Harford County, located in north central Maryland, is largely a suburban county but still retains a significant and thriving agricultural industry with 75,000 acres (27%) of the county’s land area devoted to farming. Population and development in the county have increased over the past decade, however, which has created many obvious pressures for the industry. Harford County’s agricultural producers need access to unbiased information to help them adapt to the changing face of the county.

University of Maryland Extension (UME), in its land grant mission, is tasked with providing outreach education to the farming population of the counties within Maryland. In 2012, UME faculty conducted a needs assessment of Harford County’s agricultural clientele to determine the educational needs of the population. Highlights of the survey are outlined here and are being used to guide UME faculty in developing effective educational events and resources.

Survey Technique
A seven-page written survey instrument was developed to collect information regarding the scope of agricultural enterprises operated by respondents. Respondents were also polled on their preferences for resource materials and educational events. The survey and all supporting documents were reviewed and approved by the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board.

The survey was sent to all addresses subscribed to Harford County Extension’s agricultural mailing list (n=499). Materials, as described below, were sent either via postal mail or e-mail, depending on the subscription preference of the addressee. A multiple mailing technique was used in order to maximize the response rate. Participants were first sent a letter explaining the purpose of the survey and informing them that they would be receiving the survey. One week later, participants were sent a cover letter and the survey instrument. Postal mail recipients received a hard copy of the survey and a stamped, return envelope. E-mail recipients received a link to complete the survey online. A reminder was sent to non-respondents two weeks after the initial mailing.

Data was collected during July and August 2012. Forty seven percent of the recipients completed the survey.

Survey Results
Who responded to the survey?
- Of the respondents, 77% were over the age of 50; 33% of respondents were over the age of 65.
- 75% of respondents were male.
- 99% of respondents were Caucasian.
- Respondents represented a variety of education levels. 72% of respondents had attended at least some college and 49% had a college degree.
- 85% of respondents had Internet access at home and 83% were using e-mail.

Conclusions: Respondents to this survey were primarily older white males. This mirrors the
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demographic of Harford County’s farming population but also underscores the fact that fewer young people are working in agriculture. As older clientele retire from agriculture, Extension needs to seek out new clients and must ensure that resources and programs meet the needs of this new generation. Strategies needed to reach these new clients will not necessarily align with the best practices implied by the results of this survey. It is also noteworthy that despite the fact that many clients are of an older generation, most respondents have Internet access at home and are using e-mail.

What types of farms and businesses are represented by those who responded?

- Of the respondents, 68% were operating a farm business intended to produce profits. 42% of these also worked off the farm. Of those who also worked off the farm, 27% held an off-farm job that was related to agriculture.
- 11% of those who operated a farm business hosted agri-tourism or special events for the public on their farms.
- 60% of those who operated a farm business sold products produced on the farm directly to consumers.
- 71% of respondents (156 out of 219) raised livestock. Of those raising livestock, 58 raised equines (horses, donkeys, and/or mules), 55 raised beef, 30 raised poultry, 17 raised dairy animals (lactating cows, dry cows, replacements, and/or heifers), 15 raised goats, and 14 raised bees. Of the number of livestock raised by respondents, 55% were game birds, 22% were poultry, 11% were dairy animals, 7% were beef, 1.5% were equines, and 1.5% were sheep. Respondents also reported raising swine, goats, and rabbits to a lesser extent.
- 76% of respondents (166 out of 219) grew crops. Of those growing crops, 86 grew pasture and forage crops, 64 grew field crops for cash sale, and 61 grew field crops to support livestock. Of the number of acres of crops grown by respondents, 59% were field crops for cash sale, 20% were field crops to support livestock, and 17% were pasture and forage crops. Respondents also reported growing vegetables, fruit trees, nursery/greenhouse, and Christmas trees to a lesser extent.

Conclusions: The majority of clientele are farming for profit, but a significant percentage of farm operators supplement their farming income with off-farm jobs. More than half of producers are involved in direct marketing so assistance in this area would be widely applicable. Distribution of producers raising livestock and growing crops was fairly even. Most crop producers are growing either forage and pasture crops or field crops; therefore programs should be focused in these areas. Livestock programs should focus on equines, beef, poultry, and dairy, as these species represent the greatest number of livestock producers surveyed and also the greatest proportion of animals raised.

What educational resources do respondents utilize, and how have they utilized Extension in the past?

