

## Quarterly Polk County UW-Extension Report

### Agriculture Agent Update – Jennifer Blazek

The Agriculture Agent conducts educational programming in all areas of agriculture and horticulture in Polk County. This not only includes workshops and educational meetings, but farm visits, one-on-one consultations, newsletters, and answering questions via phone, email, and office visits. The topics I cover and the type of work I do is seasonal; whereas in the winter the majority of my time is spent organizing and teaching meetings and workshops, in summer I am busy with the Polk County Fair, youth projects, farm visits and field days. Farmers and agricultural producers are the majority of my clientele, but I also serve agricultural businesses, landowners and renters, lake residents, and the general Polk County population. Because I can't possibly report on everything I do as part of my position – it would be book-length – what follows are some of the highlights of my educational programming.

#### Hay Bale Weight Project

Since the summer of 2012, I have conducted a *Hay Bale Weight Study*, which is a research project I developed in collaboration with a Polk County grazer and beef producer, who is also a grazing planner with the Northwest Wisconsin Graziers' Network. Through his work and interaction with other farmers he saw how many farmers did not have accurate weights for their hay bales. They feed, sell, or buy hay based solely on guesses and estimates.

To educate farmers and livestock owners about the importance of knowing how much their hay weighs, I began visiting area farmers to weigh their hay bales. Borrowing manure spreader scales from the Polk County Land and Water Department, a crude, low-tech and easy to assemble cradle was built to hold the hay bale on the scales. Before the hay was weighed the farmer was encouraged to offer their guess/estimate. I also recorded what I guessed/estimates, as well as any other farmer or specialist visiting the farm. After the hay was weighed, we compared the actual weight to our guesses/estimates. Based on the results so far, everyone who participated in the study, regardless of experience or expertise, either under-estimated or over-estimated bale weights by 100 pounds.



*Blazek discussing hay management with area farmers*

For the three years the project has been active, 23 farmers in five counties have participated and 82 sets of bales have been weighed. I also collected forage samples on some of the hay to do a forage quality comparison and analysis.

Project results of the first year (2012) were presented at one of the workshops in my Hay Series program, offered in Polk County in March 2012. Fourteen participants attended the workshop. The project was featured in an editorial in the *Hay & Forage Grower* magazine this past winter. I am currently working on an article to be published in local and state agricultural newspapers and magazines discussing the project results and the educational impact.

#### Veggie Bite Brochures

Local foods and emerging markets is one of the program areas in which I conduct extensive educational programming and as such, I work a lot with area farmers markets. The idea for the *Veggie Bites* came from a need expressed by the Farmers Market Manager for Osceola. She indicated she often gets asked at her

farm's booth for recipes and ways to use certain produce, especially those that are "unknown" or "unfamiliar", such as kale and eggplant. Many customers have little to no experience with cooking and unfamiliar with even the basic food handling and processing. In talking with other farmers' market vendors and managers, this was a common issue. Farmers wanted to provide customers with recipes and information but lacked the time and resources to put this information together.

To fill this need, I developed a series of informational brochures, called *Veggie Bites*, which cover a specific fruit, vegetable or herb. These brochures were developed over the 2013 market season. There are 50 individual brochures in the series and I am in the process of developing more as I receive requests for specific fruits, vegetables, and herbs produced by area farmers. Each brochure covers the following information on a specific fruit, vegetable or herb: name in English and Spanish, uses, nutrition facts, history and fun facts, selection, care and storage, an easy recipe featuring the produce, and the benefits of buying local. The brochure is tri-fold and colorful – with lots of pictures – for attractiveness and ease of display. Not only are these educational brochures for the consumer, but they are also marketing tools for farmers to increase their sales and improve customer relations.

The brochures have been distributed at seven farmers' markets in Polk County to over 10 farmers' market vendors. They are now being used and distributed by staff at other agencies and other Extension educators around the state.

#### Youth Programming

Much of my work with youth is centered on the Polk County Fair. As an advisory member of the Polk County Quality Meats Committee, I am very active in providing meat quality education to the county's youth. I organize and teach the Meat Animal Quality Assurance (MAQA) Training sessions each year which is required for youth interested in selling their animal at the Quality Meats Auction at the fair. There is increasing interest by youth and farmers in the county in sheep and goat production. In order to address this need, I have held a "Small Ruminant Production" workshop for the last two years. It has been well-attended, averaging about 25 participants (21 adults and 4 youth) each year.

#### Fond Farewell

As of October 1<sup>st</sup> I will transition to Dane County Extension as their Dairy and Livestock Agent. It is a bittersweet decision to leave Polk County and move south, because while my new position is a great personal and professional opportunity for me, my time and work here in Polk County has been immensely rewarding. I have developed successful relationships with co-workers, other county colleagues, farmers, and other county residents through my work. I feel that I have left a positive impact in the county, not only in the programming and education I have offered but also in the networking and relationship building with Polk County residents.



2014 Heart of the Farm Conference, Cumberland