The Role of Forestry Extension in Iowa

Ames Forestry Club

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The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal education organization in the world. For more than 70 years, extension has been a strong and dynamic force in agriculture, home economics, natural resources, and community development. The unique tri-level partnership between federal, state, and local governments has proven effective and efficient and has provided the flexibility to adjust to new and additional educational directions. Extension transmits practical, reliable information from universities and research centers on a variety of subjects designed to help people identify and solve problems. More than 3,000 extension offices throughout the nation make up a vast network for extending knowledge to all Americans.

Extension programs in forestry actually predate the formal establishment of the Cooperative Extension Service. Michigan began a forestry program in 1911. The first Extension Foresters were hired in 1918, and specific responsibility for forestry programs was given to Cooperative Extension in 1924. Currently, all but eight states have a forestry extension program. The level of staffing and type of programming obviously relate to the importance of the forest resource in the state, and specific activities are determined by the program priorities established in each situation. But even in states with minimal forest resources and primary focus on production agriculture, tree resources are generally acknowledged as important and beneficial.

Iowa woodlands and plantations grow high quality sawlogs and veneer logs, serve as essential habitat for a variety of wildlife species, protect steep slopes and waterways from erosion, produce firewood for home heating and crop drying, beautify the landscape of the state, provide sites for satisfying recreational experiences, and produce specialty crops such as Christmas trees, maple syrup, and ginseng.

But the primary focus of most rural landowners in Iowa is obviously on production agriculture. Although many people recognize the importance and benefits of trees and woodlands, other individuals in this agricultural state are not fully convinced that tree resources have any real value. Even those landowners who accept woodlands as desirable, often do not fully appreciate the multiple benefits derived from trees and may not be knowledgeable about proper techniques for managing woodlands.

At time of settlement, Iowa had an estimated 6.7 million acres of forests representing about 19 percent of the land area. But forest land was rapidly cleared by early settlers, and by the late 1800's less than three million acres remained. A U.S. Forest Service survey in 1954 showed 2.4 million acres of woodland. Land clearing and shifts to alternate uses dramatically reduced woodland acreage between 1954 and 1974; almost a million acres of woodland were lost during that 20 year period. Today less than four percent of Iowa is forested.

The quality of Iowa woodlands is also relatively low and needs to be improved. The most recent U.S. Forest Service survey (1974) showed that most of the forest land in the state is poorly stocked with trees, tree quality is low, timber is being removed faster than it is being grown, and most woodlands are producing only about half of the land potential. Nearly 50 percent of the forested acres are grazed to some extent, and one quarter is so heavily grazed that no young trees are present to continue the tree cover. Many woodland areas cleared for other uses have experienced excessive erosion and have not proven suitable for long-term production of row crops. The relatively small area covered by forest in Iowa would not be a great concern if the cleared land was put to its "best" use. Unfortunately, the improper removal of forest in the past and the poor condition of the residual woodlands provide a formidable challenge to university and state forestry specialists.

Specific recommendations to guide Iowans in the management of the state's woodland resources were developed in 1985, under the leadership of State Forester Gene Hertel. This "Iowa Forest Resource Plan" identified eight goals: 1) develop and implement an official forest policy for Iowa; 2) increase public awareness of the economic and social contributions of woodlands; 3) maintain a viable wood industry; 4) keep damage by wildfire, insects, and disease at acceptable levels; 5) establish forest cover on erodible lands; 6) accomplish the highest level of management of all woodlands and urban forests consistent with benefits; 7) provide appropriate publicly owned forests; and 8) conduct pertinent research on the management, protection, and utilization of forests.

The basic mission of Forestry Extension at Iowa State University is to improve and expand tree
resources in the state through educational programs. Two professional extension foresters are on staff to accomplish this mission: Paul Wray has specific skills and training in utilization, marketing, and proper use of wood. Primary clientele for forestry extension programs include private landowners, public land managers, teachers, youth, and homeowners.

A variety of educational methods and techniques are used to disseminate information and educate extension clients. During a typical program year, forestry extension will be involved in 15 Forestry Field Days, 8 windbreak schools, 15 conservation education workshops, and 20 other conferences and meetings. The WOODLAND OWNERS NEWSLETTER will be distributed to over 13,000 clients twice each year. Over 900 individual requests for information will be handled; an estimated 8,000 extension pamphlets and notes will be distributed. Twenty radio or TV programs will be presented, and over 30 news releases will be written.

One key characteristic of the forestry extension program in Iowa is cooperation with other organizations and groups. Two professionals just cannot do the entire job. Forestry extension professionals can provide leadership, but cooperation with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, the Soil Conservation Service, county and area extension offices, county conservation boards, the Iowa Tree Farm Committee, and other organizations is essential to generate significant, positive impact from most educational programs.

