WSU Extension changes with the times

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Years of recession-related state and county budget cuts have forced the Washington State University Extension to transform the way it serves the state's farmers and ranchers.

The result is a WSU Extension that looks far different today compared with a decade ago.

"County agents are a thing of the past," said Rich Koenig, director of WSU Extension and associate dean of the College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resource Sciences.

Instead of having generalists in each county, extension has become more focused. Fewer faculty members remain but they leverage their efforts by using the Internet. Other parts of extension such as 4-H remain in place, Koenig said.

Extension now concentrates on major crops such as small grains, tree fruit, vegetables and grapes, he said. "Personnel are now highly educated and accomplished faculty and specialists," he said.

Extension still supports forages, small fruits, small farms and other crops, but with less investment and fewer people, he said.

Extension employees also rely on technology — including an array of specialized websites — to deliver information and decision-making tools to help farmers make better, more timely decisions, Koenig said. "Decision-support tools represent a new frontier in extension programming, and we are investing heavily in their development."

The Web-based tools link real-time data from WSU's AgWeatherNet stations, commodity markets and the WSU Variety Testing Program to help farmers to predict disease and insect growth and forecast outbreaks, estimate wheat yields, calculate fertilizer rates, schedule irrigation and predict the potential for frost or cold damage, Koenig said.

MATTHEW WEAVER — Capital Press

Washington State University Extension director Rich Koenig stands outside Hulbert Hall on the WSU campus in Pullman, Wash., in this October 2013 file photo. WSU Extension has shifted from the classic organization of 10 years ago to one where extension personnel are highly trained specialists who use technology to convey information to growers, Koenig says.

Smaller staff

Today's WSU Extension Service has fewer employees. Before the recession hit in 2008, WSU Extension had 563 employees — 192 faculty members, 287 staff members and 74 students. Last year, extension had 8 percent fewer employees overall, with the largest reduction in faculty. The number of staff and students remained about the same, at 284 and 79, respectively.

"We have maintained staff and student positions, but have significantly fewer permanent faculty positions now than in 2009," Koenig said. This is a reflection of extension receiving more funds through grants for specific research projects.

In 2008, WSU Extension had a total budget of $55 million, including $15 million in state funding through WSU, $10 million from counties, $5 million in federal funding and $25 million in grants and other forms of revenue.

Six years later, the budget is larger but significantly different. Less money comes from the state and counties, but funding from grants and other forms of revenue has jumped nearly 50 percent.

Of extension's total $62 million 2014 budget, $12 million was state funding through WSU, $8 million was from the counties, $5 million was federal funding, and the remaining $37 million was grants and revenue, comprising 60 percent of the total budget.

Groups' investments

Koenig said extension is probably not entirely out of the woods financially, but he remains optimistic, as commodity groups such as wheat and tree fruit growers have increased their investments in extension and research.

Washington Grain Commission CEO Glen Squires said his organization gives funding directly to extension, but there are also extension components in a lot of other WSU research it funds.

Squires said there has a been a "tremendous, positive" response to the small grains work done by WSU professor and endowed chair Drew Lyon since the restructuring of extension. His work includes integrated weed management in dryland small grain production.

A few years ago, the Washington tree fruit industry gave a $32 million endowment to WSU, including $12 million to extension, $12 to research and $8 million to research and extension centers.

The Washington Tree Fruit Research Commission expects most research projects to also have an extension component, said manager Jim McFerson. Research and extension projects are often blended to have meaningful outcomes that impact the industry, he said.

"In the old days, extension was like a bullhorn blaring out how-to instructions to farmers, but that model doesn't work as well anymore," he said, citing the industry's shift to electronic and digital communication. "It doesn't take away the importance of the human interaction — it's not just about telling us what to do and how to do it better, it's about listening and figuring out what the most important problems are, where our resources are and how to bring those resources to bear on whatever the priority might be."

Farmers' reaction

Farmers have noted the differences.

"We don't have as much hand-holding as we did from extension, but they still are the conduit for information coming directly from the researchers," said Ron Jirava, a Ritzville, Wash., wheat farmer. "It's a good thing somebody invented cell phones, because that's pretty much the way I communicate with these guys now."

