

## Cooperative Extension Impact Report--Extension Response to June 2008 Floods

Mobilizing to help as waters rose, remaining to help as danger receded

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**“In a county that produces over 1.5 billion worth of agricultural sales in a year, growers needed answers to a problem of epic proportions.” - County educator**

**“We had information either ahead of or when producers were asking questions.” - County educator**

**“The local Extension offices were seen as places where people could get information... this included FEMA, state agencies and others who were trying to cope with the floods.” - County educator**

**“What makes this all possible really is good communication and interaction between agents and specialists.” - State specialist**

### Situation

In June 2008, thirty counties in southern Wisconsin were declared a major federal disaster area due to widespread flooding that caused hundreds of millions of dollars of damage to homes, roads, municipal buildings, ground water supplies, farms and other businesses. Those in the path of the flood suddenly required assistance, expertise and information in order to cope. They needed sandbags and helpers to stack them, advice on how to stay safe when wading in polluted waters, guidance on how to handle refrigerated food when the electricity went off, and help in documenting losses so they could later apply for aid. They also needed information on replanting crops, managing runoff, saving livestock, cleaning buildings, rebuilding businesses, reducing family stress, and creating community plans to deal with future floods.

### Response

As the flood waters rose, UW extension workers mobilized to help. County agents throughout the disaster area began using their specialized skills, connections to the community, and access to campus specialists to provide assistance in a multitude of ways. Their prime task was to gather information needed by flood victims, organize it, and present it swiftly in usable form. To do this they created new information pieces and published them both in paper format and on the quickly created ExtensionResponds Web site. They also took their information directly to farms, homes and communities, and responded to questions from individuals in emails, phone calls and office visits. They worked with news media to provide articles and interviews, they accessed their extensive networks, and they collaborated with state and federal agencies to provide educational programs and disseminate information.

Because the disaster touched people's lives in a multitude of ways, victims required information drawn from a wide range of the university's areas of expertise, including economics, agricultural economics, agronomy, soil science, solid and hazardous waste management, dairy science, business development, food safety and family studies. County extension educators walked fields



with farmers and discussed how to manage cropping problems, gave farmers advice on marketing plan adjustments, worked with businesses to complete loan applications, discussed safety issues with homeowners, and tested for bacteria in lakes, rivers and recreational areas. State specialists gave advice and assistance to a wide variety of people affected by the flood, including bankers, small business center staff, economic development staff, emergency preparedness staff, crop consultants, FEMA representatives, and municipal water resource managers.

According to a conservative estimate, extension staff worked directly with about 5,000 people and helped nearly 500,000 people indirectly by communicating with them through mass media and UW-Extension communications networks.

## Outcomes

To assess its work, UW-Extension undertook an evaluation that included interviews with 19 campus extension specialists and an online survey answered by 36 county and basin extension educators. The evaluation indicates that UW-Extension's timely, wide-ranging and targeted efforts had immediate and lasting effects. Extension educators were a trusted local source of information who provided immediate, relevant assistance, and who continued providing assistance long after the waters had receded. Extension's response contributed to positive impacts across ten broad impact

areas including reduction of stress and anxiety, improved decision making, preserved and improved health conditions, reduced losses and risks, and improved local and state agency performance.

The evaluation revealed that the strength of Cooperative Extension in responding to disasters lies in its highly organized system of information sharing combined with its customized approach to solving problems. An elaborate system for acquiring and disseminating information is in place, and this system supports individuals on the ground in the counties who use their initiative to identify and solve problems.

Three incidents may serve as examples of the wide range of activities carried out by Cooperative Extension personnel during and after the flood.

- One extension specialist hooked up local municipalities with commercial manure haulers who provided equipment and pumps that reduced the need for sandbagging and kept water from backing up into homes.
- Another extension educator worked with county and state colleagues to solve forage problems caused by the flood. "Team Forage," he said, "responded while it was still raining, as crops were deluged. The team pooled information and efforts to make farmer recommendations, wrote materials related to hay and distributed them by email, posted info on the Web site,

and held a statewide conference for extension agricultural agents to enable them to be able to discuss the flood's effect on crops, to discuss post-flood cropping options, and to be able to measure flood damage."

- Another county agent received a call from a farm wife who was in tears, fearing the flood waters had ended her family's career in farming. The agent said, "A week after speaking with her to provide advice on who to contact for assistance of many kinds, I called her back. She was so happy to know that I was checking back with her and said she had never expected that from anyone. She reported that she had visited with FSA, reported the crop loss, was eligible for an emergency loan and things were looking much better for her farm. She thanked me sincerely for showing the concern and empathy for her situation."

Complete evaluation report is available at:  
<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/pdf/FloodReport2008.pdf>

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