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Building an Extension Information Network: An Oregon Agricultural Case Study

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Abstract

This article discusses an Extension electronic database system that was developed to gather, maintain, and disseminate basic economic information on Oregon's agricultural production and sales. The system could be modified to facilitate a wide range of Extension program needs for the collection and dissemination of information.

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Introduction

It was in the 1970s, under a new Oregon Statute, that Oregon State University became responsible for gathering, maintaining, and disseminating basic economic information on the state's agricultural production and sales. We collect data on a county-by-county basis. Our database contains information going back to 1976 on about 130 named commodity categories that are grown commercially in at least one of Oregon's 36 counties (Burt & Grassel, 2001).

In the mid-1990s, an Extension economist's retirement and severe budget cutbacks at that time encouraged the creation of Extension's Oregon Agricultural Information Network (OAIN). It is primarily an electronic, Web-based system that was built to meet our continuing commitment to our economic information program while significantly decreasing the labor intensity and general costs of the program. Our experience so far gives us encouragement that this concept has great potential for a wide array of Extension programs that are centered around database management needs. In that regard, I would be happy to provide more detailed information on the development and use of this Extension tool.

Advances in electronic database systems and Web-based technology during the 1990s spurred the development of OAIN as we know it today. We had initial misgivings that some of our clientele would be unable to use a Web-based system. That fear proved unfounded. We are now almost entirely paperless. Time efficiency was greatly increased, and county and other reports could be made available much earlier.

Overview of the System

The Web site URL for the OAIN home page is: <http://oregonstate.edu/oain/database/SignIn.asp>

When it comes up on your computer, you will see the homepage shown in Figure 1. The five green buttons at the right of the page provide access to everything that is in the OAIN system (Hamlin & Burt, 2004). As an example, clicking on the Commodity Data Sheets button provides access to summary data reflecting selected commodities and commodity groups for principal county, state, regional, and national statistics. It presents a compilation of OAIN as well as National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) data. All Commodity Summaries provide access to the annual OAIN state and county agricultural estimates summary publications, Extension Special Report 790, going back to 1997 (Burt, 2005). These are all Portable Document Format (PDF) files. The OAIN users guide button also brings up a PDF file.

Figure 1.
Agricultural Information Network (OAIN) Homepage



The Enterprise Budgets button provides access to all the Oregon enterprise budgets we have available on-line. The Extension Educational Materials button links you to the OSU Extension Service and Experiment Station inventory of educational materials. Other Resources provides a wealth of information including USDA market news and NASS data, which includes recent Census of Agriculture reports.

The Interworkings of the System

Clicking on the OAIN Databases button provides access to all of the publicly available OAIN county and state data available in the system. Confidential data are summarized to avoid disclosure. Anyone can enter as a guest. It is an easy-to-use, menu-driven process that allows you to prepare 14 pre-formatted tables related to county, regional, or state reports on such topics as acreage or sales. Or you can create customized reports using the Data Reports and Queries button. On-screen or EXCEL formats are available.

The data in our system reflect the best judgment of our Extension faculty, agents, and specialists in the field, who for the most part are working on a regular basis with commodity producers, commissions, and associations (Burt & Grassel, 2002). In some cases, they may be using a more formal technique such as a survey to combine with other sources of information in making their judgments about production and value of the commodities they cover in each county. In most cases, however, their expert judgments are typically formulated through a blend of contacts with industry leaders, processors, handlers, and others familiar with industry trends.

This information, combined with their own personal observations of industry activity, is at the heart of concluding what numbers reasonably reflect overall production and value for a given production year. In many respects, the value of these data are found in an assessment of trends over time rather than the absolute values entered in a particular year. The advantage in looking at a longer-term time series is that one can begin to assess emerging and declining commodity production by county and also price trends.

Adding complexity to this system is the need to maintain confidentiality of proprietary information. We use the same standards enforced by NASS. Summary numbers are released only when proprietary information is concealed. Faculty enter the system for data entry and information access through unique usernames and passwords. Confidential data are flagged.

OAIN operates under the philosophy that each Extension faculty member is the ultimate authority on all estimates that we maintain in our database for that person's assignment responsibility. Faculty have the opportunity each year to review those numbers from the previous two years while entering preliminary estimates for the current production year. Estimate changes are flagged.

Livestock industries account for about 30% of Oregon agricultural sales. Preparation of estimates for cattle, swine, sheep, and wool are complex with respect to production segmentation and market outlets. So we have developed EXCEL worksheets for each of those commodities (Burt et. al., 2005). They are available to our livestock faculty as attachments to their OAIN on-line input tables.

Discussion and Implications

We provide county-level agricultural estimates to a very diverse clientele. That includes agricultural businesses in Oregon who rely on us for economic information that they need to develop and expand their enterprises. Clientele such as agricultural lenders and appraisers also have ready and inexpensive access to the public information that we maintain. In addition, this

system serves as a major resource for those conducting feasibility studies and doing land use planning. Federal and state agencies are also users.

Information is also provided to research and Extension faculty on and off campus who are affiliated with departments in such colleges as Agricultural Sciences, Business, and Health & Human Sciences. They provide information to clientele wanting to explore enterprise feasibility. Our county Extension offices also frequently use this information to work with county supervisors and other officials who affect their respective county Extension educational programs.

This computerized system could be modified to facilitate a wide range of Extension program needs for the collection and dissemination of information. In our case, we developed the capability to do more extensive projects related to farm/agribusiness management with Extension personnel, researchers, and public agencies. Increasingly, the Internet is changing the way that this type of information is collected, archived, and transferred. Through this system, we have enhanced accessibility and efficiencies that can come from this mode of interaction with collaborators and clientele through both collection and dissemination on the Web. In all cases, we observe strict confidentiality rules to protect proprietary business information.

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