

# Strengthening relationships between state university extension systems and nuisance wildlife control operators

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**THE LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITY EXTENSION** system is an American success story. The general mission of extension is to be a research-based information broker between the university and public stakeholders. Examples of successful long-term partnerships between extension and industry include agriculture, structural pest control, and the green industry (turfgrass and landscape management). There is, however, the potential for the development of another partnership with the relatively new industry of private sector nuisance wildlife control.

To help inform my thinking on the current status and potential of such relationships, I queried 12 wildlife extension specialists (most with extension positions at land-grant universities), 17 county extension educators in New York State, and 7 private-sector nuisance wildlife control operators (NWCO). I asked them for descriptions of interaction between NWCOs and extension and whether they viewed these relationships as productive. I also asked what were the challenges to successful interactions. Finally, I asked for their perspectives on what NWCOs and extension can do for each other.

They reported to me that many positive interactions already have occurred between extension systems and the NWCO industry. Such interactions included technical and educational support, classroom and workshop speakers, collaboration on research projects, publications review, committee service, and referral-making.

The people I interviewed believed that inadequate communication seemed to be the main barrier to improving interactions. Several state-level specialists described reaching NWCOs (with their busy, on-the-road work schedules) as a challenge to effective relationships. Extension's tendency to encourage do-it-yourself approaches for homeowners also was mentioned as a source of tension with the NWCO industry. Some wildlife extension specialists that I interviewed

also felt that a minority of NWCOs was resistant to change. Wildlife extension specialists felt that they could provide specialty training to NWCOs, such as that required by regulation agencies before people are allowed to control Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*). Extension can serve as a go-between for the industry and the regulatory agencies and help give the industry better visibility and recognition. The wildlife extension specialists in my survey felt that extension could, for example, record the valuable practical field experience of NWCOs. Extension researchers also could investigate questions that are important to NWCOs.

Many of the county educators I surveyed from New York State pointed out the need for up-to-date NWCO referral lists; they also pointed out a lack of knowledge about specific NWCOs. Information on types of work each NWCO does and geographical area of operation would be helpful. Some educators mentioned that organizational restriction prevents them from making referrals to businesses. Some have received complaints from referred people concerning the expense of hiring an NWCO.

NWCOs felt that extension can help the industry define itself and develop. Extension has the potential for providing continuing education for NWCOs. They also believe that extension personnel need to better understand the laws associated with nuisance wildlife. A frequent example cited is extension recommending mothballs to repel wildlife. The NWCOs also wanted extension to recommend practical solutions to wildlife problems. Several of the NWCOs felt that extension was too influenced by activists. One also described an example that he believed was a conflict of interest, whereby an extension agent had a nuisance wildlife control business on the side.

Improving referrals would be advantageous to both extension and NWCOs, especially at the county level. Increasing the amount of personal contact is important. NWCOs should visit

extension offices, and extension educators could spend a day with an NWCO. Providing up-to-date, informative lists (possibly on the Internet) of available NWCOs is important for extension offices. Extension should inform prospective referrals about who NWCOs are and that they are fee-based. At the state level, and possibly nationally, relationships between the extension system and the NWCO industry could become more formalized. This would provide a framework for consistent and sustainable interaction. Collaborations could include research (e.g. identifying needs of industry, field assistance, recording field knowledge, and developing funding mechanisms), professional development (e.g., NWCO education), and joint initiatives (e.g., licensing, certification, and public outreach).

The most highly-developed interaction that I came across was in Virginia where the Center for Human–Wildlife Conflict has been recently established. The state-level wildlife extension specialist is the director of this center, with NWCOs serving on the advisory board. Creation of the center has greatly improved the relationship between Virginia’s extension system and the state’s NWCO industry. As a result, the center is responding to specific industry needs, such as training and licensing issues.

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