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Wildlife damage management in the digital age: collaborating with others

L. C. (“FUDD”) GRAHAM, Auburn University and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, 301 Funchess Hall, Auburn, AL 36849-5413, USA grahalc@auburn.edu

JANET HURLEY, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, 17360 Coit Road, Dallas, TX 75252, USA

KATHY FLANDERS, Auburn University and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, 201 Extension Hall, Auburn University, AL 36849, USA

Abstract: Three seemingly disparate Communities of Practice (CoPs)—Urban Integrated Pest Management (Urban IPM), Wildlife Damage Management (WDM), and Imported Fire Ants—came together to promote IPM and WDM by sharing information on websites and through webinars. Originally, each CoP on the eXtension web site was set up to be a unique information source. It became clear very early in eXtension’s development that many of these unique, single-topic sites had information that could be used by others. These 3 CoPs had the foresight to work together and link information, rather than creating new material.

Key words: collaboration, eXtension, human–wildlife interactions, wildlife damage management

IN 2001, THE COOPERATIVE Extension System made a decision to use technology to transform the way it fulfilled its mission and delivered its message. This new information technology network were called “eXtension” (eXtension 2015). The eXtension platform was sponsored and endorsed by the National Extension Directors and USDA Administrators.

In 2006, experts from 8 subject matter areas came together in Louisville, Kentucky, to learn the art of building and working as a team in a virtual environment to develop the best-of-the-best content available. These pioneering groups were referred to as Communities of Practice (CoPs; eXtension 2006). The subject matter areas that were represented included: Financial Security for All, Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN), Imported Fire Ants, Building Local Economies of the Future, Consumer Horticulture, HorseQuest, Just in Time Parenting, and Wildlife Damage Management (WDM).

In 2007, a second group of CoPs met in Louisville; it included the Urban Integrated Pest Management (Urban IPM) CoP, whose web page is listed as Pest Management in and Around Structures. This CoP was interested primarily in IPM in schools, and, as a result, dealt with all pests, including fire ants and wildlife, in and around school buildings and other structures.

One of the primary goals of the Urban

IPM group was to prepare IPM action plans that could be used by pest management professionals, homeowners, and school IPM personnel to identify and manage pests. These plans covered identification, general information, suggested thresholds, monitoring, inspection, and physical, mechanical, biological, and chemical control measures, along with evaluation methods and cleanup precautions. Because most of the Urban IPM CoP members were entomologists, there was a lack of expertise in the area of wildlife pests and the associated damage they cause.

Collaboration began when leaders of the Urban IPM CoP contacted organizers of the WDM CoP, and initiated discussions on linking the Urban IPM site to the WDM site. The individual species pages on the WDM web site were designed in a similar format to the Urban IPM action plans, and there was no reason to duplicate excellent information already on the eXtension site. Working with the WDM CoP, the Urban IPM CoP was able to provide excellent information to Urban IPM stakeholders.

The second round of collaboration began when the Urban IPM CoP started producing webinars on pests. The Urban IPM CoP leaders contacted WDM CoP leaders (S. Vantassel, S. Hygnstrom, P. Curtis, and R. Smith) about conducting webinars for the Urban IPM group. While conducting webinars serving different but related audiences, we learned the value of

tags, or key words, in web searches. We began to tag all of the Urban IPM wildlife webinars with both the WDM tag and the Urban IPM tag, making the webinars easier to find. Because this was such a success, we began adding these tags to all content in the Urban site that was relevant. We also marketed all related webinars by either CoP on both sites to increase participation.

In 2013, K. Flanders with the Imported Fire Ant CoP, received a grant from eXtension to produce a monthly webinar series, *All Bugs Good and Bad*. Because 10 webinars per year on fire ants would be overkill, she decided to cover other insects, both beneficial and harmful, and also decided to include some wildlife pests in the series. The Urban IPM CoP had always worked closely with the Imported Fire Ant CoP, so we began to add tags from all 3 groups to our webinars, marketing materials, and appropriate content. The 3 CoPs have been working together since 2013 to actively promote IPM for both insect and wildlife pests.

In 2015, eXtension changed to a membership model and changed its mission from producing the best-of-the-best information for stakeholders, to becoming an innovative place for extension educators and strategic partners to marry content with technology that appeals to and attracts new audiences to the cooperative extension system. The mission of the new eXtension is to help cooperative extension amplify learner access to reliable, evidenced-based information, expand collaborations and use of technological innovations, and multiply learner engagement and sustainable networked learning. The new membership model has 3 levels of participation for institutions: premium, basic, and standard. Benefits vary for each level of participation, and the type of membership chosen is up to each institution. Currently, there are 38 institutions at the premium level and twenty at the basic level of membership. How this new vision will affect our collaborations remains to be seen. The new eXtension is committed to innovation as a means to keep ahead of learning markets, collaboration that builds new levels of synergy, flexibility to move at the pace of change, and transparent, engaging, system-wide solutions. The primary customers are now Cooperative Extension System members (eXtension 2015).

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L. C. (“Fudd”) GRAHAM, is a research fellow IV and extension specialist in the Department of



Entomology and Plant Pathology at Auburn University (AU). He has worked as an extension agent with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and as a research assistant at AU. He serves as co-chair of the Southern School IPM Work Group, as co-leader of the eXtension Urban IPM Community, as a member of National School IPM Steering Committee and the Southern IPM Center Advisory Council, and as a board member of the Alabama Vector Management Society. He is a past board member of the Alabama Pest Control Association, the American Association of Pesticide Safety Educators and served as Alabama Pesticide Education Safety Coordinator for eight years. He also is a certified pest management professional in Alabama.

JANET HURLEY is an extension program specialist with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. She



has a bachelor's degree in community health from Texas Woman's University and a master's degree in public affairs from the University of Texas at Dallas. She was hired by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension in 2001 to oversee the Texas school integrated pest management (IPM) program. She conducts educational programs for school IPM coordinators across the state of Texas and serves as a resource for school IPM programs throughout the southeast. She serves as co-chair of the Southern School IPM Work Group, as co-leader of the eXtension Urban IPM Community, as a member of National School IPM steering committee.

KATHY FLANDERS holds a B.S. degree in plant protection from Cornell University and M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in entomology from the University of Minnesota. She has been with Auburn University for 21 years, and has worked in the field of integrated pest management for 35 years. She helps stakeholders manage fire ants, as well as insect pests on forages and feed grains. Since 2005, she has been co-leader



of the Imported Fire Ant eXtension Community of Practice (CoP). She has developed content for <www.extension.org/fire+ants>, in addition to overseeing the administrative functions of the fire-ant CoP.