

# Role of Social Media and Digital Resources in Forage Education

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**Abstract.** Social media and digital resources are powerful tools that enable forage-livestock researchers and Extension specialists to connect with a wide audience of producers, Extension personnel, colleagues, and industry partners. This presentation in the thematic session on “Understanding the role of social media and digital resources in forage education and promotion” will focus on the role digital resources play in forage education.

## Introduction

The demands of forage livestock systems are constantly changing throughout the year and no two years are ever the same. Changing climatic conditions have exacerbated the volatility of forage production systems. For example, warm season forages and weeds are appearing further north and pest/disease outbreaks are becoming more frequent and with greater severity (Baxter et al., 2022). It is not surprising that University of Georgia County Extension Agents ranked forage management, grazing management, weed control, and hay production as some of the greatest needs for training in the 2020 Extension Training Needs Assessment. County Extension Agents and forage-livestock producers require relevant forage information in an accessible, easy to follow format throughout the year.

## Online Agent Trainings

Beginning in January 2020, I began conducting forage focused, in-service training events available online each month for University of Georgia (UGA) Extension Agents. The one hour training period is typically comprised of a 45 minute presentation, a short research update (if relevant research is on-going), and 10+ minutes for questions. Each month we focus on a new “hot topic” that would be relevant to the agents in the coming weeks. For instance, in July 2020 we covered weed control options for forage systems with a specific focus on controlling broadleaf weeds in row crop dominant areas since herbicide drift and volatility are always major concerns. In another example, the February 2021 training was titled “Why Are All The Cows Dying?!” where we discussed potential forage-related concerns producers would soon have over high nitrate forage, poorly ensiled baleage/silage, or feeding low quality hay. All presentations are annotated and uploaded to our intranet system with an associated video recording for agents to use in their own local Extension programs. The video recordings are made after the live training to incorporate any questions and discussion points from the Agents attending the training and ensure a clean video, free of background disruptions or microphone troubles.

The goals for these “hot topic” trainings were:

1. To create tools that agents could use in their own county Extension programs
2. To help new agents gain trust from their producers by teaching them how to communicate effectively (i.e. how to ask the necessary questions and provide clear answers for the most common forage/livestock questions)
3. To create an online environment conducive for learning for new and established extension personnel

Since 2021, I have also offered monthly, one-hour session on “advanced topics” for agents looking for a more in-depth or discussion focused session. Whereas most trainings have a definitive solution or recommendation for a problem, these presentations are more open-ended. These topics have included areas such as navigating carbon markets, foxtail control, and alternative lime products. Both of these training sessions have continued in 2022 and are proposed to continue in 2023.

I conducted 31 total training events during the first two years of these series, with 577 total contact hours (2020 = 302 hr.; 2021 = 275 hr.). This is a dramatic increase compared to previous in-person training events where only 15 agents attended for approximately 6-8 hours in forage training per year (90-120 contact hours per year). Post-training survey results show an 87% increase in knowledge from the trainings on average.

Since initiating these training events, I have noted fewer repetitive phone calls from Agents who regularly participate in these programs since they are comfortable addressing basic forage questions and troubleshooting problems. When these Agents do have questions, they call with all of the necessary information needed for me to make a complete recommendation which makes for a more effective use of everyone's time. Finally, these Agents show more initiative for developing local forage extension programming or research and demonstrations tailored to their producers instead of relying solely on the state specialist.

The response from County Extension Agents on these trainings has been overwhelmingly positive. A few examples from a few of the regular attendees are:

1. Sarah Dyer (Dade County): Dr. Baxter's monthly online trainings have been a tremendous help to my programming in my county. The information is always timely to what is happening in the forages world across the state. The trainings allow for agents like myself to ask questions and dive deeper into discussion about current topics we are facing in our communities, then we are able to take that information back to our producers needing it.
2. Robyn Stewart (Lincoln County): I have found the availability and content of the monthly forage trainings to be really helpful in maintaining and growing my knowledge base. I personally think the virtual format is helpful, as I can access the trainings from any location and can also access the materials easily through the Intranet after each session. Lisa is a great wealth of knowledge and her presentations are always well-timed to provide information that we may need in the field. I particularly appreciated the 2021 session on the Bermudagrass Stem Maggot- not two weeks after it, I had several producers find BSM while scouting, and the training really prepared me to converse with them about the pest and what they needed to do. I also really appreciate the time given to chat with fellow agents and ask questions about issues and client inquiries.
3. Raymond Joyce (Laurens County): As a county agent, I find the online forage training to be very informative. I have utilized the information from the trainings in my work with cattle and hay producers in my county. The trainings have helped me stay on top of the hot topics related to forage production.
4. Guy Hancock (Turner County): Dr. Baxter's monthly agent forage trainings are always on timely topics that should be on the minds' of producers and ANR agents. I frequently will get a question from a producer on a topic just recently covered in one of Dr. Baxter's trainings. Without a doubt, the forage knowledge I have acquired by attending Dr. Baxter's basic and advanced forage trainings have made me much more helpful to my local producers. I use the information shared in the trainings every day to better serve our cattle and hay producers by sharing with them the knowledge I gain in these online sessions.
5. Keith Fielder (Putnam County): Dr. Baxter has done an excellent job with her monthly online forage updates. The format is convenient and provides the latest information on forage varieties, grazing management, as well as disease and pest management issues. I learn something significant each session.

### **Virtual Extension Trainings**

The impact of COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) continues to create uncertainty and concern both globally and locally. The initial lockdowns and continued travel restrictions or hesitations in response to COVID-19 interrupted conventional Extension and research programming nationwide. The University of Georgia Forage Extension Team, comprised of county agents across the state, the UGA Forage Extension Specialist, and associated researchers, made efforts to maintain learning continuity during this period through a combination of programs and webinars offered virtually. This includes the new GrassMasters Spotlight Series offered quarterly to highlight specific topics that were identified on past forage program evaluations as subjects where participants wanted more information. The most popular was the program on forages for small ruminants that has since gained over 2,000 views on YouTube. Another digital resource is The UGA Forage Extension Team Newsletter published quarterly but the Extension Agents on the team. On average per month, the blog receives 2,000 visits and 2,500 page views from 1,500 unique visitors and 150 returning visitors. These and other collective efforts have reached participants in a unique way and expanded the clientele of the Georgia Forages programs. More detail will be added in the paper on "Role of Social Media in Extension". Although not ideal, it these virtual programs have been well received and allowed programming to continue in a challenging situation.

References:

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