



The Center for Public Issues Education
IN AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Florida Legislative Aides' Communication Preferences and Perceptions of IFAS

Final Report

Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and
Natural Resources

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Introduction

In an effort to enhance the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences' (IFAS) legislative position, this study was commissioned by IFAS Senior Vice President, Dr. Jack Payne and Director for Governmental Affairs Mary Ann Gosa. This study sought to better understand legislative aides' perceptions of IFAS, as well as their preferred method of communication regarding policy issues. Legislative aides were chosen as the population for this study based on their accessibility and because they typically serve as the gatekeepers of information for elected officials. The results from this study will be used to develop research-based marketing strategies to effectively communicate information about IFAS contributions to the state, so as to propel IFAS into greater state-wide recognition and legislative success. It can be assumed that by properly and effectively communicating with legislative aides, IFAS' policy agenda will be disseminated in an even more effective manner to congressional members.

Methodology

To conduct this study, online survey methodology was used. Researchers at the Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources (PIE Center) developed a questionnaire to measure state legislative aides' communication preferences and their perceptions of the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. The questionnaire was pilot tested with four experienced legislative aides. The results from the pilot test indicated that the questionnaire was valid and reliable. Additionally, a panel of experts reviewed the questionnaire for both face and content validity.

In order to collect the names and emails of legislative aides, researchers used two state web site directories. A total of 251 legislative aide emails were collected, with 122 representing the House of Representatives and 129 collected from the Senate. Respondents were asked about their preferred communication channels, the frequency in which they use certain communication channels, their perceptions of IFAS, and their perceptions of the Solutions for Your Life message theme. Data analysis is primarily based upon reporting means and frequencies

Results

A total 71 respondents have completed a portion of the survey. Forty-nine of those respondents have completed the survey in its entirety and 22 have completed some portion of the survey. The response rate for this survey is approximately 28%.

Results are as follows:

Question 1

In your role as legislative staff, please rate each of the following sources of information based on the frequency you use them as a resource for gathering policy information.

Question	Never Use	Rarely Use	Sometimes Use	Frequently Use	Responses	Mean
Web	0	1	5	52	58	3.88
Communication with Experts	0	1	19	39	59	3.64
Constituent E-mail	0	2	23	35	60	3.55
Newspapers	1	7	15	36	59	3.46
Fact Sheets	1	5	24	29	59	3.37
Interest Group E-mail	0	16	30	12	58	2.93
News Magazines	3	19	24	12	58	2.78
Other (Describe)	1	1	0	2	4	2.75
Brochure	4	22	31	2	59	2.53
Public Radio Broadcasting	5	32	13	8	58	2.41
Public Television Broadcasting	7	24	23	4	58	2.41

This scale is a 1-4 scale with 1 being never use and 4 being frequently use. The results indicate that the top three frequently used sources of information by Florida legislative aides are:

1. The Web
2. Communication with Experts
3. Constituent E-mail

Public Radio Broadcasting and Public Television Broadcasting were rated as the least frequently used. “Other” types of sources of information included: OPPAGA and legislative, legal research.

Question 2

Since the Web was rated as the number one answer as a resource for gathering policy information, the questionnaire asked which web sites legislative aides were using most frequently to gather policy information.

In your role as legislative staff, please rate each of the following web sources of information based on the frequency you use them as a resource for gathering policy information.

Question	Never Use	Rarely Use	Sometimes Use	Frequently Use	Responses	Mean
Search Engines	0	4	13	43	60	3.65
Online Newspapers	1	4	16	38	59	3.54
Blogs	8	18	20	10	56	2.57
Wikipedia	16	25	10	6	57	2.11
Facebook	22	19	11	6	58	2.02
YouTube	21	25	10	1	57	1.84
Other Social Media (describe)	5	1	2	0	8	1.63
Other Web site (describe)	4	0	0	1	5	1.60
Twitter	37	13	4	3	57	1.53

This scale is a 1-4 scale with 1 being never use and 4 being frequently use. The top three web sources of information were:

1. Search Engines
2. Online Newspapers
3. Blogs

Other social media sites that were included LinkedIn.