- Roughly half of respondents had accessed UME publications, interacted with UME faculty, or attended an educational event sponsored by UME in the previous 12 months. Only one in three people had accessed the UME website in the past 12 months.
- Most respondents had a favorable impression of UME. More than 85% of respondents believed that UME has an effective agricultural education program and an excellent reputation in the community. 86% responded that they were likely to go to UME if they had a question or problem on their farm.
- 70% of respondents typically attend at least one educational program about farming per year. Of these, 63% typically attend at least two programs per year. Of the 149 respondents who had attended educational programs about farming in the previous 12 months, 25% had attended UME programs. Respondents also
attended programs hosted by Maryland Department of Agriculture (15%), agri-service providers (14%), Farm Bureau (8%), and private businesses or farms (8%).

**Conclusions:** UME has a positive reputation within the community of agricultural Extension clientele, and respondents indicated that they would go to UME for assistance with a question or problem. However, only about half of respondents had accessed UME resources in the previous 12 months. It’s possible that respondents view UME as a resource for questions but don’t actively seek resources otherwise. Almost three-quarters of respondents attend educational programs, and more than half of those attend more than one program per year. While resources are widely accessed, more respondents attend programs so efforts should focus on program development over resource development.

**What are respondents’ preferences for programming and receiving resources?**

- The most preferred method for receiving resources was by newsletter with 80% of respondents utilizing information delivered via this method. Other popular methods included via the Internet (utilized by 47%), and farming newspapers (utilized by 46%). The most preferred method of notification of upcoming Extension programs was via newsletter (selected by 71%), followed by e-mail (selected by 56%), and farming newspapers (selected by 24%). Only 6% of respondents indicated that they prefer to hear about upcoming programs via website postings or social media.

- In terms of scheduling of programs, respondents were most likely to attend a weekday evening program, followed by a weekday daytime program or an online course. Respondents were least likely to attend a daytime webinar or an all day weekend program. Respondents were most likely to attend programs in January, February, and March and least likely to attend programs during summer and fall months.

- In terms of type of program format, respondents were most likely to attend a demonstration workshop or field day/barn meeting. Respondents were least likely to attend a round table discussion.

- The majority of respondents (38%) were willing to travel to a neighboring county for educational programming. 35% were willing to travel only to programs within Harford County.

**Conclusions:** Newsletters were overwhelmingly selected as the preferred method for respondents to receive resources and notification of upcoming programs. While website postings and social media were not highly preferred, they may be useful platforms for reaching new, younger clients who did not respond to this survey. Availability to attend programs reflects the seasonality of farming: respondents are most likely to attend in winter months. There is also a strong preference for hands-on program formats and programs in Harford or a neighboring county. Scheduling preferences were varied, but weekday programs, both daytime and evening, were generally preferred.

**Response-Driven Changes to Programming**

*Publication of newsletters will continue.* Due to the overwhelming positive responses regarding newsletters, the Harford County “Ag Notes” newsletter will continue to be published monthly and will include notice of upcoming programs as well as timely educational articles. Communications outside of the newsletter will be utilized as appropriate, but “Ag Notes” will be designated as the primary means of communication with clientele. Efforts to connect new clients with Extension will rely heavily on increasing distribution of the newsletter.

*Efforts will be taken to connect the younger generation with Extension.* As demonstrated by this survey, there is clearly a deficit of young producers connected with Extension. Since the younger generation represents the future of agriculture, it is imperative that Extension reach out to build relationships with these potential clients. In the short
term, younger producers will be targeted through social media and building online networks through current clients. Ideas are currently being explored with assistance from Maryland Department of Agriculture via the Young Farmers program and the National Young Farmers’ Coalition.

Specialists will be sought to host more programs in Harford County. Harford County’s Extension clientele represents a diverse range of enterprises, but currently the county’s Extension Office employs only one agriculture faculty. In an effort to connect producers with programming outside of county faculty expertise, University specialists will be solicited to host more programming locally. Because the majority of respondents were not willing to travel great distances, efforts will be made coordinate specialist programming in Harford, Baltimore, or Cecil County.

Emphasis will be placed on convenient programming. Extension work encompasses both developing resources and hosting programming. Both aspects are important, but because more respondents reported attending programming than utilizing resources a focus will be placed on program development. To best align with respondent preferences, programs will primarily be hosted on week days (both daytime and evening) during the winter months.

Programs will be made as hands-on and practical as possible. Responses indicate that clients are most interested to attend hands-on or demonstration-type events rather than solely lecture or discussion-based programs. As new programs are being developed, efforts will be taken to make them as practical and skill-based as appropriate for the content being covered. This will largely be accomplished by increasing programs conducted in partnership with local farms.