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Richard Koenig
Washington State University Extension, richk@wsu.edu

Teresa Cerny-Koenig
Washington State University Extension

Rick Hefelbower
Utah State University Extension, rickh@ext.usu.edu

Nancy Mesner
Utah State University Extension, nancym@ext.usu.edu

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A Team Approach Enhances Statewide Water Issues Programming

Abstract
The current drought situation and continued urban development have forced water issues to the forefront in the West. At Utah State University, a team composed of five extension specialists and six agents with expertise in soils, ornamental horticulture, turfgrass, water conservation and quality, and irrigation engineering was formed to respond to water issues. The team developed a drought resources Web site, 15 Extension bulletins on water management and conservation, water auditing workshops and training, and irrigation quality testing information. The team summarizes its approach and accomplishments to provide guidance for future issue teams.

Richard Koenig
Soil Fertility Specialist
Washington State University Extension
Pullman, Washington
richk@wsu.edu

Teresa Cerny-Koenig
Ornamental Horticulture Instructor
Washington State University Extension
Pullman, Washington

Rick Hefelbower
Washington County Horticulture Agent
Utah State University Extension
Logan, Utah
rickh@ext.usu.edu

Nancy Mesner
Water Quality Specialist
Utah State University Extension
Logan, Utah
nancym@ext.usu.edu

Kelly Kopp
Turfgrass/Water Conservation Specialist
Utah State University Extension
Logan, Utah
kellyk@ext.usu.edu

Robert Hill
Irrigation Specialist
Utah State University Extension
Logan, Utah
bobh@ext.usu.edu

Introduction

Water issues are ubiquitous in Utah State University Extension programming. Nearly every specialist and agent with an assignment in agriculture, natural resources, horticulture, or family and consumer science is involved in some aspect of water programming. With the current drought situation in the Intermountain West, the issues of water quantity, conservation, quality, and

management have moved to the forefront. It is expected that water issues will remain important after the immediate drought situation ends. Continued urban development will place additional quality and quantity demands on what are already limited water supplies in western states.

In response to water programming needs and the drought situation, the Utah State University Extension Water Issues Team (WIT) was formed in March 2002. The WIT was composed of five specialists and six agents with these assignments:

- Soils
- Ornamental Horticulture
- Turfgrass
- Water Conservation
- Water Quality
- Irrigation Engineering

Issue-based programming should allow Extension to develop a more efficient response to emerging issues. The University of Wisconsin's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources was one of the first Extension groups to develop program teams (University of Wisconsin Extension, 2003). They currently have 14 issue teams working in the areas of agriculture and natural resources. Other universities have developed multi-disciplinary groups to address issues such as animal feeding operations (Seidl, 2003) and urban planning (Kotval, 2003). This article summarizes Utah State University Extension's WIT approach and provides guidance for future teams.

Overview

In March 2002, the WIT sent an e-mail poll to all county staff soliciting input on information needs and formats. The poll determined that a web site, publications, and specific support, including landscape irrigation auditing workshops, water testing, and assistance with water audits were needed.

Web Site

The first activity of the WIT was to gather all relevant drought content on a centralized Web site (http://www.extension.usu.edu/drought). The site was launched on May 22, 2002. In addition to Utah State University Extension publications on water conservation, the site includes a tip-of-the-day, frequently asked questions, and an extensive listing of links on home, landscape, and agricultural water use.

Extension Publications

Fifteen bulletins related to drought and water management/conservation in urban, agriculture, and home settings were completed. In addition, one special insert (five articles) on drought was prepared for the August 2002 edition of the Utah Farm Bureau News.

Water User's Workshops

A series of large water users' workshops was developed. The workshops were directed toward municipalities, park managers, and church and school districts. A total of 11 workshops were presented to 244 people in 2002.

Self Assessment of the Team Approach

At the end of 2002, the WIT met to evaluate successes and to identify opportunities for improving Team effectiveness in future activities.

Overview/Successes

- The drought provided a narrow focus for planning activities;
- The WIT contained the right discipline areas to address the varied aspects of drought;
- The team approach increased awareness of granting opportunities among Team members and increased grant success;
- Team discussion and planning avoided redundancy and facilitated an organized response;
- Positive competition encouraged Team members to be more productive;
- A small group size was efficient for scheduling meetings and discussions; and
- The Team leader kept the group moving forward and focused on clear goals.

Opportunities for Improvement

- More involvement from off campus personnel and other specialists is necessary;

- Other water areas, including indoor (home) water use and water quality, should be expanded;
- Personnel with specific assignments in water areas are needed. Because water is a priority issue, it needs to be recognized by administration to allow staff to focus efforts and reduce time in other areas;
- Team effort to organize and identify priorities for future publications should be increased; and
- Sub-teams for water conservation and water quality should be formed.

Future Goals

- Ensure that water programs are ongoing in an environment of changing staff;
- Assess how Team accomplishments impacted statewide water conservation and quality;
- Develop programs addressing emerging water issues, such as the use of marginal quality and gray water;
- Become more informed about the social/legal issues surrounding water use such as laws governing gray water use and local ordinances on low water use landscapes; and
- Develop new publications for worsening drought situation,
- Continue to develop and maintain the Web site.

Conclusions

The WIT believes that the issue-based approach has, in the short term, increased productivity over individually directed efforts. We are unable to measure long-term impacts of the team's efforts yet, but will continue to monitor their effectiveness as the program develops. Team approaches in Utah State University Extension have been expanded to include such topics as biosecurity, community development, and home horticulture.

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