Other websites that were listed included The Sayfie Review.

Question 3

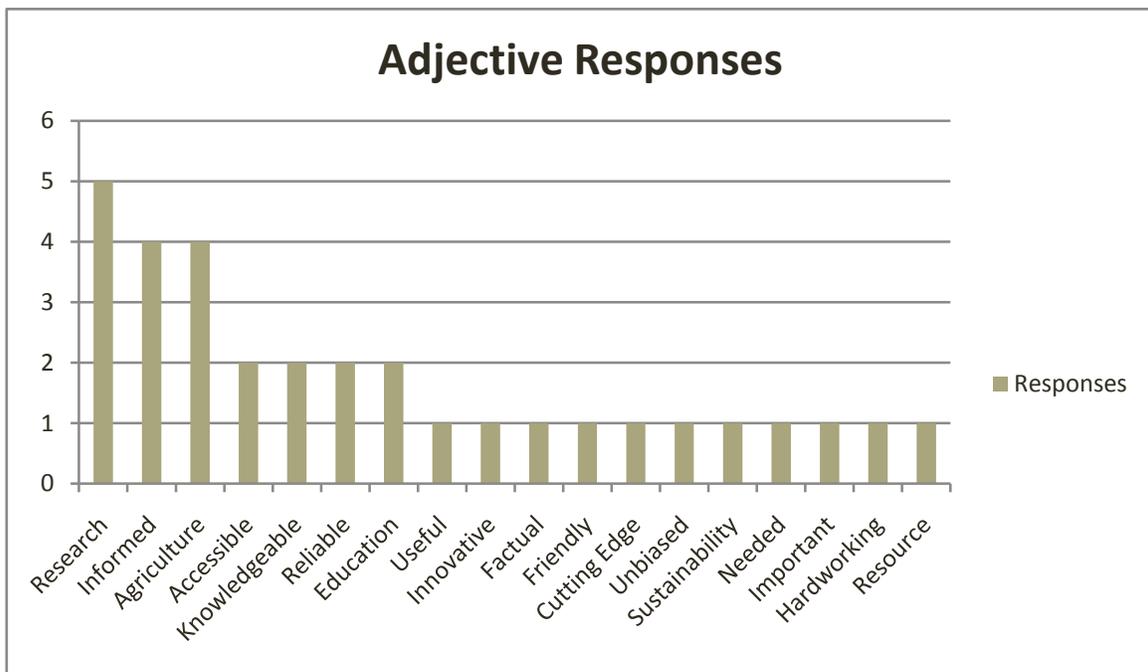
What organizations in Florida are you aware of that conduct research and/or provide information and education about food, agriculture, and natural resources? (n=23)

Text Response	Number of Responses
IFAS	16
Farm Bureau	6
Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services	6
Florida Cattlemen's Association	4
OPPAGA	3
Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association	2
Florida Nursery Growers and Landscape Association	2
4-H	2
Department of Education	1
Dairy Farmers	1
Lakewatch	1
Fish and Wildlife Commission	1
Department of Environmental Protection	1
Department of Citrus	1
FFA	1
UF	1
Duda Family	1

Question 4

In general, what three words would you say best describe UF/IFAS?

Text Response
informative/useful/innovative
Accessible Knowledgeable Factual
accessible, informative, friendly
eradicate infectious bugs
research body under UF
FL Agriculture arm
Reliable. Cutting-edge. Unbiased.
sustainability, agriculture, research
They are very important to the area I live in with helping the cattleman as well as the farmers with the latest and greatest that work.
Important, Knowledgeable, Informative
Needed, Hard-working, Great staff
education, agriculture, research
Education, agriculture, resource
agriculture, Florida, research
informed, well-researched, reliable



Question 5

The following is a list of UF and UF/IFAS information sources. Please tell us if you've ever used any of these sources when gathering policy information.

