

INFLUENCING WOODLAND MANAGEMENT USING WEB-BASED TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract.—The University of Kentucky, Department of Forestry Extension delivered hosted Web-based forestry educational programs (“webinars”) in 2009 to promote woodland management in Kentucky and engage county extension agents in forestry programming. These webinars were hosted by county extension agents and attended by woodland owners. This hosted webinar approach was intended to engage county agents in forestry programming, provide forestry programs for owners who manage their woodlands, reach non-managing woodland owners or those who may not attend traditional forestry field days, and use Web-based technology to deliver forestry educational programs. Participant responses indicated a high degree of acceptance of this programming approach with strong intentions to apply the knowledge gained. Increased extension agent involvement in forestry educational programming may prove the most valuable outcome of this programming effort.

INTRODUCTION

The woodlands of the central hardwood region, including Kentucky, are important ecologically and economically. Most of these woodlands are privately owned and their future depends largely on the decisions of private woodland owners, many of whom do not actively manage their property (NWOS Table Maker 2010). An important challenge for the forestry profession is to raise the awareness of forestry issues and promote woodland management among these woodland owners. Given the nature of shrinking outreach and extension budgets, coupled with the spread of high-speed internet connectivity in larger communities, Web-based technology may serve an important role in influencing private woodland owners to practice sustainable management. Raising woodland owners’ awareness of the opportunities and assistance available in managing their woodlands is an important first step.

HOSTED WEBINAR DEVELOPMENT

The University of Kentucky, Department of Forestry Extension developed 10 forestry Web-based programs for woodland owners in 2009. These webinars were organized into two forestry program series. One series focused on forest risks and risk management and offered three webinars; the other series focused on a variety of forestry topics and included seven webinars. All were hosted by extension agents at county extension offices and broadcast from the University of Kentucky, Department of Forestry. Most extension agents do not have a forestry background and have limited time to engage in forestry programs without support (Bardon 2001). This hosted webinar approach engages extension agents in forestry programming with minimal investments of their time. Some of the webinars included on-site foresters with the Kentucky Division of Forestry and prerecorded video segments while others were composed of live presentations only. Numerous practice sessions

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and frequent communications were maintained with hosting extension agents to ensure the best experience possible for agents and participating woodland owners. The presentations were sent to extension agents in advance and a conference call system was in place for contingency purposes. Considerably more planning and systems testing were required compared to traditional forestry programs.

EVALUATION RESULTS

Webinar attendees and hosting extension agents completed surveys to determine knowledge gained and acceptance of this educational delivery method. A large majority of the participants, 98.1 percent, indicated that webinars were an acceptable way to learn forestry information and 91.1 percent rated the webinars as “Good to Excellent.” More than 88 percent of participants indicated the information would help with management and work in their woodlands and 99.3 percent indicated they would use at least some of the information to manage their woodlands. Extension agents also returned evaluations and all indicated they would like to be involved in future forestry programming. The extension agents provided comments that complemented the woodland owners’ responses and feedback that can be used to adjust future webinars.

DISCUSSION

This educational programming effort allowed a better understanding of the role webinars can play in Kentucky and throughout the central hardwood region. Advantages to using hosted webinars include: alleviating some of the technology challenges that individuals may encounter, reducing the demand on personnel resources required to deliver individual programs, allowing forestry professionals to reach many audiences at once, and engaging extension agents in forestry programming. Technological advances are likely to improve forestry professionals’ ability to influence woodland management over the Internet; however, sending “hands-on” activities that can be completed before the program and having a local professional forester in attendance can be important enhancements to webinars. In addition, forestry professionals should not completely bypass nonformal educators. Extension agents and other nonformal educators can be an important part of forestry educational programming and efforts to engage them in forestry programs will likely multiply the impacts of forestry professionals in promoting woodland management.

LITERATURE CITED

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