Assessing the Value and Scope of National and Regional Water Program Websites

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The bulk of content on the National Website is contained within the eight National theme pages, easily linked to from the header.

Most New England content is within seven focus area pages, easily linked from the website's menu.

SITUATION

The regional, state and local efforts that constitute the National Water Program network are challenged by the need to leverage limited resources, foster program growth, and gather the support of partners and funding agencies to expand efforts. The goals of the National Water Program Website and the New England Regional Water Program Website are to:
- Serve as platforms to share accomplishments, research results, and programming efforts
- Improve communication and coordination within the CSREES/Land Grant Institution network and with its national and regional partners.

The primary audience for these websites are Extension-Educators, educators, researchers, and CSREES/Land Grant partners. The websites do not directly support extensive information on local water quality programs and issues; rather, they are intended to direct users to online resources developed by regional, state, and local experts. The National Website is a product of the Communication Standing Committee of the Committee for Shared Leadership of the CSREES National Integrated Water Quality Program (NIWOP). All content on the website is generated with the assistance of national experts who generously volunteer their time and expertise to ensure the website's content is timely, informative, and accurate. The same is true for the New England website at the regional scale. In 2007, we asked members of the National Water Program network to complete online surveys` to assess the value and scope of these websites.

NATIONAL WATER PROGRAM WEBSITE – www.usawaterquality.org

RESULTS

Forty-two respondents completed the survey. Respondent relationship to the National Water Program is described in the chart to the right. Most respondents learned about the website from a colleague within their regional water program or at the CSREES National Water Conference.

A significant number of respondents answered that they are using the website to:
- Learn about CSREES programs
- Learn about CSREES RFAs
- Learn about other CSREES-LGU projects
- Gather contact information
- Learn about events
- Link to other websites in the network
- Learn about educational resources
- Learn about new research, tools techniques
- Locate related projects for potential collaboration
- Contact potential collaborators
- Direct others to the website
- Pull information from the website to give to others

A significant number of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the following statements:
- Website is easy to use
- General content of the website is useful and adequate
- Content of the National themes is useful, well organized and adequate
- Website is accessible
- Website links to partnering programs where appropriate
- I am satisfied with the website

According to website statistics collected in 2007, the top directories of the website hit were:
1. Conference Proceedings (55,924 requests)
2. National Themes (18,805 requests)
3. About (5,016 requests)

METHODS

To assess the scope and value of the National Water Program website, a twelve question online survey on surveymonkey.com was distributed via the National WQ-L listserv, containing 390 subscribers (regional and state water quality coordinators, Land Grant Extension educators and researchers, CSREES staff, and staff at partnering agencies or organizations). The survey was open for two weeks. Survey results were collected by surveymonkey.com and transferred to Statistica (StatSoft 2002) for statistical analysis.

In addition, website usage statistics were continuously collected since 2001 by Analog at the University of Rhode Island Environmental Data Center (URI EDC).

NEW ENGLAND REGIONAL WATER PROGRAM WEBSITE – www.usawaterquality.org/newengland

RESULTS

Sixteen out of 20 steering committee members completed the survey. Ten out of 22 partners solicited via email completed the survey (partner roles are described in the chart to the right). Most of the partners (80%) heard of the website from a colleague within the New England Regional Water Program.
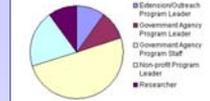
From website statistics collected in 2007, the most visited directories of the were:
1. Research project pdf (1,013 requests)
2. Hot Topics (539 requests)
3. Events (437 requests)

Top reasons why respondents use the website currently:

Steering Committee	Partners
1. Learn about other projects within the region	1. Learn about other projects within the region
2. Link to other programs	2. Learn about events
3. Direct others to the website	3. Link to other programs
4. Learn about events	4. Learn about educational resources within the region

The top reasons why respondents will use the website in the future:

Steering Committee	Partners
1. Learn about other projects within the region	1. Learn about other projects within the region
2. Gather information for proposals and reports	2. Learn about events
3. Direct others to the website	3. Locate related projects for potential collaboration
4. Gather contact information	4. Learn about educational resources within the region

A significant number of the steering committee members and partners were satisfied with the following features of the website:
- Appearance
- Organization
- Layout/Navigation
- Content
- Display Density

METHODS

To assess the scope and value of the New England Regional Water Program website, two versions of an eight question online survey on surveymonkey.com was distributed via: 1) the New England Program's Steering Committee listserv and 2) e-mail requests to the New England Program's advisory committee and partners of the program. The survey was open for two weeks. Survey results were collected by surveymonkey.com and transferred to Statistica (StatSoft 2002) for statistical analysis.

In addition, website usage statistics were collected since 2001 using the methods described for the National website.

DISCUSSION

The results of these website surveys indicate that members of the National Water Program network are using the websites to learn about resources and programs within the CSREES/Land Grant Institution network, collaborate on projects, and inform others about their own resources and programs. These websites are meeting their goals of communicating accomplishments and enhancing coordination and collaboration.

In conclusion, to maintain our excellence, we plan to develop a format for rotating successful program summaries, expand the content for additional National themes, and refresh the existing expanded themes (same with the New England focus areas). In addition, we would like to develop new assessment tools to continue to improve the National and Regional Water Program websites and determine the best ways to analyze website statistics and track how users are utilizing the website.

SUGGESTIONS FOR OTHER WEBSITE SURVEYS AND STATISTICS COLLECTION

Based on the lessons we learned from the conducting these website surveys, we offer the following suggestions to others interested in performing website surveys:
- Consider the goals of your website and ask specific questions that will answer if those goals have been accomplished
- Ask questions to decipher why people are using the site rather than where they are going
- Ask questions related to content quality, content usefulness, adequacy of information, system quality, and usability (Yang et al. 2005)
- Be sure to survey your intended audience (Wood et al. 2003)
- Grow with the knowledge you obtain!
When using website usage statistics, make sure you understand how users are tracked. For instance, for true measures of website usage, you need to develop ways to exclude search engines, robots, and the website developers themselves.

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