

His family rallied around him and found additional help with Texas AgrAbility, a USDA-financed program administered in Texas by Texas AgriLife Extension. The program provides consultation, farm and ranch assessments and technical assistance to farmers, ranchers and others associated with agriculture who have disabilities and chronic health problems.

"They were a lifesaver for me," Hillhouse said.

Cheryl Grenwelge, an assistant professor with Extension and the Texas A&M Center for Disability and Development, met with Hillhouse to determine his goals and a plan for achieving them. He told her his goal was to be on his tractor by May 1, to get a good cutting of hay. He was assigned an occupational therapist and he was put in touch with a manufacturer of lifts for tractors. The combination of exercise and rehabilitation and a new lift allowed Hillhouse to cut hay on

May 1, just as he had hoped.

Hillhouse paid for the lift and the services because he had the resources to do so.

"I told them to use the money they would have spent on me to help somebody else," he said. "There's a lot more people in my situation than you would think."

Rick Peterson, project director of Texas AgrAbility, noted that the program has been in Texas for more than 20 years. It has received attention recently for its work with wounded veterans looking to return to agriculture or get into it for the first time after being deployed overseas.

"There is a need for this kind of service in a state that depends so heavily on agriculture, where the median age is 59 and there is a higher risk of disability than other populations," Peterson said. He said returning veterans often have questions about what they will be able to do and how they will be able to do it.

"They come back with a lot of questions, and there really is a lot to think about," he added. "Aside from the physical issues, there are financial considerations and other things you have to plan for before you can begin. We help answer those questions based on the individual goals, needs and abilities."

Tom Hughes, who owns and operates Last Ranch in Northeast Texas with his wife Sue, had to re-adjust to ranch life after coming back with two torn-up shoulders, one for each tour of duty with the Texas Army Reserve. Tending to rancid burn pits made

him extremely susceptible to certain allergens. The Veterans Administration gave him a 70 percent disability rating, but there was still 100 percent of the work to be done.

"There were certain adaptations I had to make," Hughes told the Seguin audience. He advised the veterans in the audience to know that hard work, planning and an understanding of markets and funding opportunities with the Texas Veterans Land Board, Texas Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service and others is critical. "You have to have a plan before you start but there is planning

help available," he said.

Much of Hillhouse's help these days comes from his sons, including Travis, who brings technical savvy to the table along with a desire to be involved in agriculture. The elder Hillhouse noted that neither his father nor his grandfather were full-time farmers and he jokingly described one relative as "a professional juror - he always wanted that \$1.50 a day."

"My idea was to come back and work in the sun and play in the garden, but I got sick and couldn't do that," he said. "Now I can. My next goal is to walk right back into the doctor's office

where I was told I wouldn't walk again and show them they were wrong."

For more information on available resources go to the Texas AgrAbility website at txagrability.tamu.edu or on Facebook. A second "Battleground to Breaking Ground" program is scheduled for July 14 in Mt. Pleasant.

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