

In 1950, Mr. Frank W Michaux purchased Solana Ranch. Rolling prairie once covered by tall grass, scattered live oak trees and clear flowing spring-fed streams had given way to abuse. The land's ability to support domestic livestock was poor, its economic return questionable. A concentrated land management program was essential. The Solana Ranch turned to the local Soil and Water Conservation District, the Soil Conservation Service, the NRCS and others for guidance to reclaim the land.

In a transition zone, the Solana Ranch is situated in the eastern limit of the Edwards Plateau, marked by exposed weathered limestone, mingled with the broad highly fertile blacklands of the Blackland Prairies. The majority of the topsoil is shallow and rocky, with rich black highly organic soils found along the creeks and draws. The eastern most limit of the outcrops of the Balconies fault and noted for its excellent spring water. Here Salado Creek, Rumsey Branch (north and south) and Buttermilk Creek flow with cool clear water over rocky creek beds where wild grape, dewberry and other plants may be found.

It took years of diligent effort put forth to clear the land of underbrush, cedar, prickly pear and other undesirable vegetation. In the beginning, the clearing was accomplished by hand and other mechanical methods not disturbing topsoil and native grasses. Trees were selectively removed so as to leave adequate shade, protection and food for both cattle and wildlife. The dominant native trees such as live oak, Spanish oak and pecan were kept in their respective habitat. Once the land was exposed to sunlight and moisture, the severely abused native grass populations gave way to better grasses. A seeding program was initiated and, under good management, the better native grasses became dominant.

Our ranch has a strong tradition and history, yet we are focused on marrying that with the innovations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our branding patterns may be rooted in 1950, but our management systems employ the best information and technologies available.

Over a period of 61 years, with careful vegetation management and maintenance of a correct balance of livestock with available grass and grazing systems, the Solana Ranch has recovered to a point of profitable productivity. This can only be attributed to a care and deep understanding of the natural community as a whole. The Solana Ranch has taken a firm stand that land owners should be the stewards of their lands and have the responsibility to preserve unique Texas natural habitats benefiting both the cattle operation and wildlife management programs still implemented today.

## OUTSTANDING RANGELAND MANAGEMENT AWARD

1. Describe improvements which have been made in range condition, range trend, livestock performance, wildlife quality, water quality, etc, as a result of rangeland management.

Solana Ranch is an ardent supporter of realistic environmental and conservation programs and has recognized the importance of preserving certain lands as natural laboratories for scientific study and has dedicated the ranchlands to this purpose. Originally through the Texas System of Natural Laboratories and currently through the NRCS/USDA, FSA sponsored programs such as EQIP, the Environmental Quality Initiative Program, Solana Ranch has used these programs for brush control, cedar clearing, improved water quality and plant health overall. Solana Ranch has also been instrumental, with the assistance of the NRCS and the Texas Forestry Service, doing controlled burns. Controlled burns have been a blessing to the ranch and we have accomplished burning off selected sections of brush, undergrowth and cactus in larger acreage. This program provides new growth and a cleaner habitat for wildlife and opens new grazing areas for the cattle population on Solana Ranch.

2. Describe in detail rangeland management practices which are used to help meet ranch goals such as; proper stocking rates, grazing systems, water development, brush management, range seeding, prescribed burning, wildlife management, etc.

With 8,126.92 acres, Solana Ranch will accept a maximum of 450 head of cattle rotation between pastures to rest pastures when stressed. Food plots of oats, milo, and maize have been planted for cattle and wildlife to graze on in order to improve pastures. Weight gain programs have been implemented for the cattle to graze on oats instead of native grasses.

In 2004, Solana Ranch became the 5<sup>th</sup> Firewise Community in Texas and there are 53 Firewise Communities Nationwide. With the assistance of Firewise, the Texas Forestry Service and the NRCS, we had a successful controlled burn. Controlled burns and other programs, like EQIP, allow Solana Ranch to improve our water flow & quality and our spring flow through our 18 natural springs on the property that feed our creeks, the Salado, the Rumsey Branches (north & south), and the Buttermilk providing fresh water to the cattle, the wildlife and plant life. Before EQIP, the creeks were vegetation-choked, but once we put the program in place we removed a lot of brush and vines from the streambed; a six to eight week project with a lot of hard work, personnel and equipment. Water is an important issue to us and these rangeland management practices have paid off with dividends. Now, every pasture but one on the ranch has running water. We now utilize all our pastures and rotate grazing much more effectively. We're very cognizant about preventing over-grazing. We no longer own cattle, but take care of other owners' animals and get paid by the head. It works out for us with less risk and works out for owners who have limited pasture. When drought settles in

and landowners and cattle owners are in a world of hurt, Solana Ranch continues to thrive with free flowing water and grass and a program in place to receive livestock

