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Using Updates to Educate Policy Makers About Water Programs at Land-Grant Institutions

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NEXT ARTICLE



Using Updates to Educate Policy Makers About Water Programs at Land-Grant Institutions

Abstract

We developed a regional two-page color newsletter called PNWWATER UPDATE that focuses on specific water resource issues in the Pacific Northwest to meet the needs of our stakeholders. This newsletter is distributed to our congressional delegation and all state legislators serving on education, environment, or agriculture committees. Fifty-seven policy makers on our mailing list for the last 2 years evaluated the value of this newsletter. In general, policy makers found the newsletter to be of high quality, timely, and informative, and thought that it addressed the water quality priorities in the region.

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The five land-grant institutions (LGIs) in the Pacific Northwest (Northwest Indian College, Oregon State University, University of Alaska, University of Idaho, Washington State University) have a long tradition of conducting research, education, and Extension programs in water resource sciences. On an annual basis, resources devoted to water programs at these institutions collectively exceed \$25,000,000. These dollars devoted to water programs: (1) produce undergraduate and graduate degrees, (2) result in research being undertaken and consequent results published in prestigious journals, and (3) enhance the quality of life for many of the region's residents. However, the collective impact of these water-related activities has not been effectively or adequately conveyed to the appropriate policy and traditional stakeholder groups in the region.

As a consequence of this perceived disconnect, we developed a regularly issued two-page newsletter that focuses on a specific water resource topic each issue. This newsletter is named *PNWWATER UPDATE* and is designed to be issued twice a month. The format of the newsletter calls for a 500- to 700-word article with appropriate illustrations. The newsletter is designed to be produced in color (Figure 1). In addition to the article and illustrations, each *PNWWATER UPDATE*

contains appropriate contact information and a list of the eight national water quality themes developed jointly by USDA-CSREES and the land-grant institutions (Figure 2).

Figure 1.
Examples of Five *PNWWATER UPDATES* Developed During the Past 30 Months



Figure 2.
Consistent Formatting Items Found on all *PNWWATER UPDATE* Issues



The *PNWWATER UPDATE* newsletter has the following goals: (1) to provide timely information about water resource programs at LGIs, (2) show the linkages between the research and Extension mission activities of LGIs, (3) indicate potential regionally based solutions to water resource problems, (4) transfer appropriate water resources technology to stakeholders, and (5) publicize regionally based forums that target specific water resource issues. The *PNWWATER UPDATES* focus on regional water projects; however, projects specific to a particular state are

highlighted when they can be used as models for programs in other states of the region.

The actual topics for each issue of *PNWWATER UPDATE* are determined collectively by the water quality coordinators from each of the land-grant institutions on a quarterly basis. Once the topic is determined, a writing assignment is made, and a deadline is set. The types of water-related topics covered in the *PNWWATER UPDATES* are shown by category in Table 1. After each article is written, it is forwarded to the University of Idaho for editing, layout, and printing. A pdf file of each issue is made, and color copies are produced on a laserjet color printer.

Table 1.
The Categories and Numbers of *PNWWATER UPDATES* Produced in the Initial 30 Months of the Newsletter

Category	Number of UPDATES
Water Quality Team	4
Partners	5
Conferences	5
Education	2
Successes	3
Animal Waste Management	2
Drinking Water and Human Health	4
Environmental Restoration	6
Nutrient and Pesticide Management	2
Pollution Assessment and Prevention	7
Water Policy, Economics Surveys	9
Watershed Management	4
Water Conservation	6
Urban Issues	2
Stormwater	1

We developed an initial mailing list of 350 key individuals in the Pacific Northwest to receive the bi-monthly update. The types of individuals placed on this list represent the following groups of stakeholders: (1) congressional delegation from the four Pacific Northwest states, (2) all state legislators serving on education, environment, or agricultural committees, (3) land grant institution administrators, (4) members of the USDA-CSREES executive team, (5) heads of commodity commissions, and (6) administrators in partner federal, state, and local agencies. In addition to this mailing list, *PNWWATER UPDATES* are also mailed to all county Extension offices in the region.

All *PNWWATER UPDATES* are numbered for easy identification and inventory. Since the inception of this program, over 65 *PNWWATER UPDATES* have been issued. All updates are available in html and pdf formats on our regional Web site, www.pnwwaterweb.com. These updates have served to populate our Web site and are organized on this site the following three different ways: (1) in chronological order of issue, (2) by national water theme category, and (3) by subject matter (Table 1).

Evaluation of *PNWWATER UPDATES*

In March 2005 we asked the 114 policy makers (members of Congress and state legislators) who had been on our mailing list for a minimum of 24 months to evaluate the value of *PNWWATER UPDATES*.

We developed an evaluation form with nine questions that fit on one sheet of paper. This questionnaire, mailed to each of the 114 policy makers, was packaged with a letter of explanation and a business reply return envelope. Fifty-seven evaluation forms were returned completed by the survey reply cutoff date of June 1, 2005. The survey response rate of 50% was considered large enough to effectively evaluate the *PNWWATER UPDATES*.

The survey results are shown in Table 2. In general, the 57 policy makers who filled out the evaluation form had positive things to say about the *PNWWATER UPDATES*. Thirty-three, 30, 33, and 4% of the respondents reported that they always, often, sometimes, or never read the *PNWWATER UPDATES* mailed to them, respectively (Table 2). The fact that 96% of these policy makers at least occasionally read our materials was encouraging.

