

## **A forage area of expertise team: the Michigan approach to applied research and extension**

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**Introduction** Agricultural Experiment Stations and the Cooperative Extension Service have traditionally contributed to the economic, social, human, and environmental capital of the United States. Despite this, both institutions have experienced declining federal budget support and increasing competition for resources (Hamm 1997; Hood & Schutjer 1990; Knutson & Outlaw 1994; Paarlberg 1992). Michigan State University Extension, in partnership with the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station, implemented self-directed area of expertise (AOE) teams as its major educational development and delivery model. AOE teams grew out of experiences with previous temporary research/Extension teams and quick response professional groups operating within traditional line responsibilities for research and Extension units. An extension forage area of expertise team was organized in 1999 to deliver educational programmes in forage management and conduct applied forage research. Funds were made available directly to the forage team from central extension administration.

**Materials and methods** A forage area of expertise team was organized at Michigan State University in 1997 as a highly trained group of Extension and Experiment Station employees fully responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating educational programmes in a self-directed manner. The team has two co-chairs; one from the campus and another from off-campus. The on-campus co-chair has a joint research-Extension faculty appointment or responsibility. The team co-chairs provide leadership on a yearly rotational basis. Co-chairs are selected by the team and serve as facilitators. The team develops its own micro-vision, mission and operating procedures and develops a plan for programme delivery and curricula for staff development. Involvement of stakeholders is used for information input for programme/project selection, direction. The team consists of 15 active members and includes an additional 20 people on the list-serve who participate less frequently in team efforts. The team is expected to be entrepreneurial and develop self-supporting educational programmes.

**Results** Since its inception, the forage team has developed four major educational programme modules. Each program module consisted of a series of 10-12 MS Powerpoint presentations of 30-45 minutes duration. An accompanying notebook is also used to complement the Powerpoint presentations. Educational programme modules include: Building skills in grazing management, mastering the art of grazing management, advanced forage management, and utilization of dairy forages. Evaluations were conducted for all programmes. The team has developed numerous grant proposals and received grants from non-profit organizations, state and federal agencies, and private companies. The forage team has been recognized for its excellence by receiving a significant number of state and national awards for its educational programmes.

**Conclusions** The forage AOE team, which connects field, campus, and stakeholders, and ties research to Extension with an interdisciplinary, problem-solving focus, has produced results that improve peoples' lives. Feedback from both campus-based and field staff members has been very positive. A trend of enhanced motivation among field staff members and stronger credibility with agricultural stakeholders has emerged as a result of the AOE approach. Improved credibility has translated into renewed pride among many stakeholders for "their" land-grant university, and this helps assure continued public support into the 21st century.

### **References**

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