By utilizing the NRCS EQIP program in 2005, 2007, 2008 and currently, 2011, new pasture acreage is opened up for grazing by clearing cedar and managing brush followed by a prescribed range seeding program to enhance re-growth. Providing this enhancement helps provide successful food sources for the cattle and wildlife.

The Wildlife Management Program is regulated through the Texas Parks and Wildlife who monitors deer taken during a season and how many need to be culled. Solana Ranch has implemented one to two hunts per month during October through December to maintain deer numbers. At the end of the deer season, Solana Ranch hosts a Whitetail Doe Management Hunt to weed out the deer population recommended for our acreage. Not only does this provide entertainment for our clients but also helps Solana Ranch implement a successful rangeland management strategy.

3. Describe specifically how nominee plans for and deals with drought.

Being a Firewise Community and working with Texas Forestry and the NRCS, we have implemented programs to manage brush build up in the water ways, around the buildings and in the pastures year round. Controlling the brush, the over-growth and the under-growth, especially during a drought, keeps the water ways open and flowing. With open and flowing water ways, the rangeland, cattle and wildlife continue to flourish. It is important to have a plan in place and to continue to monitor the creeks, springs, tanks and water pumps to ensure success.

4. Describe nominee's skills in and knowledge of grazing management, plants, livestock, wildlife, etc.

Constant research and the quest to improve the land has led Solana Ranch to seek assistance from numerous resources. Initially, Solana Ranch turned to the Texas System of Natural Laboratories to implement a rangeland management plan. We continue to search for updated information through the Soil and Water Conservation District, NRCS/USDA/FSA, Texas Forestry Service, TSCRA (member since 1951), NCBA (member since 1951), Firewise Communities (member since 2003), Texas Parks & Wildlife, Texas Wildlife Association, Exotic Wildlife Association, the Livestock Weekly, Livestock Reporter, Drover's, The Cattleman, Texas A & M and numerous sources available to us to gain knowledge and ways to better implement improvements on Solana Ranch. If we don't know it, we will track it down. The more information we gain and retain enables us to focus the best programs for cattle grazing, wildlife management, plant maintenance and overall care of the rangeland and water sources.

Conferring with the cattle owners helps determine when the cattle grazes on native grasses, when they are rotated to oat fields and when the cows will calve and therefore becomes part of their grazing management plan.

Solana Ranch has loyal employees that know what our overall goals are and take responsibility for and pride in their work. With every project or undertaking, we first focus on the priorities and potential problems. We then plan every detail before we act or execute. Our assistant manager has previous experience with cattle and is also a lieutenant at the Belton, Texas Fire Department. He has been on the ranch off and on since he was young. Our administrative assistant has been with the ranch for 13 years and the ranch hands and guides have been with us for long term as well. Dedicated employees are a must and knowledge is the key.

5. Describe the livestock, wildlife or other enterprises which are used to harvest and market the rangeland resources.

Solana Ranch no longer owns cattle, but takes care of other owners' animals and get paid by the head. Our cattle program markets the ability to provide native forage, existing facilities, equipment and labor necessary to care for and carry out those management and good animal husbandry practices. We tag and weigh all calves at birth. Our herdsman keeps a herd inventory, birthdates, weights of newborn calves and performance data collected at weaning. Our herdsman pens the contract cattle prior to the owner working them. Solana can assist with specialized breeding such as "AI" or Embryo Transfer upon request. We charge an agreed upon sum per head per day based on the needs of the cattle. This program benefits both the Solana Ranch and the absentee Cattle Owner. It works out for us with less risk and works out for owners who have limited pasture. When drought settles in and landowners and cattle owners are in a world of hurt, Solana Ranch continues to thrive with free flowing water and grass and a program in place to receive cattle.

