



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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Northern Nye County Agricultural/Natural Resource Needs Assessment

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Introduction

Nye County is located in south central Nevada. It is 18,064 square miles in area with a population estimated at 34,704 (2000). There are a total of 144 farms in Nye County covering 85,534 acres. In August 2001, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension conducted a formal needs assessment to help citizens identify critical research and education topics surrounding agriculture and natural resources in Northern Nye County. In terms of Cooperative Extension program administration, Northern and Southern Nye County are divided immediately north of Beatty. The Cooperative Extension office in Pahrump serves Southern Nye County. After formally identifying these topics, Cooperative Extension can then address needs through educational programs and applied research. To date, this was the first comprehensive needs assessment conducted in Northern Nye County since 1995.

Conducting the Needs Assessment

The assessment format was based on a focus group method. This involved holding a public meeting in Smoky Valley, north of the town of Tonopah on August 8, 2001. This area was chosen because it is considered one of two primary agricultural production areas for the Northern half of the county. Flyers, promoting the meeting, were mailed to all known farm and ranch residencies. Eleven county citizens attended the meeting representing farming, ranching, and conservation interests. In addition, four agency personnel

attended the session representing Cooperative Extension and Natural Resource Conservation Service. Norman Suverly, Extension Educator for Northern Nye County, facilitated the session.

Participants were asked questions about what strengths they held in the area of agriculture and natural resources. They were asked to describe the agricultural history of their area thirty years ago and how it had changed over the past two to three decades. Participants were next asked to explain their vision of agriculture in the future, and goals they wanted to achieve over the next five years.

History and Strengths

Common strengths in agriculture and natural resources identified by citizens included alfalfa, cattle, trees, and water. One citizen stated that "although Smoky Valley has a long tradition of farming and ranching, much of the valley is undeveloped due to public lands. However, the last 30 years has brought about increased farm development and more trees." They were very proud of the fact that growers are still surviving profitably to this day considering the environment they live in (i.e. climate, isolation, and abundance of public lands). "Even when considering the barriers and restrictions that surround us, we still have the freedom to farm and the ability to choose how we run our operations."

Thirty years ago, Smoky Valley was more productive. Focus group participants estimated there were 12,000 to 15,000 more cattle on area ranches and public lands. On top of that, they are losing the average size hay farm. “Today, producers are either extensive with 1000 acres or more, or they are small with 20 acres or less.” This productivity was also reflected by a small population of weeds, especially noxious. However, they do acknowledge that the noxious weeds existing today are controllable.

Over the last two to three decades, population has increased rapidly due to the mining industry and has brought about an increase in subdivisions (5 to 10 acres) and “hobby farms.” “This has resulted in a portion of the community that participates in agriculture on a part-time basis and may lack required knowledge to be productive or sustainable. However, producers have become more aware of the importance of soil and water conservation.”

Vision of Future Agriculture

Individuals identified common words and themes to describe the agriculture/natural resource future they wanted to create. The key themes were:

- sustaining the family farm
- more local input/involvement in natural resource policy
- better roads for transportation of products
- access to soil and water tests
- a reliable labor market
- affordable power
- increased agriculture efficiency

These key themes helped to create a vision for the participants. With a vision in mind, they could begin to state goals for creating this future. Four categories emerged for goal setting purposes. The categories were agricultural profitability, youth involvement in agriculture, local

input/control in natural resource policy, and noxious weeds.

Agricultural Profitability

The agricultural industry of Northern Nye County is dominated by alfalfa and beef cattle production. These two industries have a long standing tradition in the communities and will likely continue to have a strong presence in the future due to the high demand for quality hay from the dairy industry and the vast availability of public rangelands. Therefore, the focus is not to produce more but produce it more profitably. It was stated that “alfalfa has a high demand for water and currently power rates are increasing. Also, cattlemen are facing more restrictions in grazing on public lands and have experienced a historical decrease in available AUM’s. “Participants identified a need for coordinated research in establishing local test plots to discover what alternative crops can be grown in the region. They expressed interest for research in irrigation efficiency since they viewed the University of Nevada, Reno as lacking this information. They wanted to see seminars and workshops on how to establish locally grown markets and to see improved communication of ideas between producers and Cooperative Extension.

Youth Involvement in Agriculture

Participants of the focus group believe the area’s youth is separating itself from the local agricultural and natural resource industry which remains an important piece of the foundation of the local economy. Local producers expressed a need for youth to have an understanding and involvement in agriculture and the surrounding natural resources. They stated that they would like to see local youth become involved with farming and to actually have them work on farms. Whether feasible or not, they wanted to see an establishment of agricultural education in the public classroom. They wondered why schools in other communities had agricultural programs (e.g. FFA). They

believed parents and the school board needed to work together to form policy changes for the implementation of an agricultural education program. What was probably most important for the success of this movement was the need to generate interest and awareness so that the community could take ownership. They also saw the need for a combined effort of resources involving Cooperative Extension, producers, Farm Bureau, and especially teachers.

Local Input/Control in Natural Resource Policy

Nevada has a longstanding history of conflict involving natural resources and Federal land-use policies. The infamous Sagebrush Rebellion began in Nye County as an assertion that states rights should take precedence over federal mandates in resource management decisions. Participants in the focus group believed input from the local level regarding natural resource policy making was lacking. Hence, a need for more local interaction and input is desired. They stated that “residents need to be informed of policy formation with improved communication.” Local committees could be formed to bring information and answers to the table so as to resolve problems. They believe Cooperative Extension can act as a mediator for this process and as a resource for educating citizens on collaborative processes.

Noxious Weeds

Although noxious weeds such as Tall Whitetop and Russian Knapweed exist in Northern Nye County, infestations are small and isolated at present. Participants indicated noxious weeds in their county can be controlled, if not eradicated. “This can be achieved with community awareness of existing and potential invading noxious weeds. There is a need for easily accessible and understandable weed identification information and public education,” said one participant.

Conclusions

A needs assessment conducted in Northern Nye County sought input from agricultural producers concerning agricultural and natural resource issues. Individuals attending the session were asked questions relating to the strengths of the county’s agricultural and natural resource base, how their agriculture has evolved over the years, and how they envisioned their agricultural and natural resources in the future. They established goals and objectives to address the issues raised and developed a plan of action.

Based on the results of the focus group session, Northern Nye County’s agriculture and natural resource needs and issues are focused on sustainability. Producers desire sustainability by preserving their way of life and producing profitably and efficiently. They want to sustain their agricultural heritage by instilling their heritage within their youth and preserving their way of life by having a way to voice their view in natural resource decision making.

Opportunity exists for Nevada Cooperative Extension to respond to the identified needs. Potential publications and workshops can be designed to address marketing, profitability, noxious weed management, and public policy issue education. Research opportunities can be found in beef cow herd management, alternative crop production and irrigation practices.

References

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