

6.4 Partnerships with Nonprofit Organizations

Applicability

The use of volunteers to provide conservation information and techniques to their fellow citizens allows the water purveyor access to large numbers of water users across a spectrum of economic, ethnic, social, and geographic groups.

Description

Organizations such as the Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, Botanical Gardens, and environmental entities with water conservation sympathies are enlisted to use their volunteers to deliver water conservation education to their typical and expanded audiences. The volunteers are provided special training and the organization may be subsidized based on audiences reached. The delivery vehicles are speaker bureaus, neighborhood events, school projects, and demonstration gardens but the volunteers may also respond to audit requests, rebate inspections, and conduct research.

Volunteer organizations can be selected that have membership recruited from diverse ethnic, age, geographic, or economic groups. It is also effective to utilize organizations that are willing and capable to expand their membership to targeted audiences.

In some cases social organizations that do not normally have water conservation goals can be recruited to the conservation cause. Their targeted audience such as low income households or senior citizens will benefit by the services (for example, high efficiency toilets and leak repairs) that are available related to water conservation.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the education materials, presentation or show, the utility should use an evaluation tool such as a pre- and post-test or survey.

Implementation

Contact is made with organizations with volunteers encouraging them to deliver a packaged program. In many cases it may be more effective, however, to communicate with the entity with a goal in mind and work with the organization and volunteers to develop a package to meet the desired goal. Volunteers often know the target audience's capabilities and are invaluable in developing a program that will work to meet the goal. Training should be developed to complement the volunteer's skills.

The financial arrangement may only involve expenses and training materials. To ensure administrative attention from understaffed, cash-strapped groups, providing funds upfront and linked to audience contacts and progress may accelerate progress. Simple contracts can be developed to encourage a more efficient process.

Scope and Schedule

If the volunteer organization partner is organized and operating with educational goals already in place, it is reasonable to expect that recruitment, negotiations, contracting, training, and program results can be accomplished in 12 months. A packaged “high efficiency toilet” giveaway program could be organized, and toilets distributed through churches and social service entities in a targeted section of a city in the year’s period.

For example, a Master Gardener Chapter provided special one-day training to 20 of their volunteers from 10 different neighborhoods on low water landscapes. The trained volunteers then conducted a total of 10 neighborhood sessions and were able to reach a combined audience of 200 interested neighbors within one year.

Measuring Implementation and Determining Water Savings

Evaluation of this Best Management Practice can be very simple or more complex with volunteers or water purveyor staff used to do the necessary evaluation. Various measures are audience contacts, toilets delivered, newsletter sign-ups, and landscape conversions. In some cases, such as the high efficiency toilet conversions and landscape conversions, water usage changes are effective measures of program impact. For a volunteer program to be judged effective it should show measurable results in behavioral or technological changes that reduce water use.

Cost-effectiveness Considerations

Partnerships with volunteer organizations have political advantages in expanding the water conservation team; however, the major advantage involves cost effectiveness. Every person in the field trained in conservation techniques and who believes in water conservation can be expected to reach several hundred other individuals with varying degrees of effectiveness. The cost of using volunteers is very low compared to the cost of paid staff and can be nearly as effective when volunteers are well trained and working in a framework of an organized program.

References for Additional Information

1. Finch, C. (1997) – Profile of an Active Master Gardener Chapter, HortTechnology October-December Vol. 7 No. 4 371-376.
2. Bohne, D. (1996), Water Saver Rebate – San Antonio Water System, San Antonio, Texas.

Determination of the Impact on Other Resources

The advantage of using well organized volunteers to staff conservation outreach programs saves staff time. A poorly organized volunteer effort can be a negative force in the relationship between a water purveyor’s ratepayers, local elected officials, and media along with little achievement in water conservation efforts.