

# INTERACTIVE VIDEO AS A SHORT COURSE DELIVERY METHOD IN MISSISSIPPI: PARTICIPANT ACCEPTANCE AND LESSONS LEARNED

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**Abstract**—The Extension Forestry program at Mississippi State University has conducted hundreds of forest landowner short courses over the last 20 years. These short courses have been the staple of the extension forestry program. The advent of interactive video is allowing us to conduct these short courses to more counties at a time, while providing significant savings in travel time and costs. At the same time, interactive video are increasing advertising costs while straining the logistical ability of extension forestry to supply the materials needed for the interactive programs, as well all other programs being conducted state wide. This paper describes the county forest landowner short courses, as well as the response to our use of interactive video with clientele. Benefits, drawbacks, and future directions for the use of interactive video for forestry extension in Mississippi are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

County forest landowner short courses have been the main stay of extension forestry programs at Mississippi State University for over twenty years (Londo and Monaghan 2002). The short courses are offered on a variety of topics and consist of 6-10 hours of instruction each. These short courses are typically offered on a county by county basis in a classroom setting. MSU Extension forestry is moving towards conducting more programs via an in-state interactive video network.

## METHODS

Short courses have historically been conducted in individual counties. The county extension director, along with the county forestry association (CFA) would request a particular short course of the area extension forestry specialist. The specialist would schedule the short course, arrange for speakers and publicity. Faculty members from the Department of Forestry typically serve as instructors; however, volunteer instructors (professional foresters from industry, consulting firms, and government agencies) are often used. Each short course has a standardized schedule of sessions. The standardization allows for efficient development and duplication of notebook material as well as scheduling volunteer instructors (Londo and Monaghan 2002).

Short courses are publicized in a number of ways. The county extension office will send a direct mailing to the CFA members, as well as those that have previously attended extension forestry programs in that county. A mail out will also be conducted from campus, utilizing the county tax rolls. In this way, several hundred additional direct mail

pieces advertising the program to forest landowners in the county are mailed (Londo and others 2006). Posters, radio programs, newspaper and television ads, as well as posting on the internet are additional ways in which extension forestry programs are advertised (Londo and Monaghan 2002).

From this point on, the short course is a “turn key” operation for the county extension staff. Teaching objectives have been developed for each session and are provided to all instructors to assist with presentations and to avoid duplication of subject matter covered in other sessions by other instructors. Consistency and similarity have proven to be very important in the development of our short courses. All short course offerings of the same title are virtually identical. This enables us to produce the notebooks in bulk and schedule guest instructors up to a year in advance.

Budget reductions have led to the use of alternative means for conducting short courses. Interactive video is one such method. Interactive video allows participants in a number of different locations the ability to participate in a program live and in person with the ability to ask questions. Our first attempt at interactive video was in 2001 with a timber tax fundamentals short course (Londo and Gaddis 2003). While this program was successfully broadcast to 17 locations around Mississippi, there were many technical difficulties because we were using non-MSU sites. This reduced our use of the technology until recently. Now we are able MSU sites with compatible equipment and technical support.

## RESULTS

Evaluations from the first interactive video short course conducted showed that even though there were ample

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technical problems with the broadcast, 95 percent said they would attend another interactive video broadcast. When asked what they would like to see in an interactive format, 80 percent listed programs already conducted by extension forestry, while 20 percent indicated other programs not currently covered (Londo and Gaddis 2003). Reasons for not liking the interactive video program all revolved around technical difficulties experienced.

The results of this survey lead us to believe that there is an unmet or unfelt educational need among our clientele across the state for new subject areas/topics. These topics can be covered through traditional educational programs, or through interactive video. Also, interactive video may allow us to do more and varied programming, increasing our potential client base across the state.

Since 2004, the MSU-Extension Service has been working to establish interactive video capabilities in all 82 Mississippi counties. When this is completed, Mississippi will be the first state in the nation with this capability in all counties. This network has been utilized by all extension programs, and proved to be especially useful following Hurricane Katrina.

During this time of Interactive Video capability expansion, extension forestry has conducted 7 interactive video programs, with an addition program scheduled for October of 2006. These programs have covered a variety of topics including timber harvesting and marketing and wildlife and forest management. The Interactive Video network also allows us the flexibility to conduct programs to a large audience on short notice. An example is the Farm Services Agency Emergency CRP Program.

The Emergency CRP program came about as a way to help forest landowners of the Gulf Coast states with their recovery efforts following the hurricanes of 2005. We used the interactive video network to broadcast a program describing the Emergency CRP program, its requirements, and sign up procedures. This was broadcast to 182 participants in 30 counties. In addition, the program was recorded to DVDs, which were made available to all participating counties, as well as other heavily hurricane-damaged counties in south Mississippi that were unable to participate in the program.