Extension provides a good channel for farmers who do not have established relationships with WSU breeders or researchers, Jirava said.

Extension is a valuable tool for farmers looking to change their practices and make the best decisions, said Tom Kammerzell, a Colfax, Wash., rancher.

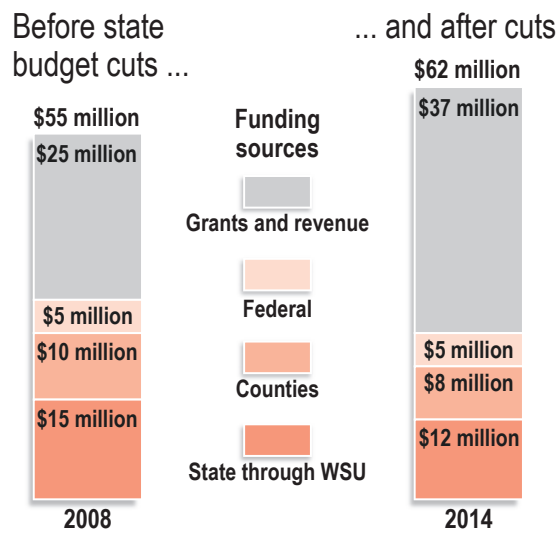
"Nobody wants to start out with a loss," Kammerzell said. "If you're trying to decide something that hasn't been done before, they can set it up so you have less of a chance of a failure."

Kammerzell has been working with WSU Extension to research riparian areas for livestock. Having extension involved as a third party makes the information more credible, he said.

Farmers can use technology to access research online, but that only goes so far, Kammerzell said. "Somebody in Ohio isn't going to give you the same valid information as somebody sitting in your own county."

WSU Extension funding changes

While total overall funding increased by more than 14 percent in 2014 compared to 2008, state and county funding fell nearly 17 percent. The shift in funding from more stable government sources to less reliable grant funds affects the way Extension is staffed.



Employee makeup: then and now

Employee type	2009	2014	Percent change
Faculty	192	155	-19.3%
Staff	287	284	-1%
Students	74	79	6.8%
Total	563	518	-8%

Source: Rich Koenig, WSU Extension director — Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

Extension: State funding for extension services dropped nearly 16 percent in 2010

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Advising the advisers

Behind the scenes, though, these private professionals often seek advice from extension specialists, West said. "The farmer doesn't see that interaction."

Disseminating information through private agronomists — as well as nonprofits and other entities — is a cost-effective way of keeping university researchers and extension agents relevant, said Scott Reed, director of the Oregon State University Extension Service.

"We don't have to do the work the certified crop advisers are doing, but we can help the CCAs be at the top of their game," Reed said.

Likewise, email and social media have made it easier for the Extension Service to communicate with farmers, he said. Growers can also get training through online learning modules instead of being instructed one-on-one.

"The more we focus on access rather than delivery, the more efficient we become," he said.

University representatives are careful to point out that "human interface" will always be part of the Extension Service, but some say the increased reliance on technology comes at a price.

"They no longer have the presence or people on-farm that they once had. That link has weakened," said Tom Peerbolt, who runs a crop consulting company for berry growers and works closely with extension.

The role of university researchers at agricultural experiment stations has also evolved as they have become more reliant on outside money for projects, he said.

More of the researchers' time is spent applying for grants, and the studies tend to be more high-level rather than applied on-farm research, Peerbolt said.

As farm companies have grown bigger and more vertically integrated, they have been investing in proprietary research, he said. Smaller growers, however, do not have this option.

"The larger companies are doing their own research. They're using knowledge as part of their corporate advantage," Peerbolt said.

Growers fund research

Growers, through their crop commissions, are being asked to fund a larger share of the work done by university researchers in recent years, paying not only for projects but also for salaries, said Mike Omeg, a cherry farmer near The Dalles and a Capital Press board member.

Robin Rosetta helped develop the new intelligent sprayer technology.

