

NETWORKING ADVISORY GROUPS AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA TO TRANSFER INFORMATION ON FORAGE MANAGEMENT

J.J. Mullahey¹, R.M. Muchovej¹, and K.U. Hill²

¹University of Florida, IFAS, P.O. Drawer 5127, Immokalee, FL 33934

²University of Florida, Collier County Extension, 14700 Immokalee Rd., Naples, FL 33964

ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to discuss a coordinated multi-county extension program in forages through the involvement of a beef/forage advisory committee and technology transfer or information dissemination using electronic media.

KEYWORDS

Extension programming, E-mail, World Wide Web, computers, agriculture

INTRODUCTION

Declining budget allocations to the Florida Cooperative Extension Service has resulted in an organization that must rely on coordinated statewide extension programs. Cost-effective information dissemination is conducted using inexpensive electronic media such as e-mail and development of World Wide Web (WWW) documents. Traditionally, forage extension programs were delivered to individual county offices by state-wide specialists. As we approach the 21st century, delivering programs to an individual county is expensive, labor intensive and time consuming, especially if statewide extension specialists are needed for programs. Coordinated extension programming is pragmatic when agricultural advisory committees are involved in programming and inexpensive electronic media (e-mail, WWW) is utilized for transferring information. The purpose of this paper is to discuss a successful coordinated multi-county extension program in forages that utilizes an advisory committee and the electronic media.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The beef/forage advisory group consists of 12 ranchers from a 5 county area in southwest Florida. The group was formed in 1987 and 12 proactive ranchers were selected. Participation of progressive ranchers willing to discuss forage management issues is critical to the success of this advisory group. One rancher is elected chairman for a period of 1 year. All members serve 3 years and elections to replace members (4 per year) are held annually. County extension agents with forage responsibilities and state-wide beef and forage specialists from the Southwest Florida Research and Education Center (SWFREC) are ex-officio members of the advisory committee. The range scientist at the center is the secretary and is responsible for scheduling meetings. The advisory group meets quarterly for about 2 hours and the chairman conducts the meetings. Forage research and extension programs are discussed and the advisory group provides program leadership.

Electronic media for transferring information involves e-mail and the World Wide Web. Each specialist and extension agent has an e-mail address for communicating information related to the advisory group. Advisory group members are contacted primarily by mail and telephone. Forage related hypertext (HTML) documents have been developed and deployed on the Worldwide Web by the SWFREC (UF Range Program Homepage <http://www.imok.ufl.edu/range/range.html>) and the Southwest Florida Beef/Forage Program (<http://www.naples.net/~kuh/>). These HTML documents are maintained by extension faculty and are updated periodically. Information contained on the web sites include extension publications, pasture

weed control strategies, range management, beef cattle production practices, recent research highlights, program announcements, and area production statistics. The documents also include e-mail links to faculty for direct feedback.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Leadership from the beef/forage advisory committee has provided program direction for extension agents in southwest Florida. The advisory group provides input and planning in the form of subject matter issues for multi-county beef/forage meetings conducted twice a year. This formal process of involving an advisory committee in planning extension programs ensures that the end-product delivered by the extension services is accepted by the clientele. Based on suggestions from committee members, a theme is derived for each multi-county program. The advisory group will ask for field demonstrations in forage management that are incorporated into the multi-county meetings. If a problem area in forages is suggested for which no information exists, research can be conducted to generate the necessary data for future extension meetings. Research is coordinated through the SWFREC involving extension specialists in range science, agronomy, beef cattle, and wildlife.

In addition to short term planning, the advisory committee is instrumental in developing the extension 4-year plan-of-work. The committee is asked to provide vision in the beef/forage area to assist county agents in formulating long term plans. Suggested program issues are prioritized and ranked relative to year of completion. County extension agents utilize the 4-year plan of work to provide programs in their individual counties in addition to the 5 county area.

Electronic mail (e-mail) is a proven cost effective method of contacting specialists, extension agents, and, increasingly, ranchers. Traditionally, advisory group members were contacted via the postal service (mail) or the telephone. These tools for communication are still utilized, but now include e-mail. All specialists and agents have e-mail addresses, and a few of the ranchers are now connected. E-mail is fast, convenient, inexpensive and can be printed to provide a hard copy.

E-mail is utilized extensively in agent and specialist interaction during the development of 4-year plans-of-work. It provides an efficient means of rapidly distributing information to all planning group participants and facilitates the incorporation of feedback elements into the final plan.

Hypertext documents on the WWW increase program visibility and information dissemination to the agricultural and urban communities. From the WWW documents, ranchers can obtain extension information related to beef cattle production, range management, pasture weed control, wildlife ecology, native plants, and water quality. Recent research information is provided that has been presented at national meetings. This cutting-edge information is immediately available to ranchers. The computer technology greatly enhances our ability to transfer information world wide at an affordable price.

The full text of the Southwest Florida Beef/Forage Program 4-Year Plan-of-Work is available via the WWW, as well as supporting information such as sales, acreage, and production data for the 5 county area. These documents are easily updated and accessible to any of our local clientele with an Internet connection.

Access to the Internet is expanding rapidly, and the importance of the WWW for distributing research and extension beef/forage information will grow as the Internet becomes more of a mainstream communications tool. One local example of expanding access for local agricultural producers is the development of a Naples community network or the "Naples Free-Net". The concept behind Free-Nets is to make telecommunications resources available to all at no cost to the end-user. The model is much like the public library system. Unlike the public library, however, the local Free-Net organization is entirely volunteer driven, and supported by community donations. Two primary principles are subscribed to: 1) broaden the community's access to local computing resources, and 2) expand that access to the world through the Internet.

This grass-roots effort has proven successful in expanding the local clientele base that could access the Southwest Florida Beef/Forage research and extension information currently available.

In the first year, the Collier County Extension Service WWW documents were accessed more than 17,000 times from more than 25 countries by people interested in extension service and agricultural information about Collier County. This information has been accessed more than 5,400 times by Collier County residents via the Naples Free-Net.

The development of the SWFREC and Collier County Extension websites along with the supporting infrastructure of the Naples Free-Net, has vastly expanded the means by which we provide beef/forage information. Because HTML-based documents are easily produced and updated, the potential exists for our clientele to always have access to up-to-date information. In addition, costs for providing full-color documents via the WWW are vastly less expensive when compared to the traditional 4-color printed publications.