Jake Landers provides range plant expertise.

Angora goat rancher Joe David Ross, right, visits with Bruce Rieck.

Iris Garza, left, and Claire Jones.

Established Ranchers Meet New Sutton, Edwards County Neighbors

Story and Photos by Steve Byrns

SONORA/ROCKSPRINGS—Neighbor Meeting Neighbor was the theme for a recent landowner gathering at the Texas AgriLife Research Station at Sonora/Rocksprings.

"This field day was unique because it originated from a desire by area ranchers to meet new landowners in Sutton, Edwards and surrounding counties, and have them visit the station firsthand," said Dr. John Walker.

Walker, resident director of research at the Texas AgriLife Research and Extension Center at San Angelo, served as master of ceremonies for the event that attracted 175 people.

"Ranchers who grew up benefiting from the station's activities wanted to showcase the facility to the newer area landowners who might not be aware of the many benefits provided now and through the years by this AgriLife Research station."

Dr. Charles "Butch" Taylor, superintendent at the station, began the program with a history of the facility and factors affecting the ecological health of the region's Edwards Plateau rangelands.

Participants then broke into groups by counties so they could get to know each other.

"I think this exercise may have been the most successful part of the whole day," Walker said. "Several of the long-time residents of this area commented on how much they enjoyed getting to know people they had not met before."

Local ranchers prepared and served the noon meal near a large tent set up for exhibits. The numerous exhibitors demonstrated products to help people manage their property more efficiently.

"Door prizes were also provided by the exhibitors," Walker said. "We used these to informally poll the group. One was here from California, others came from South Carolina and Oklahoma, but all had a connection through their love of the Edwards Plateau."

Walker said 120 participants completed a survey that revealed 60 percent of those attending were multi-generational to the area, but he said an important objective was met, because 25 percent of the participants had owned land in the Edwards Plateau for less than 10 years.

"Most of the survey respondents were familiar with AgriLife Research and the Texas AgriLife Extension Service before the field day, but 15 percent were not, so again, another field day objective was met," Walker said.

Almost all of the participants, 98 percent, were actively managing livestock, wildlife or both, Walker said. In fact, 80 percent were managing three or more species of livestock and wildlife. Twenty-seven percent managed livestock only, while only 6 percent managed wildlife

From right are Reid Donaldson, celebrity Colby Donaldson and girlfriend, and Harold Shipman.

From left are Erika Campbell, Virginia Epps and Karen Lampke.

Glen Fisher, left, talks with Tuffy Whitehead.

Participants enjoy a meal of barbecue beef brisket cooked by local ranchers.

Curtis and Rita Mae Frey.

Visitors to the Experiment Station toured prescribed burn test plots and heard from researchers.

Butch Taylor tells tour group the value of prescribed fire and frequency needed to manage cedar.

only. Cattle at 26 percent, deer at 25 percent and goats at 23 percent were the most common species managed. Sheep were managed by 15 percent of the respondents followed by exotic wildlife at 9 percent and the remaining 2 percent were "non-applicable."

The field day ended with a tour of the station that highlighted livestock production options, prescribed fire and the results of poorly managed range. Talks at the stops were made by area ranchers who have benefited from station-generated information, U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service personnel and station staff.

Walker compared this field day to the origin of the station once known as Substation 14. He said soon after the Edwards Plateau was settled, the Texas Agriculture Experiment Station, now AgriLife Research, was petitioned to create a substation to help solve problems affecting the region's livestock production. With help from the area's pioneer ranchers, the result was the 1916 establishment of Substation 14 in Edwards and Sutton counties.

"This trend continues today," Walker said. "This Neighbor Meeting Neighbor field day did not occur because AgriLife employees saw a need for such a program, but because local users of the facility felt the value of the station needed to be showcased to people who were not aware of the work and research being conducted at the station."◊