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## Assessing Extension's Ability to Serve Ohio Communities During Disasters

### Abstract

The February 3, 2023, train derailment in northeast Ohio demonstrated Ohio State University Extension's (OSUE) unique ability to connect communities, response partners, and university-based expertise during both immediate and long-term recovery efforts. This event also exposed gaps within OSUE organizational preparedness to respond to future emergencies. To evaluate the preparedness of OSUE professionals, a survey was developed to identify specific trainings and procedures to address knowledge and skill gaps. The survey was delivered to 740 Extension professionals, with 291 recorded responses. Results show that OSUE professionals are highly trained to respond to common risk mitigation scenarios within their program discipline such as pesticide safety, food security, community planning, mental health, and biosecurity concerns. Fewer professionals self-reported they had the skills necessary to respond to widespread community-based emergencies. Most respondents were not aware of their legislated responsibilities found in the Ohio Revised Code or had an active relationship with their local Emergency Management Agency. Participants identified priority areas for additional training, and some expressed a willingness to serve on a crisis response team. Findings from the survey highlight the need for continuity planning within OSUE

offices, increased collaboration with local EMAs, and continuing education to maintain readiness.

**Abbreviations:** OSU – The Ohio State University; OSUE – The Ohio State University Extension; ORC – Ohio Revised Code; ANR – Agriculture and Natural Resources; CD – Community Development; FCS – Family and Consumer Sciences; EMA – Emergency Management Agency; CERT – Community Emergency Response Team; LEAP – Livestock Environmental Assessment and Performance; BERP – Bovine Emergency Response Planning; NIMS – National Incident Management System; EDEN – Extension Disaster Education Network; IRB – Internal Review Board; QPR – Question, Persuade, Refer; CPR – Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation

**Keywords:** Disaster; Emergency Response; Professional Development

## **Introduction**

Human history is filled with disasters – both natural and human caused – that disrupt communities and, at times, entire societies. In response to such events, people demonstrate an inherent desire to help others, acting individually or collectively (Glass, 2001; Ursano et al., 2007). As a national multi-disciplinary organization coordinated through the land grant university, Extension has a role to assist citizens affected by disasters and has a plethora of resources available through the Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN, 2026). Extension professionals are often prepared to support communities during weather-related emergencies, ranging from short-term events (e.g., hailstorms) to long-term challenges (e.g., drought). In contrast, Extension typically plays a supporting role in response to human-caused disasters (e.g., bioterrorism, hazardous spills, and infrastructure failures). Regardless of the crisis event, state-based Extension programs have reviewed and evaluated their role to enhance their response capacity in emergency management (Koundinya et al, 2020; Chichester and Emm, 2019; Penn State University, 2025). One recent event demonstrated Ohio State University Extension’s (OSUE) unique capacity to support emergency management in a transportation and hazardous material incident by

connecting local communities, response partners, education and research expertise to address immediate and long-term community needs.

On February 3, 2023, a train carrying hazardous materials derailed in northeast Ohio. Local first responders, in coordination with state and federal response agencies, established the immediate evacuation radius and necessary containment measures. Throughout the following days and weeks, uncertainty remained about broader impacts on community residents, neighboring rural communities, and agricultural producers (Charles and Gunderson, 2025; Cruz, 2024; Hardy, 2025; Pugach et al., 2025; Schnoke et al., 2023). Effective coordination among federal, state, and local agencies was essential due to risks of chemical exposure and environmental contamination (Lunn et al., 2025; Oladeji et al., 2023; Singer et al., 2025). However, existing emergency plans did not clearly outline how to address analyzation needs and communication within the agricultural community.

OSUE educators helped fill gaps in the emergency response networks to rapidly share accurate information and collect community concerns. Extension's role involved county and state personnel to meet community needs and provide critical support to state and federal agencies in the immediate and extended phases of the emergency response. Strong relationships with livestock, crop, and horticulture producers enabled OSUE to provide critical support to meet community needs and also identified opportunities for improvement in future responses, such as developing a centralized farm contact list, clarifying chains of command, establishing guidance for media requests, preparing for town hall participation, and coordinating with the College's Rapid Response Task Force.

