

# Encouraging Landscape Water-Conservation Behaviors #4: Florida Homeowners' Reactions to Messages that Encourage Landscape Water Conservation Practice Adoption<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This is the fourth publication in a series focused on improving and encouraging water conservation among Florida residents who use irrigation in their home landscape. In the series' third publication, *Developing Extension and Outreach Messages That Encourage Landscape Water Conservation Practice Adoption*, readers were introduced to the concept of message framing, how to use message framing to reach a specific audience, and different types of message frames. This publication examines the impact of differently framed messages on Florida residents' attitudes toward good irrigation practices and their perceived ability to implement those practices. By understanding how the target audience responds to these different messages, Extension professionals can incorporate message frames into their communication to further encourage good water conservation practices.

## Importance of Message Framing to Extension Programming

More impactful Extension programming can be achieved when we have a good understanding of the target audience, and how different messages and ways of communicating may impact them (Telg & Irani, 2012). When conveying information about environmental concerns, "simple education that invokes this information is often insufficient to move people to action" (Shaw, 2010, p. 109). Therefore, it is important not only to educate about water conservation, but also to communicate strategically about water conservation. As Extension educators, we must design programs that positively impact our clientele, which can be enhanced by selecting appropriate messages for the clientele. Creating messages that resonate with our intended audience can better ensure that water conservation behaviors are improved and the adoption of new practices continues (Telg & Irani, 2012).

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## Understanding the Impact of Message Frames

A survey of 1,063 Florida residents who used irrigation in their home landscape tested the impact of four strategically framed messages on attitudes toward good irrigation practices and perceived ability to implement those practices (Warner, Rumble, Martin, Lamm, & Cantrell, 2015). Both of these characteristics related positively to Extension clients' behavior change. Each message contained a combination of a gain or loss frame and personal or social frame, previously discussed in the third part of this series, *Developing Extension and Outreach Messages that Encourage Landscape Water Conservation Practice Adoption*. The messages that were tested included the following:

- Message 1 (Gain, Personal): By conserving water through good irrigation practices you will waste less water throughout your lifetime.
- Message 2 (Loss, Personal): By wasting water through poor irrigation practices you will waste more water throughout your lifetime.
- Message 3 (Gain, Social): By conserving water through good irrigation practices you will be seen as a role model in the fight to ensure that water is available for future generations.
- Message 4 (Loss, Social): By wasting water through poor irrigation practices you will not be seen as a role model in the fight to ensure that water is available for future generations.

Respondents' attitudes toward good irrigation practices significantly improved after being exposed to the strategically framed messages (Warner et al., 2015). When looking at the messages individually, all messages resulted in increased positive attitudes. However, the change in attitude was only statistically significant for messages 1, 2, and 3. The respondents' perceived ability to implement good irrigation practices also improved after being exposed to strategically framed messages. Messages 1, 2, and 3 all improved the respondents' perceived ability to implement good irrigation practices. However, the improvement in perceived ability was only statistically significant for messages 1 and 3 (Warner et al., 2015).

## How to Use this Information

Understanding the impact of message frames helps us to understand how communication will be perceived by potential clientele. The message testing examined in this EDIS document provides insight into the effects communication

can have on Florida residents who use irrigation in their home landscape. When working with a group of clientele to improve water conservation through good irrigation practices, Extension educators should consider the following communication strategies.

- Consider using communication that demonstrates what the clientele can gain from implementing good irrigation practices. The survey examined in this document showed that the messages that included a gain were significantly more effective in improving attitudes toward good irrigation practices and perceived ability to implement them.
- Pair the gain frame in your communication with a value that is important to the clientele. In the survey examined in this document, both personal and social values were found to significantly improve attitudes toward good irrigation practices and perceived ability to implement them. However, other values may also be important to the clientele such as economic, environmental, or ethical values. See which values resonate most with your clientele and use these in your communication in order to move your clientele to action. For example, if saving money is very important to your clientele then communicating about ways to save money on their water bill through good irrigation practices could motivate them to implement water conservation practices.
- Be careful using communication that focuses on what clientele can lose if they do not implement good communication practices. Communication that focuses on a loss can be perceived as threatening. In addition, as seen in the study examined in this document, the loss-framed messages did not result in significant increases in perceived ability to implement good irrigation practices, and only one of the loss-framed messages significantly improved attitudes. While the loss-framed messages did not necessarily have a negative effect on perceived ability or attitude, the significant positive impacts of the gained-framed messages are more likely to result in desired programmatic outcomes.

Do not underestimate the power of good communication. The study under examination in this document demonstrated improvements in attitudes and perceived ability when presented with a strategic message. In the absence of those messages, improvement in attitudes and perceived ability would be limited. Think carefully about how you can incorporate strategic communication and messages into your programming to help facilitate attitudinal and behavior change among your clientele.

## Conclusions

Messages have the potential to improve clients' attitudes and perceived ability toward improving water conservation through good irrigation practices. Creating messages that resonate with targeted clientele can better ensure that water conservation behaviors are improved and the adoption of new practices continues (Telg & Irani, 2012). Extension educators are encouraged to use this information when developing programming that appeals to their audience and similar clientele when encouraging changes in landscape irrigation practices.

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## Appendix: Encouraging Water Conservation Behaviors Series Overview

The *Encouraging Landscape Water Conservation Behaviors* series was developed to address ways to promote specific behaviors—the adoption of water-saving practices and technologies—to a specific target audience, Florida residents who use irrigation in their home landscapes. These EDIS publications provide information to help Florida Extension professionals understand this target audience and create more effective programming.

### ***#1: Tailoring Programs to Florida Residents Who Use Irrigation in the Home Landscape (WC199)***

Summary: This publication describes commonalities among this target audience and describes Florida residents who use irrigation in the home landscape. By understanding characteristics of this audience, Extension professionals can develop more effective and targeted programming for this audience.

### ***#2: Applying Audience Segmentation to Water Conservation Activities in the Landscape—Defining Segments of the Florida Homeowner Audience and Implications for Extension Programming (WC200)***

Summary: This publication describes how segmentation can be applied to increase the effectiveness of Extension programming and defines specific segments of this audience.

### ***#3: Developing Extension and Outreach Messages (WC201)***

Summary: This publication defines message framing, gain- and loss-framed messages, and value frames. Extension educators are encouraged to incorporate framed messages into their programming.

### ***#4: Florida Homeowners' Reactions to Messages that Encourage Landscape Water Conservation Practice Adoption (WC202)***

Summary: This publication examines attitudes and perceived behavioral control over good irrigation practices among Florida residents who use irrigation in the home landscape. The impact of different messages that Extension educators may use to encourage water conservation is presented.

### ***#5: Segmenting the Audience Based on HOA Status (WC203)***

Summary: This publication segments Florida residents who irrigate by HOA status. Commonalities and differences among those who belong to an HOA and those who do not belong to an HOA are explored. Extension educators can use this information to understand how HOA status impacts water conservation practices.

**#6: Information-Seeking Preferences of Florida Residents Use Irrigation in the Home Landscape (WC204)**

Summary: This publication examines information-seeking preferences of Florida residents who use irrigation in the home landscape. Extension educators can use this publication to understand how residents seek information and the type of water conservation information that residents would like to learn about.

**#7: Personal and Social Norms of Florida Residents Who Use Irrigation in the Home Landscape (WC205)**

Summary: This publication examines personal and social norms of Florida residents who use irrigation in the home landscape and describes how these characteristics can impact water conservation practices. Extension educators are encouraged to tailor programs that will encourage good irrigation practices and water conservation activities based on personal/social beliefs.