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### PERSPECTIVES FROM USDA-APHIS-ANIMAL DAMAGE CONTROL

Bobby R. Acord  
*USDA APHIS-ADC*

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# Panel—What are Cooperators' and Customers' Expectations of Extension Wildlife and Fisheries Programs, and What are the Future Opportunities?

## PERSPECTIVES FROM USDA-APHIS-ANIMAL DAMAGE CONTROL

BOBBY R. ACORD, Deputy Administrator, USDA APHIS-ADC, Ag Box 3402, Washington, D.C. 20250-4302

I am pleased that you have asked me to be part of this panel. The ADC program depends a great deal on Extension Wildlife and Fisheries Programs, and your success is very important to us. Thus, I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss ADC's expectations and share our thoughts about the future. I should also point out that we in ADC are honored that you view us as a customer. Based on our experience, if you don't have a customer service focus, there is no future to worry about.

To establish a context for my discussion, I want to review some of our current efforts in the Animal Damage Control (ADC) program and relate them to what I believe are the future opportunities for extension wildlife and fisheries programs. You should view each of these efforts in ADC also as applicable to extension programs.

ADC developed a bad habit of being too short range in program planning. Our actions were focused on immediate results, and we made no attempt to create opportunities for the future. Over the past 4 years, we have been involved in strategic planning. More importantly, we have tried to create among our employees a culture of thinking and acting strategically. We wanted our employees and leaders to be proactive rather than reactive, to look at each activity from all points of view, and to look for opportunities beyond what is immediately obvious.

Our first strategic effort was to broaden our customer base. We had largely ignored the changes in agriculture, the growing concern over wildlife impacts on public health and safety, and the increasing demand for our assistance in conservation of other natural resources. Over the years, we had been focused too narrowly on livestock protection.

The second phase of our new strategic direction was to develop a communications plan. We needed to take a more proactive approach in public communications and focus more attention on the media. We developed materials such as fact sheets, videos, and posters to get our message out. This effort ultimately led to a public affairs campaign entitled, "Living With Wildlife."

In the third phase, we committed ourselves to exemplary customer service. A customer satisfaction survey was completed for customers of our direct control program and technical assistance. The results were shockingly high for both categories. Any private enterprise

engaged in service delivery would be envious of our numbers. The results certainly were not reflective of the antigovernment rhetoric reported in the media. Maintaining and improving on our customer satisfaction will be a difficult challenge. However, the customer feedback has been a real motivator for our employees, and they appear to be committed to doing an even better job.

It was also apparent that other kinds of information would be needed for strategic decision making. Focus group meetings were held with constituent and stakeholder organizations to learn more about their expectations. These meetings included organizations such as the American Sheep Industry, The Wildlife Society, the Humane Society of the United States, and the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. We wanted to know if there was any common ground and how perceptions about our program might be improved. Finally, it was important to understand the public's attitude about wildlife damage through an unbiased survey. The Berryman Institute at Utah State was contracted to conduct such a survey. While we aren't trying to manage by public opinion, it is important to understand how the public feels so we may know where to expect adverse reaction to our activities.

In summary, our focus has been on strategic planning, communications, customer service, and gathering information about others' perception of our program. I hasten to point out that this is an overly simplified review of all these efforts.

Throughout this process of reshaping the future of ADC, we have considered the Wildlife and Fisheries extension specialists to be our partners. Many of you have provided advice, participated in our focus groups, and demonstrated your support in countless ways. Perhaps the most important contribution is what the extension programs do best; you have helped us get the information out!

What are ADC's expectations for Wildlife and Fisheries Programs and extension specialists? Ideally, more of the same! We have cooperative arrangements with 31 extension service programs throughout the country. More importantly, ADC and extension have had very close working relationships over the years—relationships which I believe continue to strengthen both programs. While we

have been a repository of technical information about wildlife damage management, we have not always been able to disseminate that information with efficiency. On the other hand, extension has always had the communications network necessary to reach large audiences. Together, we have been able to develop educational tools to provide necessary information to those clients and customers which we both serve.

