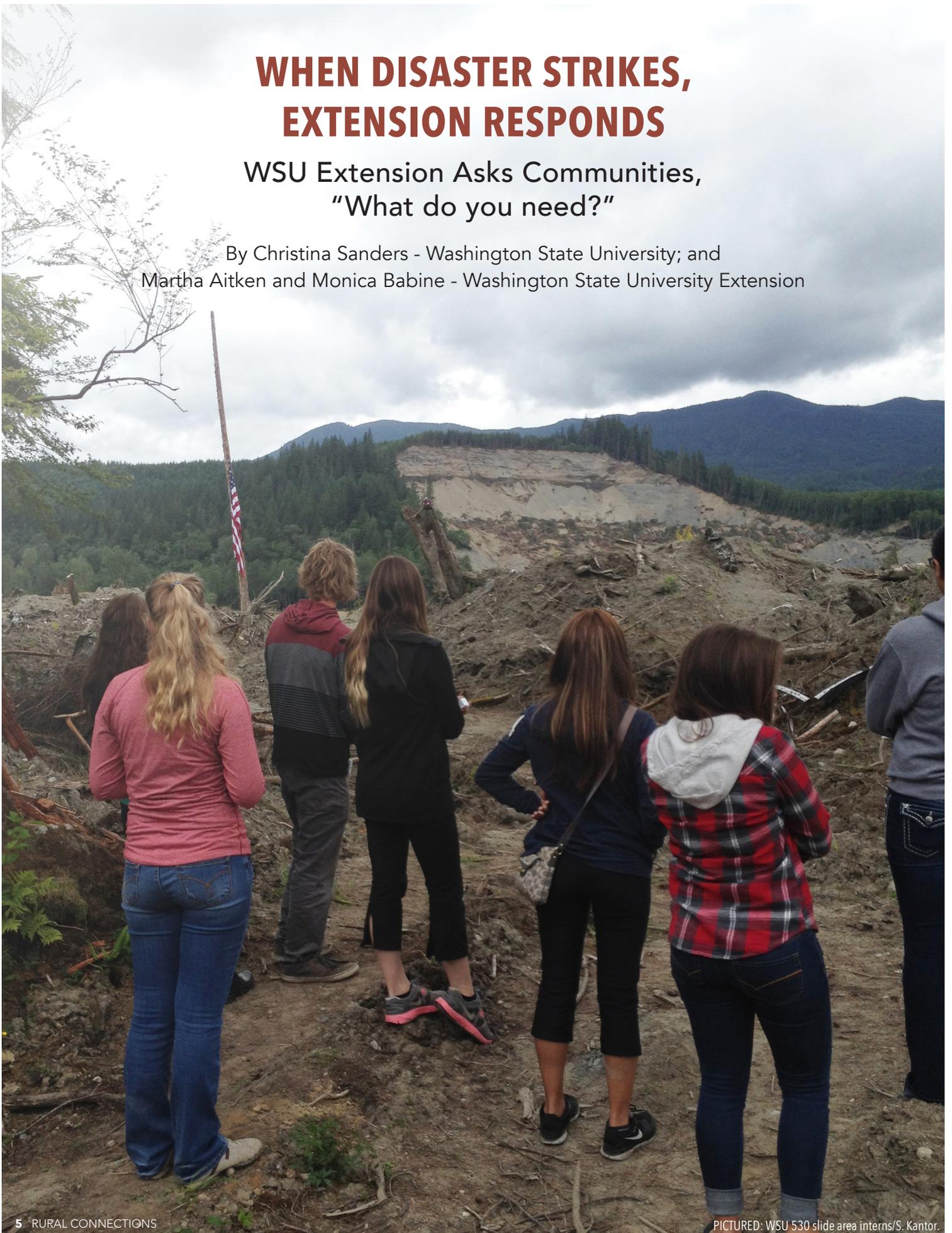


WHEN DISASTER STRIKES, EXTENSION RESPONDS

WSU Extension Asks Communities, "What do you need?"