Solana Ranch markets the wildlife management operation by designating seasonal hunts not only for entertainment but for managing the wildlife numbers on the ranch monitored by Texas Parks & Wildlife. We provide guided and semi-guided hunts for Deer, Hog, Turkey, Dove and Exotics by request; accommodations are "on property" that include linens, shelter, meals and guides.

Along with these two programs, we continually focus on the land itself for stressed conditions and take measures for relief, such as in drought, no smoking or 4-wheelers or large equipment running to prevent fire from igniting. We continually check the stock tanks for water and utilize the well pumps when needed for the cattle and wildlife. By taking these precautions, cattle owners and hunters alike have a sense of security.

6. Describe other activities or awards related to rangeland including how the nominee promotes sound rangeland management.

Solana Ranch is actively involved in conservation, rangeland improvement and preservation. In 1973, we received the Outstanding Conservation Ranch, Non-Resident Award from Little River-San Gabriel Soil & Water Conservation District. In 1994, Kirk & Julie Michaux decided to move to the ranch from Austin to have a hands-on approach as they brought the Solana Ranch into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In 1998, we received the Outstanding Conservation Ranch Award from Little River-San Gabriel Soil & Water Conservation District. In 1999, we received the Wildlife Conservationist Award from Texas Soil & Water Conservation District Area V. In 2003, Solana Ranch became the 5<sup>th</sup> Firewise Community in Texas joining a nation-wide community of 53. On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2004, Solana Ranch, in close association with the NRCS, Texas Forestry Service, the Salado Volunteer Fire Department, friends and ranch personnel, participated in a Prescribed, Controlled Burn Management Plan. On November 4, 2004, we hosted a Firewise Education Day presented by Firewise Communities when we were presented with a commemorative plaque for the Controlled Burn and for becoming a Firewise Community. In 2005, in association with the NRCS, Solana Ranch cleared 31.3 acres of cedar through the EQIP program. In 2007, we cleared 200 acres of cedar and in 2008 we cleared 350 acres of cedar through the NRCS EQIP program. In 2009, Solana Ranch was recognized an issue of the SW Farm Press Newspaper for conservation strategies. The Texas Forestry Services interviewed Solana Ranch for a case study of landowners for conservation practices in 2010. The interview was with Kirk Michaux and can be viewed on the following website, <http://texasconservation.org/page.php?page=case&id=44>. This brings us to 2011. With a lot of hard work we just completed the 2011 NRCS EQIP program clearing 300 acres of cedar. We will complete this program in early 2012 when we re-seed the pasture to enhance the re-growth of native grasses.

7. Write a brief narrative describing the goals and objectives for the ranch or farm and any unique or interesting rangeland management philosophies.

Thanks to a 61 year tradition of cattle ranching and wildlife management in the Central Texas transition zone, this region's natural beauty and biodiversity have been largely preserved. The Michaux Family, owners of Solana Ranch, continues to transform pastures beaten up from decades of drought, flood, drought, flood...etc. The ranch was developed a sustainable approach to rangeland management that mutually benefits the land, the water, the wildlife and the livestock. Solana Ranch has a strong tradition and history, yet we are focused on marrying that with the innovations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the best information and technologies available.

Our continued efforts to sustain and improve the rangeland include working with the NRCS programs like EQIP for yearly cedar clearing and prickly pear crushing and/or Prescribed Burns and then the process of re-seeding for stimulating the re-growth of better native grasses. Our cattle program includes rotating the livestock to rest pastures to allow re-growth of native grasses. Other projects include the planting of food crops, such as oats, milo and maize for the cattle and wildlife grazing and we plant sunflower for the dove; we also continually remove brush and vines from the streambeds, ponds and creeks for clean, free flowing waterways.

With careful vegetation management and maintenance of a correct balance of livestock with available grass and grazing systems, the Solana Ranch has created a co-existing habitat to a point of profitable productivity.

## OUTSTANDING RANGELAND STEWARDSHIP AWARD

### 1. Environmental Stewardship Practices, Accomplishments and Goals

The goal of Solana Ranch has and will always be to operate and maintain one of the finest working ranches in Central Texas.

Purchased in 1950, Solana Ranch was a very rough looking ranch; primarily a cedar break. It took years of clearing & planning for improved grasses. Water on the ranch has always been substantial with 18 natural springs and tributaries flowing into Salado Creek, the Rumsey Creek Branches (north & south) and the Buttermilk Creek streaming with cool clear water over rocky creek beds.

