

## ADVISORY SYSTEMS AND STAKEHOLDER INPUT

Gathering stakeholder input through advisory systems is an important link between WSU Extension programs and the citizens of Washington State. Input from stakeholders is vital to the sustainability of Extension. Such input serves to insure that educational and developmental programs are relevant to the needs of the people of the State. When appropriately gathered, advice from stakeholders can help focus programs on important current issues, evaluate the impact of programs, and provide future direction for continued and new programs.

Soliciting and using input from constituents is a long held tradition of Extension. The Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 made the gathering of such input mandatory. In keeping with the tradition of Land Grant System and in light of the 1998 mandate, **Washington State University Extension requires all county Extension educators to develop annual plans of action based on broad stakeholder input and to report the action taken to collect and consider such input.** USDA defines "stakeholders" as any persons who use or conduct research, extension, or education activities. However, to be most effective and relevant, an advisory system must represent all constituents who can potentially benefit from WSU Extension programs.

Stakeholder input can be gathered through various methods. Regardless of the method used, the opportunity to provide input is expected to be fair, open, and broadly accessible. Fairness provides equal access to the process by broadly representative number of constituents and taxpayers from diverse backgrounds. Openness ensures that the process will be in the open and on the public record. Accessibility requires consideration of timing, method, and location of the input gathering effort so that all stakeholders are able to participate and do not feel uncomfortable doing so.

The combination of these various stakeholder input gathering methods constitutes Extension's advisory system. Acceptable forms of stakeholder input include: formal committees, focus groups, surveys, and use of key informants, with a combination of methods being the most likely to ensure fairness, openness and accessibility. Formal committees can provide effective two-way communication between Extension programming and constituents. Added benefits from the formal committee method may include active supporters within the community who speak favorably about the educational work done by Extension. When a broader perspective on programs or community issues is desired focus groups and/or surveys can be used effectively. The key informant approach seeks input and advice from well informed and strategically located individuals from diverse backgrounds. This method can be especially effective for specific issues and/or rapid response. However, careful consideration should be given to ensure that the key informants adequately represent a wide range of constituents.

Regardless of methods used to gather advisory input, it is expected that:

1. Contributors can be identified
2. Contributors know that they are providing input to Extension programs
3. Plans of action reflect advisory input
4. Stakeholders are informed about what was done with their input.

Within Extension's Advisory System, each county will develop annually a plan for gathering advisory input and will produce a year-end report on how input was gathered and what was done with the information gathered. **County chairs are charged with the responsibility to lead and report on the advisory system efforts of their county.**