In Ohio, Extension has a legislated responsibility in emergency response. The Ohio Revised Code (ORC) assigns OSUE a role in response, mitigation, and recovery through collaboration with multiple organizations and state and federal agencies (Ohio Revised Code, 2023). Extension is actively engaged in emergency management efforts that support citizens and business operations, with state-level staff serving on Emergency Management Advisory Boards and county staff participating on Local

Emergency Planning Committees. These efforts include an educational role in mitigation, preparation, and recovery, as well as a supporting role during the response phase. After an emergency event, it is possible for all four program areas of OSUE (4-H, ANR, CD, FCS) to play a significant role in recovery. Extension personnel, along with the science-based information they provide, are trusted resources for both the public and local government.

Preparing OSUE employees to navigate local, state and federal emergency management processes is essential. However, sustaining emergency management training for OSUE and similar organizations present several challenges, including high employee turn-over, staff responsible for an increasing number of important or high-profile programs, and post-pandemic workforce changes. To compound these challenges, OSU also experienced a spike in retirements of long-tenured field staff and senior leaders at county, district and state levels – individuals who often hold critical professional relationships within local communities and statewide agencies that are vital during emergency response efforts. Regardless of the cause of workforce transitions, OSUE must prioritize their role in emergency preparedness to effectively serve the needs of communities.

The purpose of this project was to evaluate OSUE's organizational preparedness for emergency response by systematically gathering feedback from personnel across the organization, ensuring accountability for readiness and capacity at all levels. The research objectives were to

- Assess OSUE personnel's familiarity with current emergency action plans across a range of disaster scenarios.
- Identify training topics and educational materials to increase baseline knowledge and preparedness of OSUE staff for responding to local disaster events.
- Determine the level of interest among OSUE staff in coordinating state-wide efforts to strengthen future disaster response

## **Methods**

A needs assessment was created to evaluate the preparedness of OSUE staff to respond to local disasters. The survey's goal was to inform organizational processes to support county and state-based staff in a disaster.

The target audience consisted of OSUE professionals at the county, district and state levels, regardless of position or title. Recruitment included staff from all four Extension program areas, as well as College and office-based services, representing a total population of approximately 740 employees. Participants were invited to take part in the study through an email invitation from the Extension Director, distributed via the employee listserv. The survey link was included in this letter. Two reminder emails were sent, at one-month intervals to encourage participation. Participants' privacy was maintained in that no personal identifying information was associated with their responses, except for job title. Aggregated data was used based on training needs of job classification rather than by individual participant. This study was reviewed and approved from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

A 17-item needs assessment was created and delivered using Qualtrics software (Appendix). The instrument contained four primary domains. Survey questions included multiple-choice, rank-order, matrix, and open-ended text formats. Follow up questions were automatically generated using skip-logic function when applicable. The survey was reviewed by experienced OSUE professionals external to the research team prior to release to identify potential response bias and improve readability. Quantitative responses were analyzed using Microsoft Excel to summarize and describe the descriptive data.

## **Results**

The survey was completed by 291 participants (39% response rate) representing all four Extension program areas, office services staff, and College faculty (Figure 1). County based Extension professionals, Educators and Program

Coordinators/Assistants, represented the highest response rate, 43% and 33% respectively (Figure 2). Approximately 45% of participants had less than 5 years of professional experience with OSUE, and of those, 11% had less than one year of experience on the job (Figure 3). The survey responses generally reflect the overall distribution for years of service in the organization.

