



## **USDA-CSREES 2006 National Water Quality Conference**

### **Public Perception of the Threats to the Quality of Drinking Water in Rural North Carolina**

What can Extension educators do to increase the number of people who can have an active role in the decision-making process to keep their supply of drinking water safe from threats? The language and polarities used to frame answers to this question routinely draws Extension colleagues and water quality advocates into a quagmire. For example, they frequently end their discussions by labeling the less involved people with metaphors such as: 1) limited-resource; 2) nontraditional; 3) low-literate; 4) low-income or some other current “buzzword.” Thus, they usually form or embellish preconceived notions about these stakeholders. While it is critical to have a basic understanding of the values and behavior patterns of these individuals, there is a danger of over generalizing and stereotyping their lack of involvement.

While Extension educators often claim that their education resources are research-based – this may not always be true! In some instances, a top-down or one-way approach is used to produce resources. For example, a large amount of assessment data comes from informal county scans. The scans may not always reflect complete county needs and demographical concerns. A myriad of data is collected using non-scientific methods. Subsequently, educators use a combination of the data to design and develop train-the-trainer resources.

Our session will highlight early findings from an exploratory study designed to create baseline data for increasing public awareness, knowledge, and behavioral change. Evidence is gathered from key questions. For instance, what do people already know about threats to their drinking water? What do they want to know about those threats? And, in what format do they want to receive new information? Also, this study reveals how a traditional gap between research, teaching and Extension faculty from two collaborating Universities was bridged to conduct this integrated project.

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