Question	Never Use	Rarely Use	Sometimes Use	Frequently Use	Responses
UF/IFAS Extension Agents	22%	24%	41%	14%	37
UF/IFAS Printed Publication(s)	11%	25%	56%	8%	36
UF/IFAS External Relations	22%	19%	47%	11%	36
Brochures	36%	14%	47%	3%	36
UF/IFAS Faculty Researcher(s)	34%	20%	34%	11%	35
Solutions for Your Life Web site	69%	23%	9%	0%	35
Other UF/IFAS Web site	35%	32%	26%	6%	34
EDIS	71%	21%	9%	0%	34

The following information sources were rated highly when combining “sometimes use” and “frequently use”:

- 64 % of those surveyed use UF/IFAS Printed Publications
- 58% of those surveyed use UF/IFAS External Relations
- 55% of those surveyed use UF/IFAS Extension Agents
- 50 % of those surveyed use Brochures
- 45% of those surveyed use UF/IFAS Faculty Researchers

The highest “frequently used” UF/IFAS information sources were UF/IFAS Extension Agents with 14% of respondents.

The following information sources were “never used” or “rarely used”:

- 92% indicated never or rarely used EDIS publications
- 92% indicated never or rarely used Solutions for Your Life Web site.

Question 6

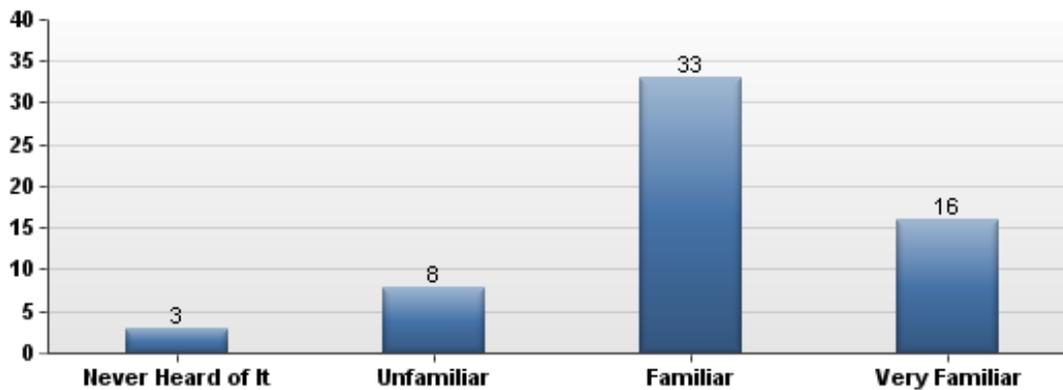
The following is a list of adjectives that describe a continuum of opinions. Please indicate where you believe information provided by UF/IFAS is on each continuum.

Question	1	2	3	4	Responses	Mean
Not Credible	0	0	6	31	Credible	3.83
Untrustworthy	0	0	9	28	Trustworthy	3.76
Useless	0	1	10	26	Valuable	3.68
Out-Dated	1	1	13	22	Current	3.51
Biased	3	4	12	18	Unbiased	3.22
Inconsequential	0	2	18	17	Influential	3.41

Of these adjectives, “credible,” “trustworthy” and “valuable” received the highest scores. Adjectives that had scores towards the negative end of the continuum of opinions were “biased” and “out-dated.”

Question 7

How familiar are you with the research, education, and extension work done by the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS)?



Question 8

How important are the following topics to your work?

Question	Very Unimportant	Somewhat Unimportant	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Responses	Mean
Environment	3	2	14	17	36	3.25
Families & Consumers	2	2	19	13	36	3.19
Agriculture	1	7	15	13	36	3.11
Disaster Preparation & Recovery	0	4	23	6	33	3.06
Sustainable Living	2	7	19	7	35	2.89
Food and Nutrition	3	6	20	5	34	2.79
4-H Youth Development	2	14	13	5	34	2.62
Lawn & Garden	8	16	10	2	36	2.17

The following topics received the highest percentages when calculating the “somewhat important” category and the “very important category” together.

- 89% felt that “Families and Consumers” were either somewhat important or very important to their work.
- 88% indicated that “Disaster Preparation & Recovery” were either somewhat important or very important to their work.
- 86% identified the “Environment” as being either somewhat important or very important to their work.
- 78% felt that “Agriculture” was somewhat important or very important to their work.
- 74% identified “Sustainable Living” as somewhat important or very important to their work.
- 74% identified “Food and Nutrition” as somewhat important or very important to their work.

