

From Community Needs Assessment to Program Planning

A Guide for New Mexico Extension Agents: Series 2 of 3

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INTRODUCTION

Effective Extension programs are built on an understanding of local communities and their needs. Needs assessments provide a systematic process for identifying community concerns, opportunities, and priorities that can guide program development.¹ By identifying community priorities and using data to guide decision-making, Extension agents can develop programs that are relevant, responsive, and impactful. This planning approach is widely recognized as a core component of effective Cooperative Extension programming.²

The *NMSU Self-Study Guide for New Extension Agents* provides orientation to county characteristics, stakeholders, and Extension responsibilities.³

A series of publications was developed to provide practical guidance for Extension agents. *Series 1, County Needs Assessment Workbook for New Mexico Extension Agents*⁴, focuses on identifying community needs through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and SWOT analysis.

This publication, *Series 2: From Community Needs Assessment to Program Planning*, focuses on the next step in the process - using assessment results to develop Extension programs. Topics include interpreting assessment findings, prioritizing community needs, selecting program areas, and developing county program priorities. The publication is designed to help Extension agents translate community needs into program priorities that address local issues and opportunities.

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USING ASSESSMENT FINDINGS FOR DECISION-MAKING

Collecting information is only the first step in the needs assessment process. Surveys, interviews, focus groups, and SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analyses can generate large amounts of information, but the data has little value unless they are carefully organized and interpreted. Extension agents must be able to identify key findings, recognize recurring issues, and determine which concerns are most important to local stakeholders.

The goal of this step is to organize assessment results so they can be used to make programming decisions. By organizing findings and identifying common themes, Extension agents can gain a clearer understanding of community strengths, challenges, opportunities, and priorities.

Each assessment method provides different types of information. Surveys can help quantify community concerns and preferences. Interviews provide detailed perspectives from key stakeholders. Focus groups offer insights into community perceptions and group priorities. SWOT analyses help identify internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats. When findings from multiple methods point to similar issues, agents can have greater confidence that those issues represent important community needs.

This section provides practical guidance for organizing and interpreting needs assessment findings. Topics include summarizing survey results, reviewing interview and focus group data, organizing SWOT findings, and identifying common themes across multiple sources of information. This concludes with approaches for summarizing assessment findings and preparing for the next step in the planning process—prioritizing community needs.

Organizing Survey Results

Survey data provide a useful summary of community concerns, interests, and priorities. After surveys have been collected, responses should be summarized and organized to identify the issues most frequently mentioned by participants.

One simple approach is to calculate the number and percentage of respondents selecting each issue. Results can then be ranked from highest to lowest priority. Table 1 shows the example.

In this example, water shortages, youth leadership development, and farm profitability were identified as the highest priorities by survey respondents.

Survey results may also include open-ended responses. These comments should be reviewed and grouped into common categories. Similar responses can then be summarized to identify recurring concerns and suggestions.

Table 1. Example of Community Survey Results

Community Issue	Number of Responses	Percentage
Water shortages	85	68%
Youth leadership development	72	58%
Farm profitability	64	51%
Workforce development	55	44%
Community beautification	28	22%

Organizing Interview Results

Interviews provide detailed information from key stakeholders and community leaders. Because interview responses are primarily qualitative, the goal is to identify recurring themes and patterns across interviews. A simple method is to review interview notes and group similar comments together. After reviewing multiple interviews (Table 2), the agent may identify recurring concerns such as rising irrigation costs, drought and forage availability, or workforce shortages. When helpful, the frequency with which a theme is mentioned may be noted in parentheses to indicate its prevalence across interviews (e.g., Rising Irrigation Costs (7); Drought and Forages (5)). These recurring themes help identify county priorities and provide a foundation for program planning and decision-making.

Table 2. Example of Interview Summary

Stakeholder Group	Key Concern
Farmers	Rising irrigation costs
Ranchers	Drought and forage shortages
School administrators	Limited youth leadership opportunities
Business owners	Workforce shortages
Community leaders	Economic development

Organizing Focus Group Results

Focus groups provide an opportunity for participants to discuss community issues in greater depth. Notes should be reviewed carefully to identify areas of agreement, differences of opinion, and potential solutions. The goal is not to record every comment but to summarize the major themes that emerged during the discussion. Table 3 shows the example of focus group findings.