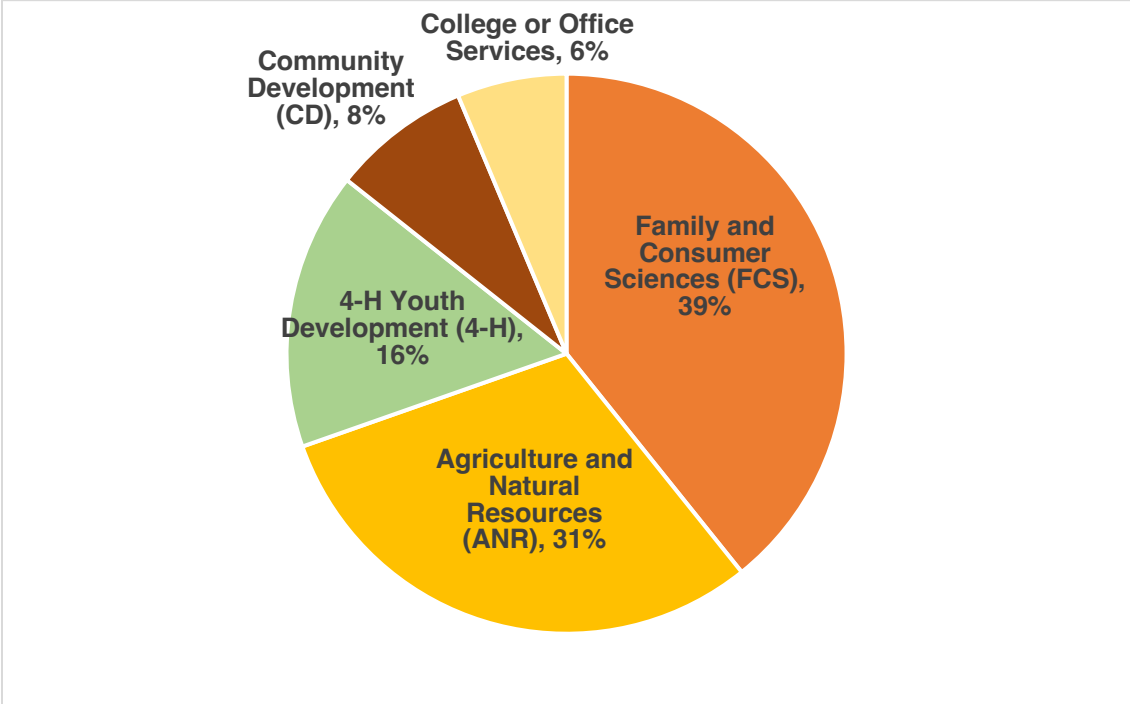


Figure 1. Primary programmatic focus of survey respondents.