Question 9

How likely would you be to use UF/IFAS for information regarding the following topics?

Question	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely	Responses	Mean
Agriculture	0	2	7	27	36	3.69
4-H Youth Development	1	6	12	15	34	3.21
Environment	0	1	22	13	36	3.33
Food and Nutrition	0	4	18	13	35	3.26
Lawn & Garden	2	10	15	8	35	2.83
Sustainable Living	0	11	17	6	34	2.85
Families & Consumers	0	17	15	4	36	2.64
Disaster Preparation & Recovery	0	19	11	3	33	2.52

The following topics had the highest percentages stating they would be “likely” or “very likely” to use UF/IFAS for information:

- 97% were likely or very likely to use UF/IFAS for information about the environment.
- 94% were likely or very likely to use UF/IFAS for information about agriculture.
- 89% were likely or very likely to use UF/IFAS for information about food and nutrition.
- 79% were likely or very likely to use UF/IFAS for information about 4H development.
- 66% were likely or very likely to use UF/IFAS for information about lawn and gardens.

Question 10

UF/IFAS is using a slogan to convey the message of what it does. The slogan they have developed is “Solutions for Your Life.” Have you ever heard of this before?

Answer	Response	%
Yes	6	13%
No	39	87%
Total	45	100%

Question 11

If you were responsible for distributing \$100 of funding money among the teaching, research, and extension functions of UF/IFAS, how much of that \$100 would you give to:

Answer	Min Value	Max Value	Average Value	Standard Deviation
Research	0	80	38.17	19.58
Extension	0	75	25.77	15.75
Teaching	0	50	23.56	13.53

Question 12

How important do you believe the following attributes are to include in a message about UF/IFAS?

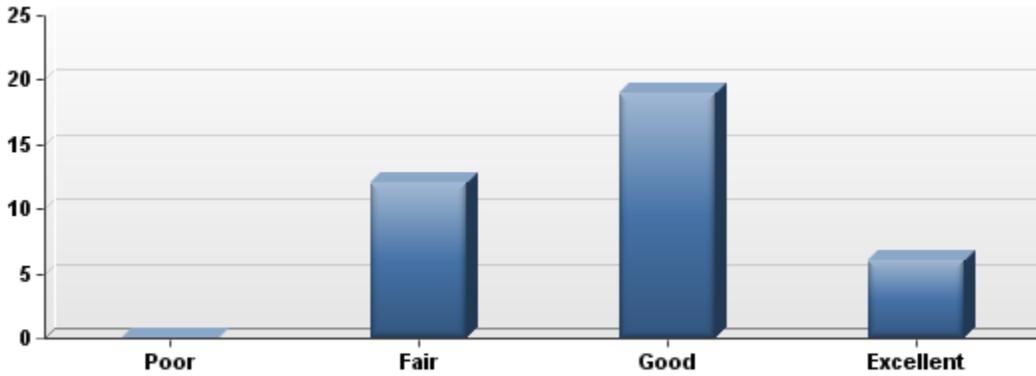
Question	Not at all Important	Very Unimportant	Very Important	Extremely Important	Responses	Mean
Trustworthy	0	1	12	21	34	3.59
Knowledge	0	1	15	18	34	3.50
Innovative	0	1	19	14	34	3.38
Science-based	0	1	19	14	34	3.38
Unbiased	1	3	13	16	33	3.33
Research arm	0	1	23	10	34	3.26
Pertinent	1	5	13	15	34	3.24
Cutting-edge	0	2	22	10	34	3.24
Resource	0	3	21	10	34	3.21
Academic	0	5	20	9	34	3.12
Influential	0	7	20	7	34	3.00
Diverse	3	4	19	8	34	2.94

The top five attributes that were considered extremely important to include in a message about UF/IFAS were:

- Trustworthy
- Knowledge
- Unbiased
- Pertinent
- Science-based

Question 13

Would you say the slogan “Solutions for Your Life” is an Excellent, Good, Fair, or Poor communication of what UF/IFAS does?



