

Just a mouse click away

DASNR develops new Web-based resources

Ready or not, here it comes.

The future ... and it's coming to the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Oklahoma State University in the form of Web-based technology.

Soon the days of fact sheets and pamphlets will be gone, replaced by new online databases accessible from the comfort of one's home. The result: a system more in tune with society's growing dependency on the World Wide Web.

Radio took 55 years to reach 200 million users, while the Web took only five. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, "In August 2000, 54 million households, or 51 percent, had one or more computers, up from 42 percent in December 1998."

"The change in society, coupled with the need to be more financially efficient, has prompted the creation of two new searchable databases: the Print-on-Demand System and OSU Extra," said Donald Stotts, communications specialist for agricultural communications services at OSU.

Prior to the Internet, DASNR relied heavily on mass-produced, hardcopy fact sheets written by faculty members to distribute information to the public, said Stotts.

"At one time everything was done hardcopy. To get a fact sheet, you would have to go to a cooperative extension office where they would have copies," said Stotts. "If you needed a bunch of them, county personnel would have to order more copies from DASNR's publications warehouse."

The cost of paper, printing and storage is expensive, said Stotts. Putting information on the Internet saves on printing costs because people print just what they need.

"As the Internet exploded in popularity beginning in 1994, everybody quickly latched onto the idea of putting information on the Web to make it more accessible," he said.

DASNR's first effort to put fact sheets on the Internet was Pete's Electronic Archive and Resource Library, or PEARL.

"PEARL was our first effort of putting what was essentially a hardcopy format onto the Web," said Stotts. "The format came about because at the time there was a concern that people might not make a connec-

tion between the fact sheets available at county offices and materials available on the Web. The problem with it was it looked exactly like the hardcopy format; it didn't take advantage of the medium of computers."

Stotts said the Print-on-Demand System and OSU Extra are simply the next step in the progression, and they are more accessible and easier to use.

The Print-on-Demand System is an electronic archive and ordering system for fact sheets available to all DASNR employees, including extension specialists, county extension educators and research station personnel. Those with Web access are able to search the database, select the fact sheet they need and place an order.

"There are many benefits to this system," said Gayle Hiner, a graphics designer for agricultural communications services at OSU. "Printing and storage costs will decrease, we will never 'run out' of any fact sheets and the most current information will always be available."

DASNR created a second online database, OSU Extra, to provide information to consumers in a flexible way.

With content identical to the Print-on-Demand System, the database uses a keyword search and topic headings to make the database accessible and understandable to consumers. Brief descriptions of each fact sheet also are included to simplify a search.

OSU Extra is a free service available to the public, allowing anyone to view HTML or PDF files in the comfort of their homes, said Hiner. The address for the Web site is <http://www.osuextra.com>.

Hiner said the goal is to try and think like consumers when putting information into both databases.

"Fact sheets will cross reference and be put in more than one spot," said Hiner. "We want to put them wherever they will be the easiest to find and the most useful."

One key feature of the Print-on-Demand System and OSU Extra is the timeliness aspect. Fact sheets posted have expiration dates; when the designated time is up, e-mails are sent to the author(s), prompting him or her to review the information, ensuring it is accurate and timely.



No fact sheet will be allowed to remain in the database without review for more than three years, said Hiner.

"Because the two sites are mirror images of one another, staff members can easily work with consumers and assist them in searching for information," said Hiner. "The extension educator can talk the person through on the phone and tell them exactly where a file will be."

In addition to developing two DASNR databases, the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service is working with other states to create a national e-Extension.

This new system is being developed in conjunction with other land-grant universities with the goal of bringing extension into the 21st century, said David Foster, retired associate director of the OCES.

Since the beginning of the Cooperative Extension Service, the goal has been to spread knowledge and educate people about agriculture. As society has changed, the need for a new way to distribute that knowledge has become apparent.

"In the beginning, universities began to send people out in the field as practitioners to demonstrate to farmers why they should use improved farming techniques," said Foster. "By the end of the 19th century, there were a number of states that had people employed doing essentially extension work."

"The idea of extension is that individuals go out and actually be part of the community and be accepted as local people who happen to be in a position to help and move [agriculture] forward," said Foster.

With technology becoming more widely accepted and used, the demand to alter the way extension work is done has heightened, said Foster. The idea of a corporately managed database system addressing all of the subject matter pertinent to extension work would be attractive.

"If there was a way all states could cooperate with one another to create that database and then manage it at the system level on behalf of all the land-grant universities, that would be a powerful idea," said Foster.

This is the foundation of e-Extension.

According to the e-Extension executive committee, "The challenge is to learn to cooperate and take advantage of the shared intellectual capacity of the land-grant system, in a way that can be locally branded. E-Extension provides a vehicle for doing this in a way that addresses the information-seeking behavior of our current and future customers."

Stotts said the idea for e-Extension has been talked about for years.

"It's a long process by which an organization makes change," said Stotts. "It's a series of steps in which you bring a large organization together to then make a change. It does happen slowly and it does happen over time; it's more of a progression.

"The aim is to allow people to take advantage of information throughout the nation," said Stotts.

"Change does not occur overnight in most large organizations, especially those that have local, state, national and international components," said Stotts. "It's more of a progression in which ideas and new ways of doing things are formulated, tested and then either adopted or discarded over time."

The e-Extension national database is in the planning stages.

"E-Extension is on the way; however, the exact manner in which everything works together has yet to be finalized," said Stotts.

It will incorporate information from land-grant universities across the United States and provide it in one database.

According to the e-Extension Executive Committee, "The idea is that teams of subject matter experts will be in charge of their subject area. These teams will be responsible for curriculum, interactive multimedia modules, ask-the-experts and interactive decision tools."

The goal of the system is to help people find specific information, thus allowing them to make sound decisions, according to the e-Extension executive committee.

Consumers will be able to customize the information they are looking for and access it on their own time.

Ready or not, technology is here to stay. With programs such as the Print-on-Demand System, OSU Extra and e-Extension coming online, DASNR is definitely ready.

◆ *Story and graphic by Melissa Majors, Sutton, Neb.*