

## *Rewards of Changing to Holistic Decision-Making*

### **Introduction**

Holistic Management® is a process of decision making that enable users to do a better job of achieving their goals. It helps the producer make decisions that are economically, ecologically, and socially sound towards the goal that established by those using the process. An overview of this process follows:

### **Elements Within the Holistic Management Model**

**The whole under management.** All management decisions have to be made from the perspective of the whole under management, bearing in mind that it always influences, and is influenced by, both greater and lesser wholes. Forming this whole is a simple process that involves identifying the people, financial resources and land that collectively form a management boundary.

**The holistic goal.** The ideas underlying Holistic Management take on meaning and power only in relationship to a goal, but in this case it is specifically a **holistic** goal – one that is based on the whole you have defined, created by those responsible for managing it, and expressing their collective needs and aspirations, both short- and long-term. It is written in three parts: quality of life, forms of production, and future resource base. The holistic goal drives Holistic Management and guides every significant decision.

**The ecosystem processes.** To work with the complexity inherent in the greater ecosystem that sustains us all, we focus on four fundamental processes, each representing vital functions within it: water cycle, mineral cycle, solar energy flow, and community dynamics. We recognize that any action taken to affect one of these processes automatically affects them all.

Most of the techniques involved in no till farming are based on their influence on the ecosystem process. The better we understand how it functions, the better our decisions can be.

**The tools for managing ecosystem processes.** In conventional management, the tools available for altering any one of the ecosystem processes were limited to four broad categories: rest, fire, living organisms, and technology. In the more arid environments, however, these tools alone were inadequate to maintain or improve the functioning of the four ecosystem processes. We found a remedy to this shortcoming in the behaviors of the large herding and grazing animals that had helped to maintain these environments for eons.

**The testing guidelines.** In deciding which tool to use to alter any one of the ecosystem processes, or in deciding whether or not to take an action **in any situation**, we use all the information that helped people make decisions in the conventional manner. But now we also pose a series of questions based on seven guidelines that test for economic, environmental, and social soundness relative to the holistic goal.

**The feedback loop.** In Holistic Management the word **plan** has become a 24-letter word: **plan-monitor-control-replan**. In the model these words are incorporated into a loop because this effort is a continuous process.

### **An example of using the Holistic Management® Model**

The model explained above is illustrated by using an example of a farm family deciding whether or not to adopt no-till on their farm. An example of the whole under management and the holistic goal form the basis for their decision.

Next, the ecosystem process on their land is explained and the effects of both tillage systems on it. The idea of no-till is tested through the seven testing guidelines to see if it will move them toward their goal faster than continuing on with conventional farming. The tests are:

- **Cause and Effect** – Does this action address the root cause of the problem?
- **Weak Link**
  - **Social** – Have I/we considered and/or addressed any confusion, anger, or opposition this action could create with people whose support I/we need in the near or distant future?
  - **Biological** (used only when dealing with problem organisms) – Does this action address the weakest point in the life cycle of this organism?
  - **Financial** – Does this action strengthen the weakest link in the chain of production?
- **Marginal Reaction** (used only when comparing two or more actions) – Which action provides the greatest return, in terms of my/our holistic goal, for the time and money spent?
- **Gross Profit Analysis** (used only when comparing two or more enterprises) – Which enterprises contribute the most to covering the overheads of the business?
- **Energy/Money Source and Use** – Is the energy or money to be used in this action derived from the most appropriate source in terms of my/our holistic goal? Will the way in which the energy or money is to be used lead toward my/our holistic goal?
- **Sustainability** –If I/we take this action, will it lead toward or away from the future resource base described in my/our holistic goal?
- **Society and Culture** – Considering all the questions and my/our holistic goal, how do I/we feel about this action now?

The results of the tests show that no-till wins in almost every category. This means the family is much more likely to achieve the overall quality of life they desire, while improving their financial position and the quality of the land base they are farming.

Some tests will not apply to certain decisions, and can be skipped. Some tests will raise points you will again consider in other tests. This testing should take you minutes, rather than hours. Once you are familiar with the tests and have internalized the questions, the testing will be accomplished in seconds, and will be something you begin to do subconsciously.

The illustration is a broad one, but the same process can be used for the countless smaller decisions made on a daily basis on any farm. Collectively, these decisions determine the success or failure of any operation.