Question 14

Please rank your top three preferred methods for receiving information related to policy.

Answer	Percentage	Responses
Email	72%	47
Website	62%	26
Face-to-Face	46%	28

Question 15

In what way do people contact you about policy information that you find annoying?

Text Response

too much information - we gets lots of info on lots of things - it can be very hard to keep track of the issues. State the problem, state the solutions. try to keep the problem to bullet points unless asked for further info.

text

Spam, unpersonalized e-mail

Unscheduled appointment

Mass/Organized telephone calls and form letters

fax

If the contact is constant and overly frequent.

Fax, impersonal emails

blanket emails to all members- not targeted

Phone calls

brochures

When you send me stuff I don't really need. Ag just isn't a big issue to my boss, but I am a UF alum, and I recognize the importance of agriculture to our state, so when IFAS needs something, and we're in a position to help, we will. Basically I need to hear from IFAS once before session just so I know what might be coming up this session that affects them, and then again if something urgent comes up and my boss is in an immediate position to help (i.e., on a committee hearing a bill that will affect IFAS, or during the budget process on a specific line item). But sending me a regular update about IFAS during session is just not something I'm going to have time to look at. After session, send me something about cool stuff IFAS has done -- like solved the bee scarcity or developed a new seedless fruit or something.

Need to meet face-to-face

Mail

on the phone

Form emails where they just sign their name. I get thousands of those and delete them right away. I want to hear the specific concerns of individuals, not be on an infomercial list.

Constant phone calling or blast emails.

Newsletters that I did not request.

auto email

Poorly written emails and letters.

Sending mailers from different people within the same organization sending the same information constantly.

Constant emails

dropping off brochures without having a meeting to explain it

In what way do people contact you about policy information that you find annoying? (continued)

brochures in the mail; multiple meetings with no significant updates.

Repetitiveness

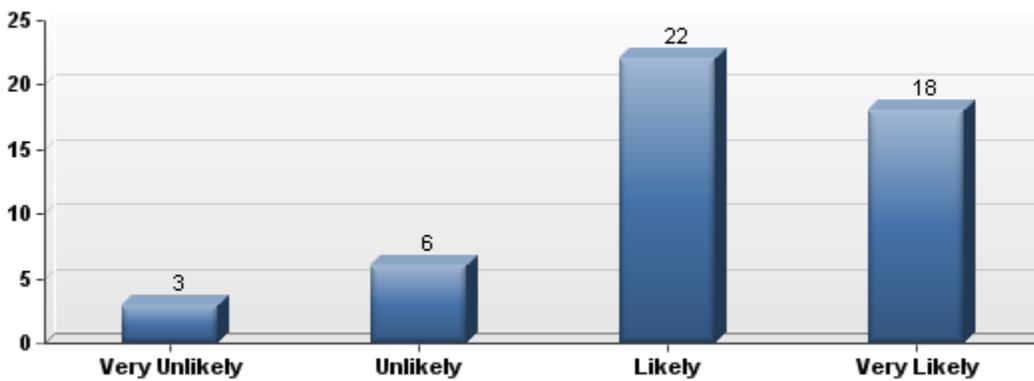
Leaving brochures/pamphlets that are going to be lost in the deluge of information we have dropped off on our desks every day.

Costly brochures mailed to office or hand delivered.

Mass faxes. It's a waste of paper, and tends to jam our fax machine.

Question 16

How likely would your Legislator be to participate in a visit to a local farm with media present?



