IdaH2O Master Water Stewards Volunteer Water Monitoring Program: A Case Study

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University of Idaho Extension Service has created a unique volunteer water quality monitoring program at the confluence of education and data collection called IDAH2O Master Water Stewards. Maintaining water quality is necessary for drinking supply, recreation, and fisheries. Water monitoring is integral to maintaining quality, and successful monitoring programs are coupled with a robust outreach program. However, in Idaho, funding constraints require that state agencies prioritize only areas with known TMDL or other water quality problems; funding for educational programming is equally sparse. Volunteer monitoring by IDAH2O helps to meet substantial gaps in statewide data collection and outreach.

The proposed presentation is a case study for the benefit of those interested in starting a volunteer water quality monitoring program. Quantitative data from the case study includes patterns of volunteers and monitoring site increases, spatial distribution of sites, active v. passive volunteer ratios, active v. inactive registered sites, percentages of trained volunteers v. active volunteers. Qualitative data will include rich descriptions of processes employed in program development, constructive (and sometimes otherwise) critiques of the program, and unanticipated delays.

IDAH2O was launched in fall 2010 and currently has over 100 certified volunteers. Participants in the program attend an 8-hour workshop, and then adopt a stream location to conduct regular monitoring. Volunteers can monitor lakes or streams, and some volunteers are active with other volunteer programs such as IDEQ's Community Volunteer Water Monitoring (CVMP), UI Extension Master Forest Stewards, IFG Master Naturalists, and/or those of nonprofit organizations such as Pend Oreille Waterkeeper and the Sierra Club's Water Sentinel programs. The IDAH2O project has recently commissioned a customized online, real-time Hydrological Information System to allow volunteers to enter data through online forms and immediately publish this data via an interactive map.

Future directions for the program: increased presence in K-12 science classrooms, teacher education and curricular support, "Mobile Bug Lab" (my apologies to all the entomologists out there) development to bring the "field" to the people, and expansion to distant parts of Idaho through development of distance training and partnerships with outside organizations.