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“In the world of University Extension where we offer an array of programs designed to meet a community’s needs, it is second nature to be on the lookout for opportunities to implement them. In this instance, however, the team set out to do exactly the opposite: understand the complexities of the needs first, then design or modify a program to meet that need.”

On March 22, 2014, a catastrophic landslide devastated a rural region in northwest Washington. A hillside gave way, burying an entire neighborhood, taking 43 lives, and temporarily closing State Highway 530, the physical and economic lifeline for the area. Carrying a wall of mud and debris, it destroyed 49 homes and structures; creating a slide zone nearly a mile wide. In the aftermath, what emerged were resilient and interdependent communities with a shared goal of growing their economies while preserving quality of life. The events of that day could have left a region totally devastated but instead they served as a catalyst for economic revitalization efforts, and spurred Washington State University (WSU) to explore how it supports communities in moving forward after a disaster.

Immediately after the slide, WSU’s President, the late Elson Floyd, committed University resources to assist with recovery efforts. Instead of focusing on mounting an emergency response, WSU Extension turned its attention toward long-term recovery strategies and formed the interdisciplinary SR 530 Mudslide Recovery Team. Co-lead by Snohomish County Extension and the Division of Governmental Studies and Services, the Team included members from the WSU Extension’s three units: Community and Economic Development, Youth and Family, and Agriculture and Natural Resources; the WSU Energy Office; WSU North Puget Sound at Everett; and communication experts from WSU’s College of Agriculture, Human and Natural Resource Sciences – all with diverse experience and backgrounds. The Team made a foundational commitment to focus not simply on what the University had to offer, but to concentrate on the immediate, short-term, and long-term needs of the communities. By keeping the communities’ needs central to their work, the Team asked community leaders, “What do you need?” instead of telling them, “Here’s what we’re going to do to help you.”

In the world of university extension where we offer an array of programs designed to meet a community’s needs, it is second nature to be on the lookout for opportunities to implement them. In this instance, however, the team set out to do exactly the opposite: understand the complexities of the needs first, then design or modify a program to meet that need. It is important to note that WSU Extension was known to, and valued by, the communities through the legacy programs and activities of the local County Extension Office; however, many of the resources on the Mudslide Recovery Team were new and included regional specialists and faculty located on WSU’s main campus three hundred miles away. As the needs of the community evolved after the landslide, so did the composition of the Team.

This ability to be flexible and customize the response and recovery to the community has not only been the underlying strength in ongoing relationships with community members, but has served as an example to other Extension personnel who want to support their own communities in the event of a disaster. The depth and diversity of Team members, their internal communication, and their external collaborations with elected leaders, tribal officials, nonprofit staff, state and federal agency personnel, and local citizens, illustrated the breadth of the



PICTURED: Former WSU President Elson Floyd and local sheriff S. Kantor.

WSU's outreach and the University's commitment to help the communities move toward self-reliance and a sustainable economic future.

Members of WSU's Mudslide Recovery Team have led and supported a broad range of activities from co-facilitation of the Governor's SR 530 Landslide Commission by the William D. Ruckelshaus Center, which identified recommendations to avoid future slides, to student focused activities such as providing tuition waivers to students from the slide area, to WSU summer student internships and student service weekends. In addition, the team engaged WSU's Rural Communities Design Initiative to assist the Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe with a reservation expansion. Other Team projects addressed natural resources, youth, and organizational, community and economic development.

WSU Extension also hired a local resident to serve as a Community and Economic Development Coordinator to insure collaboration and coordination of the multiple local projects. The Coordinator participated on a cross sector team that secured a \$150,000 US Economic Development Administration grant to develop a regional economic development plan, and spearheaded local projects such as downtown business improvements and a co-working space. While stakeholders were crafting that plan, local leaders were encouraged to enter the America's Best Communities Competition to help directly engage community members in economic development efforts. Under the leadership of WSU's Metropolitan Center for Applied Research and Extension the community has advanced from an initial field of 135 applicants to become one of 8 finalists by creating and implementing an expansive

11 month community revitalization plan and, in the process, building capacity for future economic development initiatives.

