

Building Resilience in Agriculture and Forestry: A Regional Extension Perspective

Boby, Leslie¹, Mark Megalos², Martha Monroe³, and William Hubbard¹

¹*Southern Regional Extension Forestry*

²*NC State University Forestry Extension*

³*University of Florida*

The cooperative Extension system has been the traditional outreach arm to farmers, foresters and natural resource managers. Yet, many Extension personnel are not versed in the latest climate science resilience research, nor are there many training opportunities available at a state level for these agents and specialists. Three unique projects sought to change this dynamic to improve resilience on the agriculture/forestry front with messaging that resonates with the target audience. These projects, funded by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), link research to improve resilience from climate change and Extension have yielded interesting outcomes and lead to promising developments. Members of the projects, which focus on forest management, vegetable production and animal agriculture across the southeast leveraged resources to develop a training academy for Extension agents on climate change programming. The Southern Region Extension Climate Academy (SRECA), held in Athens, GA in September 2014, included more than 120 agents from across the southeast in multiple program areas and led to improved understanding of climate science and change, as well as greater awareness of resources and idea exchanges. The Climate Learning Network, a nationwide tool for Extension resources related to agriculture and forestry management in changing climate has been developed from collaborations amongst these three projects.

From this effort and academy, we have learned that Extension personnel have similar views about climate change as the general public, and need more training on climate science and resilience. Messaging is important and it is imperative to develop appropriate messages for each audience. Climate change and resilience is a critical issue with little time available for research to catch up with the changes, therefore empowering Extension will help lead to more on the ground efforts to adapt. Adaptation to changes in climate are critical to build resilience in these sectors and may be best delivered or shared by producers themselves, with assistance from cooperative Extension. Academy participants have moved on to incorporate information on management for greater resilience into their programming, and next steps include bringing participants and others back together to share lessons learned and resources with each other. These attendees have already shown leadership for their states on this issue. Ultimately, building knowledge on resilience and enhancing the capabilities of Extension personnel to address climate change will increase climate–resilient natural resource management on the ground more quickly.