Table 3. Example of Focus Group Findings (Topic: Agricultural Development)	
Common Concerns	Suggested Solutions
Limited water availability	Irrigation efficiency training
Rising input costs	Alternative crop production
Lack of local processing facilities	Value-added processing opportunities

Organizing SWOT Findings

SWOT analysis helps identify internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats. SWOT findings can help agents understand both the challenges and opportunities that may influence future programming. Table 4 shows the example of SWOT summary.

Table 4. Example of County SWOT Summary	
Strengths	Weaknesses
• Strong agricultural industry • Active community organizations • Experienced Extension volunteers	• Limited staff resources • Aging producer population
Opportunities	Threats
• Growing interest in local foods • New agricultural technologies • Available grant funding	• Drought • Rising production costs • Population decline

Synthesizing Assessment Findings

After organizing survey, interview, focus group, and SWOT results separately, the next step is to compare findings across assessment methods. Extension agents should look for issues that appear repeatedly, even if they are described differently. Similar findings can be grouped into broader themes that represent community-wide concerns.

For example, survey respondents identified water shortages, farmers interviewed discussed rising irrigation costs, focus group participants emphasized limited water avail-

ability, and the SWOT analysis identified drought as a major threat. Although these findings use different wording, they all describe the broader issue of water resource management. Likewise, survey responses on farm profitability, interview concerns about forage shortages, focus group discussions of rising input costs, and the SWOT threat of rising production costs can be synthesized into the broader theme of agricultural profitability.

Table 5 illustrates how findings from the previous tables can be synthesized into common themes that provide the foundation for prioritizing community needs.

Table 5. Synthesizing Findings Across Assessment Methods				
Broad Theme	Survey Results (Table 1)	Interview Results (Table 2)	Focus Group Results (Table 3)	SWOT Results (Table 4)
Water resource management	Water shortages	Rising irrigation costs	Limited water availability	Drought
Agricultural profitability	Farm profitability	Drought and forage shortages	Rising input costs	Rising production costs
Youth development	Youth leadership development	Limited youth leadership opportunities	—	Population decline
Workforce and economic development	Workforce development	Workforce shortages	Value-added processing opportunities	Growing interest in local foods

PRIORITIZING COMMUNITY NEEDS

After organizing assessment findings and identifying common themes, the next step is to determine which needs should receive priority attention. Prioritization is a critical component of the program development process because it helps allocate limited resources to issues that are most important to stakeholders and where educational programs can have the greatest impact (Boone et al., 2002).⁵ Surveys, interviews, focus groups, and SWOT analyses often identify multiple concerns within a community. However, Extension personnel typically have limited time and resources and cannot address every issue simultaneously. Prioritization helps identify the issues that are most important to the community and most appropriate for Extension programming.

Importance

The common themes identified in the previous section should first be evaluated based on their importance to the community. Issues that are consistently identified across multiple assessment methods may indicate broader community concern than issues identified through only one source. For example, if water shortages are identified in surveys, interviews, focus groups, and SWOT analyses, the issue may be considered more important than an issue mentioned only occasionally by stakeholders.

Importance may also be reflected by the number of people affected by the issue and the potential consequences if the issue is not addressed. Issues affecting agricultural production, youth development, family well-being, economic development, or natural resources often have widespread impacts across the community.

Urgency

Assessment findings may also help determine the urgency of a particular issue. Some concerns require immediate attention, while others may be addressed over a longer period. Stakeholder comments, survey responses, and SWOT findings often provide insight into whether an issue is becoming more severe or creating immediate challenges for the community.

For example, prolonged drought conditions, declining water supplies, or emerging agricultural pests may require timely educational programs and outreach efforts. In contrast, other issues may be important but less time sensitive.

Extension Capacity

Not all identified community needs can be effectively addressed through Extension programming. After reviewing assessment findings, Extension personnel should consider whether Extension has the expertise, resources, and partnerships necessary to address the issue.

Extension is often well positioned to address issues through education, demonstrations, technical assistance, applied research, and community partnerships. However, some community concerns may require policy changes, infrastructure investments, long-term research, or services beyond the scope of Extension. In these cases, Extension can share assessment findings with appropriate organizations, agencies, or decision-makers while focusing its programming on areas where it can make the greatest contribution. Prioritization should therefore consider where Extension can make a meaningful contribution. Available staffing, funding, and partnerships may also influence which priorities can realistically be addressed. Counties often face resource limitations and may need to focus on a smaller number of high-priority issues where Extension can have the greatest impact.

