For the Good of All

Extension Agent, Producers Work Together to Plan Local Programs

WASHINGTON, Kan. – Not long after starting her job with K-State Research and Extension’s River Valley District in 2010, livestock agent Robin Slattery figured her first move was to get to know the area’s farmers and ranchers.

Turns out, they’ve become a driving force in just about everything Slattery has done since then.

“I was new to the extension system and actually new to Kansas,” Slattery said, “so by forming a livestock program development committee (PDC), I was able to get a group of producers that could help me assess the needs of the area, get familiar with the area and let me know what problems or issues they would be facing.

“The PDC then helped me gather ideas for what type of programs that we should offer, continuing education and issues that popped up during the year.”

The idea of a committee to develop extension programs is common in every Kansas county, but as a district agent specializing in livestock issues, Slattery was able to form a group to talk about that one topic.

“When we were a county [extension] office, we were lucky to have two agents” with general responsibilities, said JR Roop, a cattleman in Washington. "We had two good agents, [but] in the winter we might have one meeting that was focused on livestock.

“With one livestock agent in our district, we have a lot more emphasis on [livestock issues] and can offer more programs and meetings.”

Slattery’s committee has at least four producers from each of the River Valley’s four counties (Clay, Cloud, Republic and Washington). The group meets each Fall, but she is active with the group throughout the year. The district has numerous cow-calf producers, but Slattery also works with dairy and hog producers.

“By having my PDC members as farmers and ranchers that are out there every day working in the fields, working with their cattle, it’s a way to know exactly what’s going on and making sure that what we are doing meets the needs of what they are facing,” Slattery said.

And meet those needs more often, she adds.

“I feel like if I was in a county agent role, a general agriculture role, I would not be able to offer so many livestock programs as I do here,” Slattery said.

“Last year (2011), we had five different winter programs ranging from cow nutrition to human resources, diseases in cattle, advancements in cattle genetics and
prescribed burning – all focused for livestock.”

In just a couple years, Slattery already has her success stories. In 2012, about 50 producers attended a meeting to discuss how testing forage and balancing rations can help producers economically provide for their cows through the winter.

The success of that meeting, she said, went beyond those who attended; throughout the following year, several more producers brought forage samples to the local extension office and worked with Slattery to balance rations.

“At the nutrition meeting last winter,” Roop said, “one of the things brought up was that soybean meal at the time was a lot cheaper than corn gluten pellets per pound of protein. I switched, and I think that saved me several hundred dollars right there. Little things like that, probably not everyone is aware, can catch your attention and save you some money.”

Roop added that the information he gets from extension is better when agents are able to specialize.

“You know, you are bombarded with information today,” he said. “You have the Internet, radio, television, newspaper...whatever you want. But often it’s trying to figure out the right question to ask when you have a problem. Having a specialist in each of the areas I think makes that simpler.”

Slattery just simply appreciates that she can help more people.

The local committee “helps me as far as making sure I have successful and well-received programs here in the district,” she said.