To illustrate my point, I polled our State Directors to seek their input for my remarks to this group. Their biggest concern was the loss of extension wildlife positions and what they see as a gradual erosion of extension capability. Frankly, I had the feeling they had lost a member of their own staff, a person they could work closely with, rely on, and trust. That is good news in terms of our cooperative efforts and signifies a healthy relationship between our agencies. It also indicates that we share equally in your future.

The current climate of downsizing, streamlining, and efficiency in service delivery should be a catalyst for greater cooperation between our programs. There is an absolute guarantee that there is more work than we can individually handle due to the increasing incidence and diversity of wildlife damage problems. Working together, we have a better chance of meeting our customers' needs. So, in the short term, I would challenge this group and the employees of ADC to revisit our cooperative arrangements in each State. A fresh look frequently produces new ideas.

Looking at the future can give one a simultaneous sense of panic and optimism. I think the biggest challenge to the future of extension programs is overcoming your own success. There is a perception among some policymakers, and especially budget cutters, that the mission has been accomplished. In many respects, we can say that the mission is accomplished if we use abundance and diversity of wildlife species as a measure. This success can be attributed to the traditional wildlife and fisheries management programs for which you can claim a large share of the credit. The budget cutters theorize that your customer base now is sophisticated enough to be serviced through technology in information systems, and people can be replaced. I strongly disagree!

In my view, the need for extension wildlife and fisheries programs and specialists is greater than it has ever been. Extension programs have been successful purveyors of objective, scientific information to those traditional users such as landowners, states, and rural publics. And, as mentioned earlier, wildlife populations, our environment, and ultimately the public have been the beneficiaries.

There are increasing numbers of organizations which are also successful purveyors of information. Members of these organizations are passionate, hard-working, and committed to getting their message out. However, their information is philosophical and emotional, antimanagement, and based on what I would term "unnatural" science. Their peer review process is based on different standards than those of the scientific community

which supports extension wildlife programs. Their refereed journals are frequently their own magazines or the media.

Are extension wildlife and fisheries programs in competition with these organizations? The answer is definitely yes; we all are! Just consider for a moment the ecological consequences of who wins this competition.

What does this suggest about future opportunities for Extension Wildlife and Fisheries Programs? First, there must be a redefinition of your customer base. The urban audience presents the greatest future opportunity and also has the most serious need for information and education programs in the natural resources arena. I believe the demographic changes in the United States have produced the largest factual information deficit we have ever had in this country in the public's understanding of natural resource issues and particularly wildlife.

The consequences of allowing this to continue are rather severe. Even though the public is not well informed, they are taking an increasing interest in natural resource and environmental issues. They are voting on referenda that set policies for wildlife management and electing politicians who share their beliefs and values. The natural resource decision makers such as members of Congress and policy officials at the federal and state level are increasingly from urban backgrounds. They haven't had the same exposure to natural resources as did their predecessors.

Given the extension programs' success with traditional audiences, I can't think of any organization better equipped to address what, in my view, is our most serious challenge to effective natural resource management. One approach to this problem is for extension programs to become an active consultant to the state, county, and municipal school systems. You should review curricula, text books, and teaching methods to make sure they are based on sound, objective science. The most significant opportunity we have to influence future generations is to teach the teachers! Other methods for interacting with large segments of the urban public must be devised. We need to think outside the box! The communications technology of today provides another great opportunity, but someone has to be the originator. Extension programs are ideally qualified to take on this task.

I would also suggest that you market extension programs more aggressively to the nontraditional customers. The demand for your programs is out there, but many who would be customers don't know you.

We also need to make the case more strongly that the need for extension programs has shifted from rural to urban audiences and that the need has reached the critical level.

Finally, I would suggest you become more involved in strategic planning and the culture of strategic thinking. It has worked for us in ADC, and I think it can pay dividends for you as well.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here and share my views from a customer's perspective.

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