Courtesy of Oregon State University Extension Services

As growers become more responsible for basic funding, the university system begins to take on the role of a paid consultant, he said.

The question then becomes whether it might be less expensive to conduct research privately, as some cooperatives in Europe have done, Omeg said.

"It's definitely in the realm of reasonable possibilities," he said. "You lose some control when you hand the funds over."

Realistically, though, research and extension must diversify its funding base if it hopes to stay viable, according to university leaders.

Government funding shrinks

The Extension Service has traditionally been funded by the federal, state and county governments, said Sonny Ramaswamy, director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, which oversees and funds the system.

After the 2008 financial crisis and the recession that followed, states and counties slashed their budgets for extension, which forced the federal government to reduce its support, he said.

"If states aren't able to match those numbers, we will withhold our funds as well," Ramaswamy said.

In 2010, state funding for extension services dropped nearly 16 percent, from $977 million to $823 million, and has still not recovered, according to USDA figures. Since then, the federal contribution has decreased about 18 percent, from $567 million to $465 million.

Due to these cuts, as well as inflation and the increasing cost of health care and pensions, the total "footprint" of extension services across the U.S. has shrunk by one-third since the recession began, Ramaswamy said.

Financial pressures are likely to continue unless Congress and state legislatures begin directing more revenue toward the system, he said. "Absent that kind of recognition, farmers are going to have to bear a bigger part of the burden," he said.

The Heritage Foundation, a free-market think tank, argues that a thorough re-examination of university agricultural research is preferable to increased funding.

Universities should focus on studies that serve the public good but are not likely to be taken up by private researchers, said Daren Bakst, agricultural policy fellow at the foundation.

"There's likely a benefit to this research, and I don't think that's the problem. The question is whether or not the private sector would do it," he said.

Bakst said he is "less sympathetic" toward the Extension Service's role in disseminating information, as this function is more easily privatized.

"There is a clear way to provide a service to someone and make money doing it," he said.

Impartial research

While Bakst argues that farmers can best decide for themselves whose advice to trust, others say the great advantage of the extension service is its reputation for even-handedness.

University research and extension is unlikely to be displaced by private companies because growers see the public system as impartial, said West of the University of Tennessee.

"I think our role will always be to provide an unbiased source of information," he said.

Extension agents are well-positioned to guide farmers who are facing policy predicaments regarding species, water, air quality and pesticides, said Barbara Allen-Diaz, director of Cooperative Extension at the University of California.

"All of these types of issues, we have cooperative extension folks intimately involved in navigating the discourse," she said. "That's what a public university can bring to the table."

Particularly in the West, land grant universities serve niche regional crops that often are not lucrative enough for many agribusiness firms to pursue, said Ryan Davis, Northwest regional technology specialist with Wilbur Ellis, an input supplier whose agronomists commonly advise farmers.

"It's not something the private sector will jump on because it doesn't appear to have that big payoff," he said.

University faculty also conduct fundamental research that does not have an easy return on investment, he said.

For example, Wilbur Ellis employees are more likely to collect soil electroconductivity data for an individual farm, while the university system will draw correlations between that information and crop yields, Davis said.

"They do that baseline work and then we take it to the grower," he said.

Farmers benefit

In situations where the private and public sectors are rivals, that is often beneficial to farmers, said Jim Peterson, vice president of research at Limagrain Cereal Seeds, a crop breeding firm.

"Everyone needs to appreciate that competition is a good thing, especially with plant breeding," he said.

On the other hand, it is unproductive for university and private breeders to be overly duplicative of each other's efforts, so in some instances, they would best serve growers by joining forces, Peterson said. Limagrain, for example, is partnering with the University of Idaho on wheat breeding.

It makes sense for university researchers to concentrate on basic research that is more risky from the market perspective, such as studying basic genetics and biochemical pathways, he said.

"We don't want to run the public programs out, we want to work with them to bring the best product to market," Peterson said.

The university system already has facilities and scientists at multiple locations, so it is logical for private companies to use that "infrastructure" rather than build it themselves, said Paul McCawley, association director of extension at the University of Idaho.

"For them to replicate that would be far more expensive than for us to do it," he said.