Solana Ranch is an ardent supporter of realistic environmental and conservation programs, has recognized the importance of preserving certain lands as natural laboratories for scientific study and has dedicated the ranchlands to this purpose.

Originally through the Texas System of Natural Laboratories and currently through NRCS, Solana Ranch participates in programs for break control, cedar clearing and improved water quality which benefits the livestock, wildlife and plant life overall. We have also been instrumental, with the assistance of the NRCS and the Texas Forestry Service, doing controlled burns. Controlled burns have been a blessing to us and we have accomplished burning off selected sections of brush undergrowth and cactus in larger acreage. This accomplishment opens new grazing areas for the herds of cattle being cared for and the diverse wildlife on Solana Ranch. Water is an important issue to us and these water practices have paid off with dividends.

### 2. Local, Regional, and National Leadership Activities that improve Conservation Perception of the Cattle Industry

Solana Ranch holds the belief that if you take care of the land, it will take care of you. As one of the contract cattle herds being cared for on the Solana Ranch, Beefmaster has hosted a dinner for a group of cattle owners from South Africa. We assisted in entertaining, answering questions and following up with a tour of the ranch and facilities utilized to manage livestock. Because of the numerous awards for conservation and the programs we participate in to maintain Solana Ranch, we have established a reputation that we are one of the few ranches that has native grass for grazing and water flow year round.

Solana Ranch has been a supporter and member of the Texas & Southwest Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA) since 1951 and the National Cattleman's Beef Association (NCBA).

Several programs in our wildlife management operation have been implemented geared toward the kids in the area and nation. We like to work with the Ag Departments of local school districts to encourage kids to actively participate and to develop an interest in agriculture. Prior to dove season, during the school year, we host a group of kids to assist us with Dove Nesting Cones. We supply the supplies and have the kids construct them. Upon completion a date is set for them to come out to the ranch and put them out. We offer hamburgers and hot dogs for lunch, t-shirts for commemorating the date and an education that they can take with them if they pursue a career in wildlife management. We encourage parents to include their kids in their hunting plans and support high school graduates with scholarships each year. We have hosted a Canadian Soccer Team of high school girls and are big supporters of FFA and the Salado Youth Fair Boosters. Our assistant manager has worked with the kids teaching them how to raise, care for and show animals

### 3. Endorsements from Cattle Groups, Conservation Organizations and/or Government Agencies

- 1973 Little River-San Gabriel Soil & Water Conservation District  
Outstanding Conservation Ranch Award
- 1998 Little River-San Gabriel Soil & Water Conservation District  
Outstanding Conservation Ranch Award
- 1999 Texas Soil and Water Conservation District Area V  
Wildlife Conservationist Award
- 2003 Became 5th Firewise Community in Texas / there were 53 Nation-wide
- 1/27/2004 NRCS & Texas Forestry Controlled Burn Management
- 11/4/2004 Firewise Education Day presented by Firewise Communities  
BBQ & Presentation at Solana Ranch
- 2005 NRCS EQIP Program cedar clearing, 31.3 acres
- 2007 NRCS EQIP Program Cedar Clearing, 200 acres
- 2008 NRCS EQIP Program Cedar Clearing, 350 acres
- 2009 Recognized in SW Farm Press Newspaper
- 2010 Participated in a Case Study by Texas Forestry Services  
Conservation Practices on Solana Ranch  
Posted on their web site,  
<http://texasconservation.org/page.php?page=case>

2011 NRCS EQIP Program Cedar Clearing, 300 acres, & Re-Seeding

4. Economic Viability and Size of Operation

Solana Ranch is made up of 8,126.92 acres with a cattle operation and wildlife management plan that co-exists in a habitat located 200<sup>+/-</sup> feet above Salado, Texas with natural beauty, good soil that produces good grasses and abundant water for cattle and wildlife. The co-existing cattle operation and wildlife management program support each other for a profitable productivity.

We employ five (5) permanent employees and eleven (11) seasonal employees managed by the Michaux Family with an assistant manager who is also a lieutenant for the City of Belton Fire Department.

By clearing cedar, crushing cactus, cleaning the water sources of debris and destructive vegetation, the Michaux Family is proud of the biodiversity created within the ranchlands of Solana Ranch.