### **Benefits of Interactive Video**

The most significant benefits of interactive video are savings in terms of travel time and costs. The forest and wildlife management for recreation and profit short course was conducted through the interactive video network in the spring of 2006. Conducting this program through the network to 17 counties resulted in a savings of approximately 21,000 miles traveled, \$9,200 in mileage costs, and 460 hours of travel time, compared to

conducting the short course through traditional face to face presentations. In addition to these cost savings, more clientele are reached at one time, further reducing the cost per individual contact. Lastly, interactive video can provide a comprehensive outreach Program with the flexibility to provide educational programs on short notice (Emergency CRP program) or on topics traditionally not covered in our traditional programs. The ability to reach multiple counties at the same time allows us to get information out in a timelier, cost effective manner.

In spite of being at remote locations, participants are able to interact with the presenters through use of an intercom system. With the push of a button, the interactive system switches from the camera on the speaker, to the camera on where the intercom button was pushed. A question can be asked, with all participants hearing the question, as well as seeing who is asking. This allows for more direct interaction with the presenters, as one would find in a more traditional short course presentation.

Clemson University has led the way in this arena with the Master Tree Farmer and Wildlifer programs in recent years. This technology may allow different states to collaborate on programs, thus further increasing the efficiencies of scale associated with interactive video.

### **Drawbacks of Interactive Video**

There are some drawbacks to using interactive video. First and foremost, it shouldn't be used exclusively for conducting all programs. While interactive video provides some flexibility, some topics can not be taught effectively in this format. Field based exercises, site visits, and other similar programs would be difficult to conduct through interactive video. Also, while most clientele like interactive video, many do not. There is the risk of losing some of the traditional clientele base.

We are currently using interactive video technology at sites controlled by MSU. This is necessary since not all equipment is compatible with each other. Also, MSU will provide technical support for MSU controlled sites. This could be a hindrance to using this technology across state boundaries.

While interactive video has saved on travel costs and time, it has increased costs in other areas. MSU Extension Forestry uses county tax rolls for producing mailing lists to advertise programs (Londo and others 2006). The hardwood management short course being offered interactively in October of 2006 had approximately 29,000 direct mailings sent to landowners in the 42 participating counties. That accounts for approximately 75 percent of our annual mailing output and budget. While we have some soft money funds to help defray the costs, this may reduce our ability to advertise other programs in the future.

Interactive video programming places a strain on the overall logistics associated with putting on the short courses and other extension forestry programs. The assembling and shipping of notebooks to the counties from campus is performed by student workers, whose availability is limited under the best of circumstances. The pressure of needing so many notebooks for one program has been difficult, especially since there are other programs and activities going on at the same time, which also need materials and supplies provided from main campus. We have discussed placing the notebooks onto CDs, to reduce handling and shipping costs. However, to do this would increase specialist preparation time. This idea is still being looked at as a viable alternative to using the traditional notebooks.

In addition, mail costs increase significantly as more counties are added to a program. All mail charges are covered in part by state appropriated and extramural funds. We also charge a nominal fee (\$35 per person) for our short courses. This fee could be used to help offset mail costs as well.

Interactive video does offer the opportunity for personal contact with presenters through the use of the intercom button. The system can slow down if too many sites are using the intercom buttons at one time. Also, it takes participants a while to relax with the technology. There is a “fear” of pushing the button.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We expect to conduct 4 interactive video short courses a year statewide. This amounts to one a quarter. In addition, these programs will be limited to 20 counties. There are a number of reasons for limiting the number of counties. First, it will ease the logistical pressure on providing mailing lists and other needed materials from campus. Second, the interactive network can get “bogged down” with too many sites online at one time. We hope to be able to limit these kinds of unnecessary technical difficulties. Lastly, we are concerned about market saturation with our clientele. We don’t want to conduct so many interactive programs, that it reduces the overall demand for our short courses and other programs.

In between the short courses, we plan on conducting shorter duration (1-2 hour) programs on assorted topics. These topics could be on virtually any forestry-related topic, and will provide us with new flexibility and opportunity to create new programs. We could do seasonal topics (tree planting tips, why do leaves change color, how to prune your trees, etc...), topics of immediate importance (Emergency CRP, Pine beetles, etc) or topics that are of interest to our clientele.

## CONCLUSIONS

County forest landowner short courses have been the bread and butter of MSU Extension Forestry for over 20 years. In recent years, we’ve made a shift from conducting all short courses in a traditional “class room” setting in individual counties, to using interactive video in multiple counties at one time. This has been met favorably by our clientele state wide. Future plans include conducting one short course per quarter through the network, as well shorter programs in between those short courses.

The use of Interactive video provides greater flexibility in conducting programs while reducing travel time and costs and increasing the number of clientele reached at one time, as compared to conducting these programs in the traditional format. However, there is increased postage costs associated with the significant increase in mailings for advertising. There are also logistical issues associated with assembling short course notebooks for multiple counties associated with one program, with other programs needed support from campus occurring at the same time. Improved scheduling for all programs may be the best way to resolve some of these issues.

Interactive video may allow us to collaborate on programs with other states in the southern region. This could further enhance the economies of scale associated with using interactive video, while raising the profile of MSU in the process.

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