Stakeholder Support

The assessment process also provides information about stakeholder support for potential programming areas. Issues frequently discussed during interviews, focus groups, advisory committee meetings, and community discussions often indicate strong stakeholder interest.

Programs are generally more successful when stakeholders recognize the importance of the issue and are willing to participate in educational activities, partnerships, and community initiatives. Strong stakeholder support can increase participation, strengthen collaborations, and improve program outcomes.

Prioritization Matrix

A prioritization matrix can help organize assessment findings and support decision-making. Each identified community need (broad theme) can be evaluated according to importance, urgency, Extension capacity, and stakeholder support. Scores can then be compared to identify potential priority areas using the worksheet in Appendix 1. Table 6 shows the example of community needs prioritization matrix. In this example, water resource management received the highest score and would likely become a county program priority.

Table 6. Example of Community Needs Prioritization Matrix

Community Need (Broad Theme)	Importance	Urgency	Extension Capacity	Stakeholder Support	Total
Water resource management	5	5	5	5	20
Agricultural profitability	4	4	4	4	16
Youth development	4	3	5	5	17
Workforce & economic development	3	3	3	4	13

After discussing each theme using the four prioritization criteria, Extension personnel may assign numerical ratings (for example, 1 = low to 5 = high) to facilitate comparison among community needs.

The matrix is intended to support discussion and decision-making rather than replace professional judgment. Local circumstances, emerging issues, and available resources should also be considered when establishing priorities.

Selecting Top Priorities

Once assessment findings have been reviewed and community needs evaluated, Extension personnel can identify the issues that will become programming priorities. Many counties focus on a limited number of priority areas to ensure that available resources can be used effectively and that programs can achieve meaningful outcomes. Based on the prioritization matrix (Table 6), Water Resource Management and Agricultural Profitability receive the highest scores and would become the primary county program priorities. After comparing total evaluation scores in the prioritization matrix, the highest-ranked community needs can be translated into county Extension program priorities. Community needs should be evaluated using multiple criteria because no single factor determines program priority. Some issues may be highly important but not urgent, while others may be urgent but beyond Extension's capacity to address. Evaluating each broad theme using the four criteria below helps identify priorities that are both responsive to community needs and appropriate for Extension programming. Table 7 illustrates this process.

Table 7. Translating Community Needs into County Extension Program Priorities

Community Need (Broad Theme)	Total Score	Selected Extension Program Priority
Water resource management	20	Irrigation Efficiency and Water Conservation
Youth development	17	4-H Youth Leadership and Workforce Readiness
Agricultural profitability	16	Farm and Ranch Business Management

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEVELOPING COUNTY PROGRAM PRIORITIES

Selecting priorities does not automatically determine Extension programming. Extension personnel must next decide which community needs fall within the Extension mission and where educational programs can have the greatest impact. They should also consider whether they have the expertise, resources, and capacity to address each priority effectively. If additional expertise is needed, agents may collaborate with Extension specialists or partner with other organizations that have relevant knowledge and resources.

Community needs and Extension program priorities are not always the same. A need describes a problem, concern, or opportunity identified during the assessment process. A program priority describes the area where Extension will focus its educational efforts in response to that need.

What Should Extension Address?

Extension programs should focus on issues that are important to the community and where Extension can make a meaningful contribution through education, technical assistance, demonstrations, applied research, or partnerships.

When selecting program priorities, Extension personnel should consider:

- Community needs identified through the assessment process.
- Stakeholder interests and concerns.
- Availability of Extension expertise and resources.
- Opportunities to improve knowledge, skills, behaviors, or practices.
- Alignment with Extension and university missions.

County advisory committees should review and discuss proposed program priorities before they are finalized. Advisory committee members provide valuable local perspectives, help confirm that priorities reflect community needs, and strengthen stakeholder support for Extension programming. The strongest program priorities are supported by assessment findings and address issues that stakeholders consider important.

What Should Extension Not Address?

Not every community issue should become an Extension program priority. Some concerns may fall outside the mission and expertise of Extension. Others may be better addressed by government agencies, nonprofit organizations, private industry, or community groups.

For example, stakeholders may identify concerns related to road maintenance, law enforcement, utility infrastructure, or housing development. While these issues may be important to the community, they may not be appropriate Extension program areas unless there is a clear educational component where Extension can contribute.