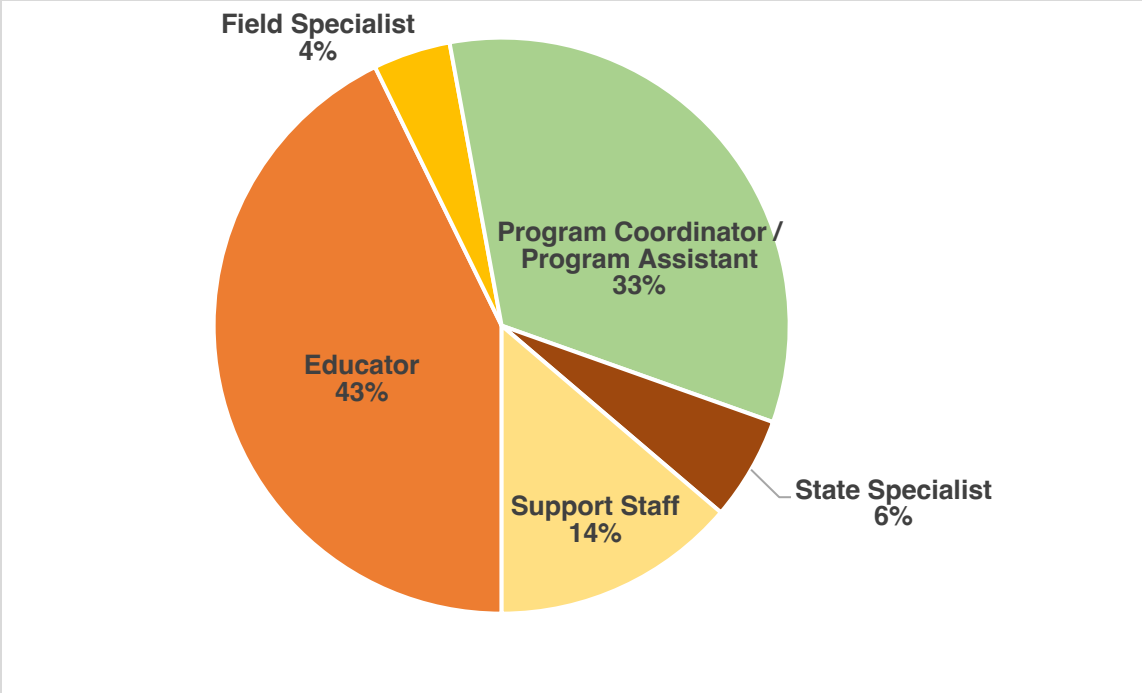


Figure 2. Professional title of participants.

