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Regional Conservation Professional Training Program - Lessons Learned from Implementing a Multi-state Effort

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Abstract:

The Great Lakes Regional Conservation Professional Training program is a six state project that provides both base level training for Conservation Advisors (Soil and Water Conservation Districts/partner agencies, private sector consultants (TSPs, CCAs), Extension) and advanced technical targeted training in specialized areas such as pest management, comprehensive nutrient management planning, forestry etc. It is led by Land Grant university Extension systems in Great Lakes Region states and is developed and supported by a core leadership team. This presentation will discuss two successful strategies and the lessons learned from building a multi-state project with different interest levels, capacities, and agency relationships with Extension in each state.

The multi-state phase of this project was initiated by the Great Lakes Regional Water Leadership Team, after a successful Wisconsin pilot. Interest and willingness to participate has been developed within states as the project evolves. Several different approaches were tried, but two have the greatest impact. The first was to create or re-invigorate state-level training coordination teams among Extension; federal, state and local conservation agencies; NGOs; and private sector consultants. Membership ranges from 6 to 24 members, and each group was challenged to create a 'Training Matrix' which cataloged existing training for their state and who was responsible. The second was the combination of a regional training needs assessment, regional round table meeting (face to face) and subsequent development of working groups that were identified as priority areas for the development of a regional organizational framework.

Impact Statement:

One of the keys to creating a successful multi-state initiative is the early identification of the motivating factors of each of the partners. In this project, those factors included:

- Increasing workload that decreased staff time available to conduct training
- Documentation of duplicative training efforts in neighboring states
- Realization that new employees lacked the agricultural connection of previous employees
- Understanding that the private sector will play an increasing role in conservation adoption.

To meet these concerns, several partner states created or re-invigorated in-state interagency training groups. These networks draw on in-state information and expertise while building diverse partnerships among agencies and state organizations. The primary partners include:

Extension/Land Grant Universities, NRCS, state regulatory agencies and departments of agriculture, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and private consultants. Partnerships have effectively leveraged resources and funding. Two examples are:

- Minnesota's training partnership which received significant funding from the state's Clean Water Legacy Fund to implement conservation training focused on improving TMDL and impaired watersheds.
- Wisconsin NRCS has provided training dollars and support to help develop training on emerging issues (bio-energy, native pollinators and invasive species) and to assist in the regional training initiative.

Another successful approach focused on a regional needs assessment and face to face 'Round Table' that brought agencies and partners together from multiple states to share information and create a unified vision of training. This meeting accelerated the project's implementation and created a clear vision as the foundation for future training initiatives.

Across the region, the steering committee has facilitated curriculum sharing on various training programs that allows each state to adapt the training to their own needs while reducing duplication and wasted curriculum development time.

- CNMP (Michigan led Tri-state, Minnesota, Wisconsin)
- Conservation Planning (Minnesota, Wisconsin)

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