The 2014 mudslide in northwestern Washington was followed in 2015 by devastating fires in rural central Washington. Faced with new communities in need, WSU, reflecting on the University's response to the mudslide, and leveraging their long engagement with the national Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN), formed the Extension Disaster Capacity Planning (EDCP) Team to assist with response by Extension personnel in communities during the wildfires.

As a first step the EDCP Team created a Wildland Fires website to serve as a clearinghouse for resources for County Extension personnel, along with up-to-date news on developing situations around the state and recovery efforts already underway. The group also provided support in the form of a small team of representatives through the Office of Emergency Management at WSU who are still available to answer questions and assist County Extension personnel in locating additional resources and in connecting them to professional services that might be needed in an event. County based Extension personnel expressed a need for strategies to help faculty and staff to assist with emergency response and recovery in their own communities, so the EDCP Team conducted a needs assessment among all of the county Extension offices across the state to better understand the potential expectations and the gaps that exist.

The needs assessment was distributed via email and responses were received in an online survey format



PICTURED: Flag in front of the slide area/S. Kantor.



PICTURED: Glacier Peak Institute students/S. Kantor.

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from 39 of the 46 WSU County Extension offices and research stations surveyed in Washington, for an 85% response rate. The assessment indicated that Extension personnel are equally as concerned about serving their communities in a disaster, as they are about preparing their own offices for all types of emergencies - whether it be a manmade disaster such as a chemical spill or a natural disaster such as an extreme storm causing power outages. When asked to choose from a list of options that asked respondents to indicate what made them feel most vulnerable regarding a disaster in their area, almost 50% indicated that they Agree or Strongly Agree that the need to learn how to prepare their work place for disasters is an area of concern. Other options that garnered a high number of Agree or Strongly Agree responses included the need for more information on surviving disasters and needing to know more about whether their communities are prepared for disasters. Survey responses indicate that WSU Extension County Directors are also concerned about being prepared on a personal level, so that they can be available to help in their place of work and in their communities when a disaster hits.

In order to assist County Extension be better prepared to help in specific areas of need in their communities during and after a disaster, WSU is continuing to develop and compile up-to-date resources in multiple formats that will be useful to counties even in the event of internet and power loss. When asked what preparedness resources they would most benefit from, survey respondents indicated a preference for an emergency procedures handbook, emergency procedures posted in all facilities, and an online resource bank. The EDCP team is also working toward providing trainings in several locations across the state, to include Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training, which would better prepare community members, and hope to be able to have resources in the future to provide for the deployment of strike teams.

While WSU's experiences assisting the communities after the landslide and the wildfires were fundamentally different, common themes and lessons emerged from both including the importance of creating a long-term plan, being a convener, staying in the community, fostering long-term relationships built on trust and meaningful accomplishments, and seeking involvement from university colleagues. Through these disasters and the development of EDCP, WSU provides support to County Extension staff and faculty in Washington to prepare for and respond to future disasters in their own communities.

This experience can also help other land-grant universities better understand the pivotal role Extension can have in times of disaster. Keeping the focus on community needs is critical and can lead to utilizing University resources in new ways. Not only does it help communities emerge from disasters better prepared, stronger and more resilient, but it also solidifies Extension and the University's position in the community, fulfilling our land grant mission in new ways.*

WEB RESOURCES

WSU Mudslide Recovery
mudsliderecovery.wsu.edu

The SR 530 Landslide Commission Report
governor.wa.gov/issues/issues/safe-communities/joint-sr-530-landslide-commission

WSU Wildfire Recovery
wildfires.wsu.edu/

City of Arlington America's Best Communities
arlingtonwa.gov/index.aspx?page=547

America's Best Communities Facebook Page
facebook.com/StillyValleyABC/