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[Return to Current Issue](#)

Old-School Extension Programming: A Simple User Survey Provides the Impetus to a New and Successful Regional Program Opportunity

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Abstract: A 2004 needs assessment survey of licensed pesticide applicators in Florida identified a need for a regional training opportunity in the southeastern U.S. A 1½-day program was held in northwest Florida during fall, 2007, attracting pesticide applicators from six states seeking continuing education units. Surveys of participants indicated that the presented information was relevant to their work, new information was gained, and the training opportunity should be offered on a regular basis in the future. Participants also responded positively regarding informal evening socials held during the event for networking with presenters and industry representatives.

Introduction

Federal and Florida law require that applicators of "restricted" pesticides be certified and licensed. During the mid-1970's, the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (USEPA, FIFRA, 2005) was amended to authorize each state to enact a certification/licensing program for these applicators. All states have specific, but similar requirements; the regulating agency for this program in Florida is the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS, 2007). For individuals to become certified to purchase and handle restricted use pesticides, they must meet competency standards as demonstrated by passing (70%) mandated examinations.

To keep the license valid, recertification is necessary. Pesticide license holders must accumulate continuing education units (CEUs) every 4 years. FDACS is very flexible in the type of CEU programs they approve (Fishel, 2008). Although distance media is currently in use (Ferrell & Fishel, 2007), face-to-face programs

conducted by Extension have been the most common venue.

Surveys have been used historically by Extension educators as a means of needs assessment. Needs assessment is a process that "identifies needs and decides upon priorities among them" (Encyclopedia of Educational Evaluation, 1975). These types of surveys have been used extensively by Extension over the years (Beckley & Smith, 1985; Gilmore, Meehan-Strub, & Mormann, 1994). In 2004, a survey of applicators was conducted in Florida (Langeland, 2004). The intent was to determine if recertification needs were being met for applicators in the Aquatic, Right-of-Way, and Natural Areas Weed Management categories. The survey was mailed to 3,593 Florida-licensed applicators in these three categories and selected results included (n = 778; response rate of 22%) the following.

- The majority of applicators are employed by county government.
- Most applicators lived and worked in south Florida. Only approximately 10, 12, and 20% of Aquatic, Natural Areas Weed Management, and Right-of-Way applicators, respectively, live and work in north Florida.
- The majority of applicators prefer to attend meetings to obtain CEUs.
- Many applicators will pay up to \$500 for attending a CEU meeting.
- Most applicators are able to travel to attend a regional CEU meeting.
- Most applicators prefer a meeting length of 1 to 2 days.

Many applicators have attended the annual Aquatic Plant Management Short Course, held in south Florida, for the purpose of obtaining CEUs. That particular meeting is a 3-day venue attracting more than 400 applicators annually. The survey also showed that more than 50% and 30% of Right-of-Way and Aquatic applicators, respectively, in northwest Florida responded that the availability to obtain CEUs in that region is either "difficult" or "impossible" (Langeland, 2004).

This article reports on the development and implementation of a new and successful program opportunity that was developed and implemented based upon the results of a simple user survey.

Methodology

Our development effort was initiated during January 2007 for planning a southeastern state regional conference in Florida. The conference targeted audience was applicators in the Aquatic and Right-of-Way categories. Because applicators in other states face the same challenges with the availability of approved programs for earning CEUs, our conference sought state approval from other southeast states. Approval was granted from the following states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas.

Based on the 2004 survey, this conference attempted to meet the needs identified by affected applicators:

- Held in Panama City, in northwest Florida, making easier access for those living in north Florida.

- An early registration cost of \$225, well below the \$500 cost identified by the survey that applicators were willing to spend.
- Meeting length of 1½ days, with a total of 12 CEUs awarded, the length that was indicated as most desirable by the survey.

To enhance the attractiveness of this event:

- Subject matter specialists from around the United States were invited to speak.
- It was held in a large-scale beach and golf resort.
- Extended discount room rates through the weekend were offered, making it appealing to bring family.
- Social receptions were held both nights.
- An industry display room was set up to accommodate event sponsors with product literature.
- The University of Florida Extension Bookstore representatives had a display area where University publications were sold.

At the event's conclusion, a survey ascertained applicator perceptions of the conference and its future (n = 85 - 101). Most of our survey contained statements using a 5-point Likert scale (5 = very satisfied, 4 = satisfied, 3 = neutral, 2 = dissatisfied, and 1 = very dissatisfied). Selected response means are presented along with their standard deviations.

Results and Discussion

Besides a larger than expected audience (approximately 160 applicators), the conference was very successful as indicated by the survey results (Table 1). Although 38% of the audience did not respond to the survey, the survey was strictly voluntary and not required for obtaining CEU credit. Applicators' expectations for learning were overwhelmingly positive (response mean = 4.28; sd = .67), as 92% of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied. The topics presented were apparently relevant to their work, as 84% of the applicators were either satisfied or very satisfied (response mean = 4.09; sd = .75) with the information's applicability.

Some CEU meetings target a diverse range of applicators holding various license categories. At these types of meetings, some material presented is relevant to only a selected portion of the audience. Because of this, our conference's focus was on licensed applicators holding only the Aquatic and/or Rights-of-Way categories. Some applicators hold both categories on their licenses; therefore, much of the information presented would be relevant to all attendees.

A related survey statement attempted to determine if the depth of topic coverage was adequate. Most (83%) were at least satisfied (response mean = 4.16; sd = .77). The social functions held in the evenings offered opportunities for interaction. Approximately 90% of the attendees were at least satisfied with the opportunities presented (sponsor interaction response mean = 4.38; sd = .63 and presenter interaction response mean = 4.27; sd = .69). From an Extension educator's standpoint, offering informal interaction at large events can lend credibility to an Extension professional. One-on-one interaction is more likely to occur where attendees feel less intimidated than in a large audience setting. Additional highlighted information from the event's survey is shown in Table 2.

Table 1.

Selected Pesticide Applicator Responses to the University of Florida's Regional Pesticide Applicator Training Event

Survey Statement	Response Mean ¹	SD ²	n ³
The training met my expectations for learning.	4.28	.67	101
Insights gained were applicable to my situation.	4.09	.75	100
Depth of topic coverage.	4.16	.77	99
Opportunities for informal interaction with sponsors.	4.38	.63	101
Opportunities for informal interaction with presenters	4.27	.69	101
¹ Mean was based on a 5-point scale where 5 = very satisfied, 4 = satisfied, 3 = neutral, 2 = dissatisfied, and 1 = very dissatisfied. ² Standard deviation. ³ Number of responses.			

Table 2.

Selected Additional Information from Respondents at the University of Florida's Regional Pesticide Applicator Training Event

Survey Question/Statement	Percentage Response
How much NEW information did you obtain at this training?	Some: 52; Significant amount: 44; Very little: 4
This training should be:	Continued as is: 49; Expanded: 46; Re-designed: 5
This training should be held:	Every Year: 68; Every two years: 29; Every three years: 3
Overall value for the training fee:	Excellent: 18; Very good: 36; Good: 41; Fair: 4; Poor: 1

Implications

A positive perception from an extension educator's viewpoint is that a real need was identified and the program developed and conducted had great success. Needs assessment surveys have proven to be a reliable tool for extension educators.

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