Forestry extension professionals in an agricultural state like Iowa must also recognize opportunities and "teachable moments" and be prepared to respond rapidly to meet educational needs. For example, when the energy crunch developed during the 1970's, interest in using wood as a home heating fuel dramatically increased. Forestry extension developed support materials and delivered a large number of educational meetings over a several-year period focused on improving woodlands by harvesting fuelwood and on safe efficient burning of wood. Another opportunity, this time for encouraging tree planting, was recently presented when the federal government implemented the Conservation Reserve Program. Forestry extension was an active cooper-ator in this endeavor designed to remove highly erodible land from row crop production and to establish permanent cover on these fragile acres.

Educational programs for teachers and youth have also been an important part of the forestry extension effort for many years. For example, as part of her graduate study, Reinee Hildebrandt, forestry extension assistant, recently developed an instructional package on woodland management for Iowa high school vocational agriculture instructors. The topics for the six complete instructional units were: Trees for Schools, Introduction to Woodland Management, Christmas Tree Production and Marketing, Wood as Energy, Managing Woodlands for Sawlog and Veneer Production, and Reforesting Iowa (Establishment and Care of Tree Plantations). Bringing such information to the youth of our state should help develop a better appreciation of tree resources by future Iowa adults.

Another recent effort focused on youth education involved active participation on the Governor's Arbor Day Committee. Forestry extension provided leadership for a major program of this multi-agency committee entitled "Trees for Schools" program. Educational efforts were focused on high schools in the state; the objectives were to promote resource conservation, to provide unique opportunities for learning experiences, and to enhance the beauty and utility of school grounds through plantings of trees and shrubs.

A portion of the woodland resource in Iowa includes the urban or community forests. Forestry extension through the development and implementation of the "Community Tree Program" has assisted over 40 communities in more effectively managing their tree resources. Services provided have included assistance in the development of goals and objectives, inventory of the existing trees, and development of planting and maintenance programs to achieve the community's objectives.

Proper use of wood in structures is necessary to more efficiently utilize the forest resource and to enhance wood's image as a modern construction material. Forestry has cooperated with other extension specialists at Iowa State in providing educational opportunities for builders and materials suppliers who are active in constructing houses and other structures. Forestry extension has developed a large number of support materials and has provided instruction on the proper use of wood to promote structural stability, durability, energy-efficiency, and low maintenance at various conferences and short courses during the past several years. Educational programs have also been provided to homeowners; topics have included energy improvements, home maintenance, and reducing moisture problems.

During 1986 and 1987, forestry extension cooperated with the Forestry Division, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, to stimulate the formation of the new Iowa Woodland Owners Association. This organization of private woodland owners in the state already has over 300 members and should stimulate renewed efforts to promote tree planting and improved timber management. Excellent opportunities exist for cooperation between this new group and forestry extension to improve the image of forestry in Iowa and to promote improved woodland management.

Educational programs should periodically be evaluated by clients to determine benefits derived, actions generated, and economic values realized. Mail surveys of those attending Forestry Field Days
were conducted during 1985 and during 1987. The results clearly showed that the majority of those responding received major benefits and implemented specific actions to improve their woodlands. In addition, respondents to the 1985 survey estimated that the average dollar value per person for attending one or more of these field days was about $500; in 1987, the average value per woodland owner increased to over $1,000. These Forestry Field Days programs are conducted in cooperation with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources; this arrangement is very beneficial since the education can be followed by field assistance. Interest in these programs continues to be strong after 12 years; efforts will be made to increase the number and diversity of such programs in the years ahead.

The Iowa Cooperative Extension Service recently completed an in-depth, grass-roots planning effort to identify priority programs for the next four years (1988-1991). Forestry extension will focus most of its efforts and resources on a major program entitled "Natural Resource Management." Forestry will be working with allied extension units, state and federal agencies, and other interested organizations to achieve very specific target goals: plant 15,000 acres of land to trees each year; establish at least 200 windbreaks each year; improve woodland management on the property of at least 400 landowners each year; increase membership in the new Iowa Woodland Owners Association by 400 per year; and enroll at least five new schools in the Trees for Schools program each year.

The Cooperative Extension Service has been described as an agency for change and a catalyst for individual and group action. Forestry extension is working to reduce the diminution and degradation of the forest resource in Iowa. Careful attention is given to assessing primary educational needs in the state. Every effort is made to increase the impact of a small professional staff by constructive cooperation with other organizations. We believe that a focused forestry educational program and the grass-roots delivery system characteristic of the extension organization can make a real difference in expanding and improving tree resource in an agricultural state like Iowa.