



USDA-CSREES 2007 National Water Quality Conference

[The Changing Role of Extension Specialists in Watershed Planning](#)

Agricultural Extension has generally played a vital role in assisting producers with information on best management practices and researched based information to improve the bottom line of profitability. But when looking at the larger watershed community and environmental concerns affecting the area, many Ag Extension specialists are being forced to review their role within the watershed community. Environmental issues that transcend property lines and affect the larger population are becoming a major player in rural decision making when agriculture is identified as a key component to environmental health. The Ag Extension specialist needs to move from an area of resource expertise with agriculture into the role of resource person as facilitator for the larger community doing watershed planning for environmental protection. To meet these changing roles, the Ag Extension agent must now become a community facilitator that can handle meeting management, conflict, and provide stability and assistance as the community addresses environmental issues in the watershed. As the “un-bias facilitator”, the Extension agent’s role includes bringing together the different groups of producers, citizens and other “voices” that are stakeholders in the watershed. The role includes helping them identify their overall goals for the watershed, and allowing each group to have input in the process of identifying possible solutions that are environmentally sound, economically viable and socially acceptable. The process is time consuming but builds local community support, acceptance and capacity for decision making. The role of facilitator in bringing the group together may be the most critical role that Extension agents can perform. By changing roles, the Extension agent can help the local watershed community in keeping agriculture as a strong economic base while responding to environmental concerns and building local leadership and capacity within area residents.

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