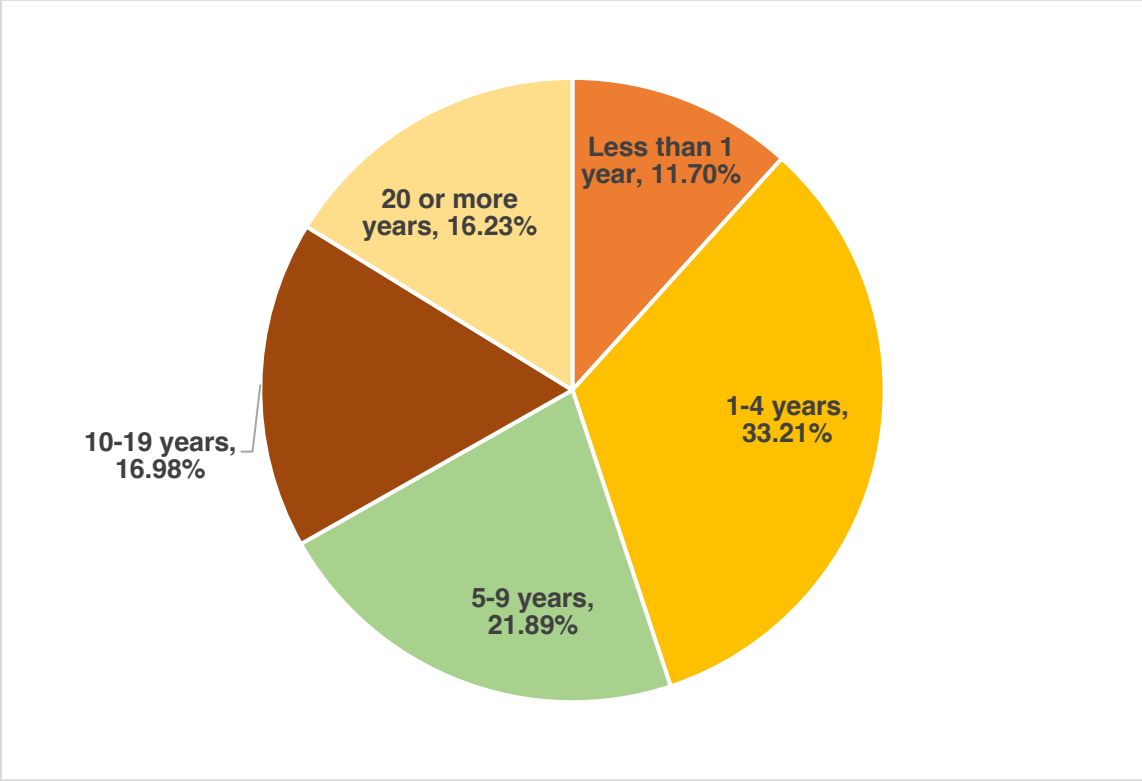


Figure 3. Years of service with Ohio State University Extension

Extension employees have received training to respond to a variety of emergency situations including mental health crisis, first aid, food safety, risk management, biosecurity, and community planning. Despite the training, relatively few Educators possess the ability and confidence to deliver educational programs in their communities on emergency management topics (Figure 4). Topics with the highest mastery of the subject include risk management (i.e. pesticide safety, quality assurance, ServSafe) and food security. Additional areas for training were also identified as priority areas to improve emergency response preparedness (Figure 5).

