4-H project camps and school programs gain popularity with parents and kids

The Situation
As the economy in Butte County has become more challenging, parents are having to work longer hours and sometimes more jobs to make ends meet. Parents find it increasingly difficult to volunteer as traditional 4-H leaders, leading to a reduction in project offerings and opportunities for informal education for youth.

Butte County has a large number of parents working/commuting long hours or working more than one job. The number of parents volunteering as 4-H leaders has fallen from 43 in 2007 to 10 in 2009, with the resulting decline in the number of children involved in 4-H projects. In 2009 no clothing, leadership or shooting sports projects were exhibited at the county 4-H fair.

While project and leader enrollments have declined, the number of children needing educational opportunities has increased, and extension resources have remained static.

Our Response
Following examples in other counties, in 2009, we began to develop our own week-long project camp program. For a nominal fee to cover supplies, parents were encouraged to bring their children to the project camps every day for a week. Completed projects were exhibited at the fair. Initially, the program depended entirely on extension office resources to organize and teach the projects.

Also during this period, teachers at the Arco Elementary School recognized a need to provide after school educational and recreational activities that children were not receiving. They approached the Butte 4-H Council and the Extension Office to help teach an educational and recreational program one afternoon a week for 6 weeks during the winter. The council and extension office responded by providing curricula and volunteers.

Program Outcomes
The spring-break and summer 4-H project camps have expanded to children each completing two projects, which are exhibited at the county fair. Initially only a limited number of project opportunities were available, due to lack of personnel. However, it has become somewhat easier to recruit volunteers to teach in both the conventional and summer camp program.

The afterschool program has continued for 3 years and has expanded. Not only have these children completed interesting, educational and recreational activities in the program, 25% have become involved in conventional 4-H projects, 4-H summer camp and 4-H summer project camp as a result of their expo-
sure to Extension in the afterschool program. In addition, teachers have become more aware of Extension, and some have volunteered as conventional 4-H leaders. This has lead to a closer and more collaborative relationship between the extension office and the school.

- Summer project camp has expanded from 12 in 2009 to 16 in 2010.
- Summer project camp volunteers have increased 250%, from 2 in 2009 to 5 in 2010.
- Afterschool participation in 2010 was 173% of 2009 participation, increasing from 60 to 104.
- 25 children moved into conventional 4-H from the afterschool program in 2010.
- 3 children who participated in the afterschool embryology class, joined 4-H and 2 gave demonstrations at the county fair demonstration contest.
- 22 sewing, cooking projects, which had entirely disappeared from the 4-H fair, were exhibited in 2010.
- General 4-H Enrollment in 2010 was 132% of 2009 enrollment, increasing from 53 to 70 regular club members.
- Youth participation in all Extension sponsored activities has increased 300% from 88 in 2009 to 264 in 2010.

The Future
We intend to continue the summer project camp each summer, expanding offerings by giving volunteers an alternative way to participate in the 4-H program. We also intend to expand the program to the Little Lost River Valley where 4-H participation has dwindled.

We will continue to support the Arco Elementary School after-school program with curricula, direct and volunteer support, as well as seeking financial assistance to enhance and extend after-school opportunities and supervision.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors
- Butte County 4-H Council
- Arco Elementary School
- Summer feeding program through the school lunch program
- Butte County
- Butte County Fair Board
- Epiphany Episcopal Church
- United Dairymen of Idaho