

## Finding new ways to serve communities during the COVID-19 pandemic

*The heart of land-grant universities and Extension is teaching. When required to be socially distant from students, farmers, 4-H'ers and communities, educators found innovative, safe ways to continue providing much-needed information.*

### Here are a few examples of that work:

- When faced with the inability to host in-person events, many educational agricultural field days became virtual. Live online meetings and webinars promote communication and education, despite location. These events allow participation on a variety of devices and can easily serve producers in rural areas, even those lacking an internet connection. In **Louisiana**, the Beef Brunch Educational Series was initially designed to maintain engagement with beef cattle producers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This series will continue beyond the pandemic. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency office requested more information for future webinars, and a similar request came from high school agricultural science teachers for their professional development. Increased views of both the webinars and news updates, positive feedback and requests for more information illustrate an interest in continuing the Beef Brunch Educational Series past the COVID-19 pandemic. Optimistically, this series can develop into a leading informational source for beef cattle producers in Louisiana.
- Extension agents in **Tennessee** adapted to a new work-from-home routine with limited office hours and greater technology use to meet local needs. One team used Zoom, YouTube and Facebook to continue delivering timely information. A lunch series held twice each week and is recorded and posted to YouTube where anyone can watch them at any time. A similar series on the **Georgia** coast showed one Extension agent that virtual presentations can reach a much larger audience with the same effort. Virtual sessions routinely had over 170 participants compared to an average of 20 for sessions in person. Behavior changes shared by participants included beginning to compost waste, reduction or elimination of pesticide use, adding habitat needs for wildlife and pollinators to the landscape, creating a hurricane preparedness kit, sharing information learned with others, utilizing IPM strategies, removing invasive

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## COVID-19 Impacts

plants from the landscape, greater appreciation of and more time spent in natural areas and adding native plants to the landscape.

- In **Georgia**, educators were looking for ways to earn continuing education credits during the summer without in-person options. An Extension webinar symposium focused on fruit plants in the school garden, seed saving, vermiculture in the school garden and the Great Georgia Pollinator Census. For each topic an at-home activity allowed the teachers to expand what they learned during the webinar and to have something tangible to take back to the classroom. More than 300 participants from Alabama, Georgia, Texas, Alabama, Virginia, South Carolina, and California and the Philippines attended the symposium.
- Farmers, ranchers and other agricultural producers, as well as commercial and non-commercial pesticide applicators, need to maintain their pesticide licenses to have access to pesticides critical to their commodities and jobs. In Arkansas, close to 6,000 applicators are recertified each year through Extension trainings. The COVID-19 outbreak caused an immediate cessation of the face-to-face meetings. Even though Extension was able to conduct numerous face-to-face recertification meetings in the fall and winter of 2019-2020, many applicators still needed recertification. Within five days in mid-March, Arkansas Extension established online fee-based training that helped 879 private applicators and 105 commercial/non-commercial applicators gain recertification. An additional 900 applicators completed the online training for using the herbicides dicamba and Enlist Duo (2,4-D) as required by state regulations. Similar trainings were also successfully provided in **Kentucky**. As a result of the transition to virtual learning in **Tennessee**, pesticide applicators from Tennessee, Kentucky and Alabama logged in and participated in the Correct and Accurate Pesticide Use training saving a total value to participants over \$66,000.
- Across the nation, 4-H programs were struggling to meet the needs of participants – many of whom don't have reliable access to internet. In **Georgia**, that expanded to schools as well to participate in residential environmental education programs through Extension. Since the COVID-19 outbreak closed school buildings beginning in mid-March, portions of the Georgia 4-H Environmental Education Program were shifted to a virtual format. The lessons covered a range of topics such as herpetology, entomology and beach or stream ecology. They also highlighted specific area interests including historic landmarks, salt marshes, tidal creeks, natural history museums and species exhibits. With the release of eight of the 10 summer programs and the continued growth of the original series, the program reached more than 217,900 viewers. 4-H can bring learning to life for thousands of Georgians through virtual environmental education classes, helping them understand and appreciate the natural world while stuck indoors because of COVID-19.
- Each year, an Extension specialist in **Oregon** leads groups on hikes in the Rogue Valley to teach them about natural history, fire safety, healthy streams, identifying plants and more. With the pandemic shutdown, she recorded two wildflower walks and posted them to YouTube. The video has been viewed 269 times. A video of a hike in the East Applegate Ridge trail (also called East Art) has been viewed 417 times. Not only did these video segments provide interesting, educational information, quarantined viewers reported relief at feeling they were out in nature again.
- Prior to 2020, **Oregon** Sea Grant Extension's Shop at the Dock program provided economic benefits to coastal communities and marine businesses. It also increased residents' and tourists' knowledge about and access to seafood. When the popular program was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic, an Extension fisheries management specialist created 10 videos that have proved popular on social media, gaining thousands of views.