### Competency Areas of Survey Participants

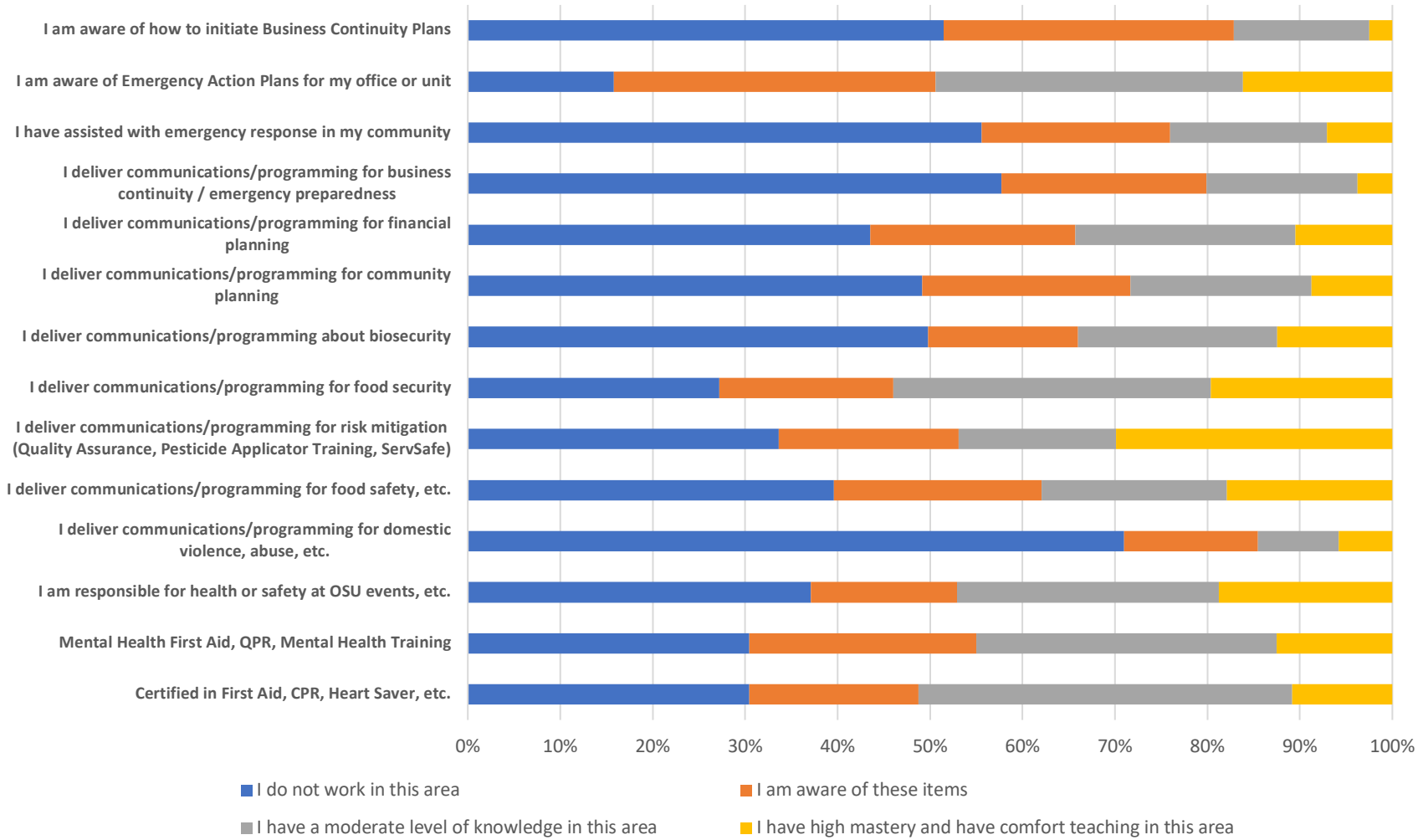


Figure 4. Competency areas of survey participants.



Figure 5. Additional training priorities identified by participants.

OSUE is identified in the ORC as having responsibilities during emergencies that require closely working with county Emergency Management Agencies (EMA). Data reports 68% of participants were unaware of the responsibilities of OSUE as defined by the ORC. Similarly, 69% did not have, or were not sure, if a relationship existed with their county EMA, leaving only 31% of participants with an active, ongoing relationship. In the last five years, 34 participants actively participated in a county emergency response including COVID pandemic assistance, the East Palestine train derailment response, natural disaster recovery, and nuclear disaster preparedness.

There is a willingness of OSUE staff to participate, or increase their participation, in crisis response teams. Approximately 31% indicated interest in serving on a local or state crisis response team, while an additional 35% were unsure about participating.

## Discussion

OSUE professionals are highly trained to work with local clientele within their respective Program Area to mitigate more common risks such as food security, pesticide safety, biosecurity, and mental health awareness. Educational programs in these areas are offered regularly, with regular in-service trainings to maintain up-to-date knowledge and skills. Despite this training, knowledge gaps remain among many OSUE professionals who may be called upon to support large-scale emergency responses requiring coordination with local EMA resources. These gaps have been further compounded by retirements and staff turnover, leading to a loss of valuable institutional knowledge.

Large emergencies are infrequent in Ohio; therefore, response skills are not practiced consistently except for counties with routine evaluated nuclear drills. There are opportunities on the horizon to expand nuclear emergency response, as rural communities face industrial surges to create data centers fueled with nuclear-powered systems (Stauff et al., 2025). Expansion of nuclear power throughout the United States will lead to an increased need for response training among Extension systems. Without regular practice, skills and lines of communication can become stale or broken. To prepare staff at all levels of the organization for these infrequent but critical events it is advisable to create opportunities to practice these skills.

Results from this survey highlighted a need to offer existing training opportunities more frequently and identified additional opportunities for training. Regardless of tenure, OSU professionals should participate in regular trainings and tabletop emergency exercises to enhance their ability to understand their role during crisis situations. Within these trainings, veteran staff can practice skill retention while less experienced staff are introduced to new topics. The training opportunities to be expanded or offered more frequently include:

- Overview of OSUE's responsibilities outlined in the Ohio Revised Code
- Involvement of effected personnel in the annual review of OSUE's continuity planning for county Extension offices

- Events to create relationship building with local Emergency Management Agencies
- Promotion of resources and trainings available through the Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN)

Additionally, 820 survey responses offered insight into additional training needs for OSUE staff. The training topics identified as most needed include:

- Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT)
- Environmental compliance
- Human health programs

There is a clear interest to serve on crisis response teams at both the local and state levels; however, approximately one-third of respondents remain unsure about participating. Reasons behind hesitation to serve were not explored in this survey, presenting an opportunity for further evaluation. Understanding why individuals are hesitant to join crisis response teams could help identify and overcome potential barriers.

The findings offer nationally relevant insights for Extension programs interested in conducting similar assessments of their professionals' knowledge, skills, and readiness to support local and state emergency response efforts. By gaining a clearer understanding of their staff, Extension leaders can more effectively identify strengths, address gaps, and build the organizational capacity needed to serve communities during crises. This study provides a practical, replicable foundation that Extension programs across the country can use to strengthen preparedness and enhance overall disaster resilience.