The goal is not to solve every community problem but to focus on areas where Extension can provide meaningful educational leadership.

Developing county program priorities is an important step in the Extension program development process, but successful programming requires more than identifying priorities. Extension personnel must also develop educational programs, implement activities, evaluate outcomes, and document program impacts. These topics are addressed in Series 3, which focuses on program implementation, evaluation, impact reporting, and continuous program improvement. Together, the three publications provide a practical framework to guide New Mexico Extension personnel from community needs assessment through program planning, implementation, and evaluation.

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APPENDIX 1. COMMUNITY NEEDS PRIORITIZATION WORKSHEET

Instructions

Complete one worksheet for each broad theme identified from your community needs assessment (e.g., water resource management, youth development, agricultural profitability). Use information gathered from surveys, interviews, focus groups, SWOT analysis, advisory committee meetings, and other local data.

This worksheet is designed to help evaluate each community need before completing the Community Needs Prioritization Matrix (Table 6).

Broad Theme

Step 1. Evaluate Importance

Evidence to Consider

- ☐ Affects a large number of community members
- ☐ Identified through multiple assessment methods
- ☐ Significant economic impacts
- ☐ Significant environmental impacts
- ☐ Significant social or community impacts
- ☐ Frequently mentioned by stakeholders
- ☐ Consistent with county priorities
- ☐ Other: _____

Summary of Evidence

Importance Evaluation Score

Score	Description
1	Very little evidence that this is an important community issue.
2	Limited evidence; affects a relatively small group.
3	Moderate evidence; affects part of the community.
4	Strong evidence; affects many people or has significant impacts.
5	Very strong evidence; major county-wide issue with substantial impacts.

Selected Score: _____

Step 2: Evaluate Urgency

Evidence to Consider

- ☐ Requires immediate attention
- ☐ Problem is becoming more severe
- ☐ Delaying action could increase negative impacts
- ☐ Emerging issue identified by stakeholders
- ☐ Immediate educational response is needed
- ☐ Other: _____

Summary of Evidence

Urgency Evaluation Score

Score	Description
1	Not time-sensitive; action can be delayed.
2	Low urgency; should be monitored.
3	Moderately urgent; should be addressed within the near future.
4	Urgent; timely educational programming is recommended.
5	Requires immediate attention because delaying action may result in significant impacts.

Selected Score: _____

Step 3. Evaluate Extension Capacity

Evidence to Consider

- ☐ Fits the Extension mission
- ☐ Extension has appropriate expertise
- ☐ Educational programming can address the issue
- ☐ Staff time is available
- ☐ Funding is available
- ☐ Community partnerships are available
- ☐ Other: _____

Summary of Evidence

Extension Capacity Evaluation Score

Score	Description
1	Extension has little or no ability to address the issue.
2	Limited expertise, resources, or partnerships are available.
3	Extension can address some aspects of the issue.
4	Extension has strong capacity through education and partnerships.
5	Extension is exceptionally well positioned to address the issue effectively.

Selected Score: _____

Step 4. Evaluate Stakeholder Support

Evidence to Consider

- ☐ Strong stakeholder interest
- ☐ Advisory committee support
- ☐ Community partners are willing to collaborate
- ☐ Participation in educational programs is likely
- ☐ Local organizations support the effort
- ☐ Other: _____

Summary of Evidence

Stakeholder Support Evaluation Score

Score	Description
1	Little or no stakeholder interest or support.
2	Limited stakeholder support.
3	Moderate stakeholder interest and willingness to participate.
4	Strong stakeholder support and collaboration.
5	Very strong stakeholder commitment with high potential participation and partnerships.

Selected Score: _____

Step 5. Synthesize the Evaluation

Criterion	Evaluation Score (1–5)	Summary of Evidence
Importance	_____	_____
Urgency	_____	_____
Extension Capacity	_____	_____
Stakeholder Support	_____	_____
Total Score	_____ / 20	

Step 6. Overall Assessment

Based on the evaluation above:

Recommendation

- ☐ Recommend as a County Extension Program Priority
- ☐ Consider for Future Programming
- ☐ Do Not Recommend at This Time

Step 7. Transfer the Results

Transfer the evaluation scores for Importance, Urgency, Extension Capacity, and Stakeholder Support to the Community Needs Prioritization Matrix (Table 6). Compare the total scores for all broad themes to identify the county's highest Extension program priorities.