Table 2.
Results from the *PNWWATER UPDATE* Evaluation Completed by 57 Policy Makers.

Question	Response
Q-1. How often do you or a staffer read our UPDATES?	
Always	19 (33%)
Often	17 (30%)
Sometimes	19 (33%)
Never	2 (4%)
Q-2. Do you wish to continue receiving our UPDATE?	
Yes	50 (88%)
No	7 (12%)
Q-3. What information in our UPDATES interests you?	
Water quality	48 (84%)
Success stories	42 (84%)
Current programming efforts	37 (65%)
Water quantity	31 (54%)

General consumer information	28 (49%)
Outreach/Extension	25 (44%)
Research	21 (37%)
Education (college)	21 (37%)
Q-4. Have you visited our Web site (www.pnwwaterweb.com)?	
Yes	33 (59%)
No	23 (41%)
Q-5. Have you followed up on any information we provided to you in our UPDATES?	
Yes	42 (76%)
No	13 (24%)
If yes, how:	
Use of www.pnwwaterweb.com	30
Through contact information on UPDATE	16
Through water quality program at LGI	11
Direct contact with R. L. Mahler	9
Other	4
Q-6. Are our efforts addressing water quality priorities in the Pacific Northwest?	
Yes	53 (97%)
No	3 (3%)
Q-7. Please rate the quality of our UPDATES:	
Excellent quality	42
About right length	42
Excellent information	33

Too often	6
Fair quality	4
Too short	2
Too long	2
Poor quality	0
Poor information	0
Q-8. Before you received these UPDATES on a regular basis, how much did you know about water programs at the LGIs in the Pacific Northwest?	
Virtually nothing	28 (49%)
Much less than I do now	18 (32%)
Somewhat less than I do now	7 (12%)
About the same as now	4 (7%)
Q-9. Suggest possible format changes for us:	
Stay with current color one-sheet format	41
One mailing per month (2 updates, one envelope)	27
Make Web-based only; send email when available	7
Change to black and white (save money)	3
Use lighter weight paper, regular sized envelope	1

Over 88% of the responding policy makers reported that they wanted to continue receiving our updates. The types of information of most interest to policy makers varied; however, a majority of respondents expressed interest in updates highlighting water quality, success stories, current programs efforts, and water quantity (Table 2).

Over 59% of the respondents have visited the regional water Web site, www.pnwwaterweb.com. Seventy-six percent of respondents have followed-up on information provided in a particular *PNWWATER UPDATE* (Table 2). The most common method of follow-up utilized our regional Web site. Ninety-seven percent of responding policy makers felt that the updates were addressing the water resource priorities in the Pacific Northwest.

Seventy-three percent of respondents thought that the quality of the bi-monthly updates was excellent. The same percentage also felt that the updates were about the right length (Table 2). The answers to survey question 8 indicated that the majority of policy makers learned much about water programs at land grant institutions in the Pacific Northwest (Table 2). In fact, over 81% of respondents reported that prior to receiving *PNWWATER UPDATES* they knew virtually nothing or much less than they do now about water programs at land grant institutions (Table 2).

Based on the responses to survey question 9, policy makers are satisfied with the current format of the updates and do not want significant change. Over 70% of respondents want us to stay with the current color one-sheet format. Only seven respondents would prefer a Web-based only update. It appears that a traditional paper copy is handier and effective, and more likely to be read to convey water information to policy makers than via electronic transmission.

Discussion

Based on evaluation results, *PNWWATER UPDATES* are meeting our needs by providing timely and important water information to policy makers in the Pacific Northwest. We have received 105 documented requests for additional information on highlighted water topics from stakeholders regularly receiving *PNWWATER UPDATES* (more than just the policy makers). Several of the surveyed policy makers indicated that they have often used the provided information in their work and deliberations. One state policy maker commented that the information provided in a particular *PNWWATER UPDATE* influenced his vote in the 2004 legislative session.

The cost of printing and mailing each copy of *PNWWATER UPDATE* is \$0.81. In addition to these fixed costs, a significant amount of human resources (faculty and staff) labor is involved in the preparation of each issue. However, we believe that this money is well spent for the following reasons.

- Much of the *PNWWATER UPDATE* material can be used dually in the preparation of quarterly and annual reports.
- *PNWWATER UPDATES* gets our information out in an organized and timely manner using an easy-to-digest sound-byte strategy.
- This information allows us to more effectively populate our Web site, www.pnwwaterweb.com, with water resource information.
- It provides us with a feedback loop on our current efforts and progress.

It is important to note that in this age of electronically transmitted information, policy makers prefer hard copies of *PNWWATER UPDATES*. We speculate that this hard-copy format is better received than electronic materials because:

- The hard-copy format puts the issue right in front of the staffer or legislator.
- The color format is attractive, and the inclusion of a color picture grabs the attention of the stakeholder.
- The hard-copy *PNWWATER UPDATE* is the right length (500 to 700 words) and is a single sheet of paper.
- The single-sheet format lends itself to one-step filing--no copying from a computer is necessary.
- The hard-copy format is attractive and thus easy to route through an office and receive attention from several employees.

This article has documented our impact on education of our policy makers; however, the updates are targeted at a wider audience. In addition we need to expand our audience to include the media. For instance, the updates could be used as news releases. We need to build upon our initial idea of *PNWWATER UPDATE* to truly achieve our water research, education, and Extension mission in the Pacific Northwest.

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