Limitations commonly associated with surveys collecting self-reported data typically stem from the potential for response bias. To limit this occurrence and prevent where possible, neutral, non-leading language was used in both the survey introduction and questions, with assurance to the survey respondent that all data and responses were anonymized and confidential; information was reported as aggregate data. Prior to

system-wide rollout, the survey instrument was reviewed and piloted by select peers to identify areas or questions in need of revision.

### **Conclusion**

Disaster events require immediate response and decisive actions to address key needs and issues for affected populations. This needs assessment provided insight of OSUE personnel's ability to serve the state in the areas of emergency readiness and response coordination. OSUE professionals reported knowledge and mastery in certain areas, but there is room to improve in each. Improving business continuity operations for county offices is a high priority, as many staff lacked understanding of their roles and participation expectations during local emergencies.

Results will guide OSU administration's future trainings efforts and support the establishment of statewide disaster response teams. A positive outcome was the demonstrated willingness to identify professional development training needs, as well as teaching opportunities for clientele through the train derailment train-the-trainer curriculum.

The land grant mission is rooted in community engagement, providing leadership, education and communications as local citizens seek timely and reliable answers. During crisis situations, communities trust Extension to provide information related to response and recovery efforts. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to enhance the efficiency and response to critical issues during disaster events, and address specific community needs that complement services of other federal agencies.

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix



**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**

COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL,  
AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Hello Extension Colleagues:

Natural and human-caused disasters can affect clients in your county on any given day. As Extension staff, we need to prepare to serve our fellow citizens effectively thus preparation prior to the event is critical.

Our team has received funding from a NIFA grant “Preparing Extension to Respond to Train Derailments and Other Community Disasters” to create a curriculum to enhance the capacity of OSU Extension personnel to respond to these events. One of our objectives is to determine “the readiness” of our Extension organization to respond to emergencies. We will use this survey to establish a state-wide baseline for crisis response preparedness. Ultimately this information will help our organization to develop a crisis preparation curriculum to best support future trainings and resources in this area.

The survey will take 5-8 minutes of your time. Completion of this survey is voluntary and will have no impact upon your role and/or employment with OSU Extension. This information will be used to further our mission to serve Ohio clientele in the area of natural disasters (fires, floods, tornadoes, etc), biological disasters (including animal-, avian-, or human-transferred diseases), or man-made disasters (like acts of terrorism). All responses will be de-identified, meaning you will not indicate your name on the survey.

We will work to make sure that no one intercepts your survey responses without approval. But because we are using the Internet, there is a chance that someone could access your online responses without permission. In some cases this information could be used to identify you. Your de-identified responses may be used or shared with other researchers without your additional informed consent. All collected information will be reported to sponsors and administrators as aggregated data, not as individual responses.

The American Dairy Association has provided OSU Extension with \$300 of Dairy Queen coupons for 60 participants who take the survey. All persons completing a survey will have their name entered in a lottery-styled drawing, for a chance to receive DQ coupons. At the end of

the survey, there are instructions for how you will include your name in the lottery drawing for the coupon.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

Thank you, Dee Jepsen, Haley Shoemaker, Lee Beers, David Civittolo

Do you consent to answer the survey questions? By clicking yes, you will be taken to the questions. If you do not consent, click no to exit this survey.

- Yes
- No

## **General Information**

Your position:

- Educator
- Program Coordinator / Program Assistant
- Support Staff
- Field Specialist
- State Specialist

Office or Department location(s):

\*Respondents were given a dropdown list of Ohio's 88 County locations, as well as regional/Campus Locations

OSUE Program Area (select any that apply):

- Agriculture and Natural Resources
- Community Development
- Family Consumer Sciences
- 4-H Youth Development
- College or Office Services

How long have you worked with the Ohio State University?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-4 years
- 5-9 years
- 10-19 years
- 20 or more years

Length of time in current position:

- Less than 1 year
- 1-4 years
- 5-9 years
- 10-19 years
- 20 or more years

In your position, how do you work with emergency response plans or teams? Select any that apply.

