



AgriLife Extension  
South Region



## South District 12



# Making a Difference... ...in Starr County

## District Extension Newsletter for Commissioners' Courts in South Texas



**E. Yolanda Scrivner-Morado**

Family & Consumer Sciences



**Omar Montemayor**

Agriculture & Natural Resources



**Rolando R. Zamora**

Agriculture & Natural Resources



THE TEXAS A&M  
UNIVERSITY SYSTEM  
AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH &  
EXTENSION CENTER AT WESLACO

Dr. Ruben J. Saldaña  
District Administrator  
2401 E. Highway 83  
Weslaco, Texas 78596  
956.968.5581  
956.969.5639 fax  
rjsaldana@ag.tamu.edu

In 2007, AgriLife Extension celebrated the 100th anniversary of the County Extension Agent and of the Texas 4-H Program. I want to thank you for your continued support of Extension, but more importantly, for the opportunity it provides us to serve the people of Starr County. I hope you find this newsletter helpful in updating you about the difference that Extension education is making in Starr County and the public benefits these differences mean economically, socially, and environmentally to the community. We feel strongly that these preventive, educational approaches to community issues provide present and long term value to the County and its residents.

Dr. Ruben J. Saldaña  
District Extension Administrator

## Agriculture and Natural Resources

### Rio Grande Valley Bull Gain Test & Heifer Development Program

South Texas beef cattle producers lack access to a standardized program or uniform environment to compare evaluate their bull & heifer development. They are unable to identify bulls & heifers within a herd which are genetically superior in feed conversion and reproductive ability. A standardized feeding regime and data collection program was developed by agents in the four county Rio Grande Valley area. Throughout November and December, initial test weights were taken after the 14-day adjustment period. Initial weight of bulls & heifers is calculated using the average of two consecutive days of weighing. Mid-way through the feeding period, a 56-day weight is taken for each bull & heifer. A final or 112-day weight is calculated in the same manner used for initial weight. Hip height and scrotal circumference measurements are taken at the beginning and completion of the feeding period. Also, at the end of the feeding period, sheath scores, rib eye area and fat thickness measurements are taken. After final weights are figured on the last day, a field day is held to inform consignors and interested producers on the results of the gain test. Awards are presented to the top gaining bulls. Bulls are then sorted into cull, keep and sale groups. The cull bulls are usually fed out and sent to slaughter. The Rio Grande Valley Bull Gain Test & Heifer Development Program has been an ongoing program for the last ten years and is held in cooperation with the agriculture agents in the four county Rio Grande Valley.

### Vegetable Grower Food Safety Program

A Good Agricultural Practices Program (GAP) program was initiated with twelve Starr County Vegetable growers in 2005. The farm assessment program was designed to assist growers with the process of identifying risks, developing appropriate solutions and implementing good agricultural practices to reduce risk. Dr. Juan Anciso, Extension Vegetable Specialist, assisted with the three educational activity program that incorporated resource material developed from Cornell University. A pre and post test evaluation revealed a 90% participant intent to adopt agricultural best management practices that would reduce microbial risk associated with fresh produce food safety.

### Kids & Kows & More -Agriculture Literacy Program

Over 1500 4<sup>th</sup> grade students from Rio Grande City, Roma, Immaculate Conception, and San Isidro along with their teachers have attended the Kids & Kows & More Agriculture Literacy Program in 2006 and 2007. During the event, students visit exhibits that represent important food & agriculture commodities that are important in our region. Students also learn how these commodities help farmers and ranchers establish a profitable income. This educational program is sponsored by the local Farm Bureau and is assisted by all members in the Texas AgriLife Extension Service Office in Starr County.

# Strengthening Families & Improving Health

## Diabetes Education, Awareness and Management

Texas AgriLife Extension Service worked to improve the health of Starr County residents by conducting culturally competent diabetes health programs designed for Hispanics. The three major steps of the program are careful planning, assessment of the cultural characteristics of the disease. First meetings and private consultations were held with key individuals: physicians, nurses, dietitians, community workers, religious leaders, political leaders, and individuals with Type II diabetes – so they would understand clearly Extension’s role in diabetes education, awareness and management. Extension activities include ongoing support groups, diabetes management symposium, diabetes prevention workshops for volunteers, diabetes youth fitness camps, health fairs that provide screenings, and implementation of the “Do Well, Be Well with Diabetes” and “Cooking Well with Diabetes” curricula.

## Resource Management/Entrepreneurship

Making ends meet is tough for most of us. For low-income families of Starr County it is an overwhelming task. Beginning in 1980, Texas AgriLife Extension Service has provided education to enable families to make informed financial decisions. Proportionally, low-income families pay more than others for financial services, insurance, housing, food, gas and health care. In many instances, the undue burdens placed on low-income families shatters their hopes of getting out of poverty. Beginning in 1989, Texas AgriLife Extension Service has provided financial literacy programs designed to help these families find a way out of credit debt and better manage their finances. Service providers and educators became volunteer teachers, helping poor families increase their personal knowledge, set money goals, make spending and saving plans, set up bank accounts use credit wisely and get out of debt. For the past four years the Pasos Al Mercado Program has planted the seeds for a growing field of dreams for Hispanics women in the Rio Grande Valley. More than 20 volunteer educators have helped more than 200 women build their skills and unlock their entrepreneurial creativity. Ten women are now in the process of applying for SBA Loans to start their own business ventures.

## Better Living for Texans Program (BLT)

The Better Living for Texans Program, which started in 1994 teaches nutrition, food safety, wellness and financial management to food stamp recipients and others with limited resources. The innovative BLT curriculum has been customized to the needs of Hispanics audiences, and the program is offered in numerous sites in the county making it highly accessible to residents. By offering hands-on cooking opportunities in people’s homes, BLT shows families how to plan and prepare meals on a limited budget. Participants have shown behavior changes in the way they select, prepare and serve family meals. They also have taken charge of other aspects of their lives and are moving down the road toward self-sufficiency. For the past five years, the Starr County BLT Program match has been at the highest Platinum level. It is one of the most successful family nutrition programs in the county, reaching more than 5,000 limited resource families each year with creative and innovative information that helps them manage their limited resources and live healthier lives through proper nutrition. The program also reaches 3,000 school children with nutrition information each year. Two program assistants Norma Garcia and Irma Ortiz craft nutrition and physical activity into neighborhood programs across Starr County.

2008

## Educational Outreach

### Education in Group Settings

Number of Sessions	573
Number Contacts	37,695
Hrs Instruction	176,234

### Education for Individuals

Office Visits	1,493
Site Visits	15,320
Phone Consultation	2,121
Mail/Email	6,026
By Volunteers	6,731

Visit us at:  
<http://starr-tx.tamu.edu>

## 2008 4-H Enrollment

Club Members	220
School Enrichment	681
Special Interests	2,892
Total Enrollment	3,793