I am certified in First Aid, CPR, Heart Saver, or other types of human health assistance training.	I am aware of these items	I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am certified in Mental Health First Aid, QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer), or other types of mental health training.	I am aware of these items	I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am responsible for persons' health or safety attending OSUE events, camps, and programs.	I am aware of these items	I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I deliver communications / programs for domestic violence, abuse, personal welfare, etc.	I am aware of these items	I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I deliver communications / programs about food safety (canning/preservation, raw milk, cooking temperatures, etc.)	I am aware of these items	I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I deliver communications / programs for risk mitigations to prevent outbreaks (ServSafe / Pesticide Applicators Training / Livestock Quality Assurance).	I am aware of these items	I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I deliver communications / programs about food security.	<input type="radio"/> I am aware of these items	<input type="radio"/> I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	<input type="radio"/> I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
I deliver communications / programs about biosecurity.	<input type="radio"/> I am aware of these items	<input type="radio"/> I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	<input type="radio"/> I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
I deliver communications / programs for community planning.	<input type="radio"/> I am aware of these items	<input type="radio"/> I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	<input type="radio"/> I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
I deliver communications / programs for financial planning.	<input type="radio"/> I am aware of these items	<input type="radio"/> I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	<input type="radio"/> I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
I deliver communications / programs for business continuity / emergency preparedness.	<input type="radio"/> I am aware of these items	<input type="radio"/> I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	<input type="radio"/> I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
I have assisted with emergency response planning for my community (i.e. fairgrounds, county buildings, etc).	<input type="radio"/> I am aware of these items	<input type="radio"/> I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area	<input type="radio"/> I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I am aware of emergency action plans for my office or unit. For example: fire, tornados, flood, medical emergencies, or chemical spills.

I am aware of these items

I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area

I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area

I am aware of how to initiate Business Continuity Planning for my office, building, or unit after the impacts of an emergency or disaster.

I am aware of these items

I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area

I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area

Other, please describe in next question.

I am aware of these items

I have a moderate level of knowledge in this area

I have high mastery and have comfort teaching in this area

Please describe any other emergency management experiences that you have - for items not included in the question above.

### **Past Disaster Response Participation/Involvement**

Do you have an established relationship with the County or State Emergency Management Agency (EMA)?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

Have you worked to support a county/state disaster response within the last 5 years?

Yes. If so, what was the nature of the disaster and your role in the response

No

Not Sure

5. Do you know that OSU Extension has emergency management responsibilities in the Ohio Revised Code?

Yes

No

Unsure

Have you heard of the Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN)?

How do you prefer to receive training and information about emergency preparedness training? (Please check any that apply.)

Webinars

During program meetings with directors (i.e. Between the Rows, Chat with Pat, Clover Connections)

In EERA or area meetings

Yearly review as an online training

Stand-Alone In-Person Training

During Extension Annual Conference

Other, Please Specify

What types of resources and /or trainings would be most helpful to you in preparing for a disaster response in your community? (Please check any that apply.)

- BERP (Bovine Emergency Response Planning)
- LEAP (Livestock Emergency Action Planning)
- CERT (Community Emergency Response Team)
- NIMS (National Incident Management System)
- Chemical Response
- Community-related biosecurity
- Human health
- Environmental compliance (i.e. water quality, drinking water, air quality, soil contamination, etc)
- Other, Please Specify

Would you like to serve on an OSU Extension crisis response team?

- Yes, In My County / Area
- Yes, In The State
- No
- Not Sure

Do you have any established relationships with agencies, organizations, community groups, or businesses that are focused on disaster response?

- Yes, Please Specify
- No
- Not Sure

## **End of Survey**

Thank you for your response. Your information has been collected. To be entered in the lottery-style drawing for a \$5 Dairy Queen coupon (sponsored by the American Dairy Association), please click "next" to leave this survey page, and add your name to a separate entry form.