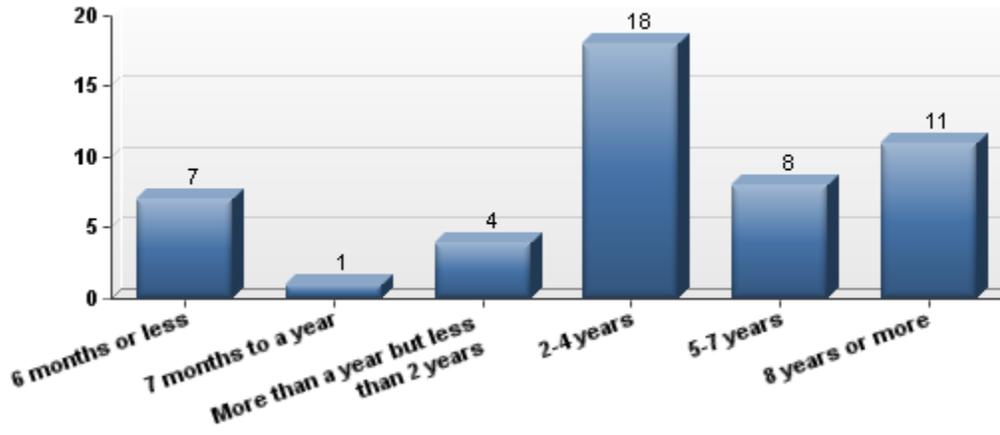
Question 17

Do you or any members of your household obtain any of their income from farming or the agricultural industry?

Answer	Response	%
Yes	3	6%
No	46	94%
Total	49	100%

Question 18

How many years have you been a legislative staff member?



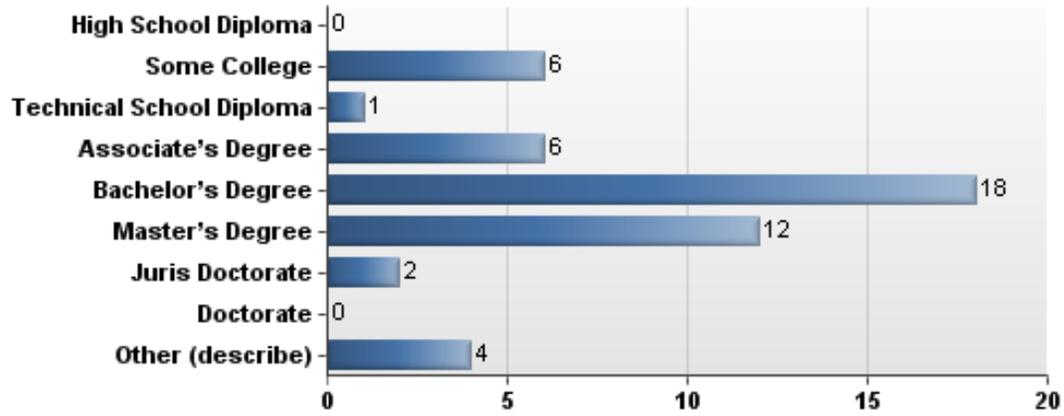
Question 19

Do you work for a legislator in the House or the Senate?



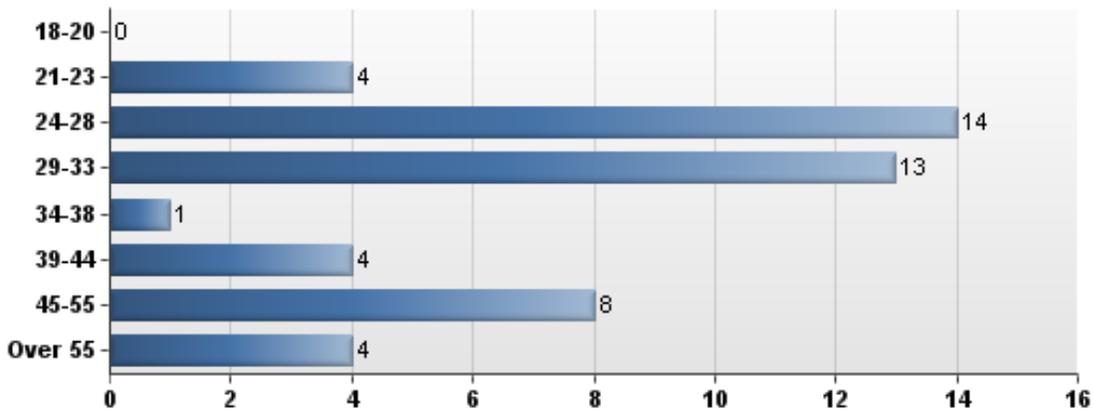
Question 20

What is your educational background?



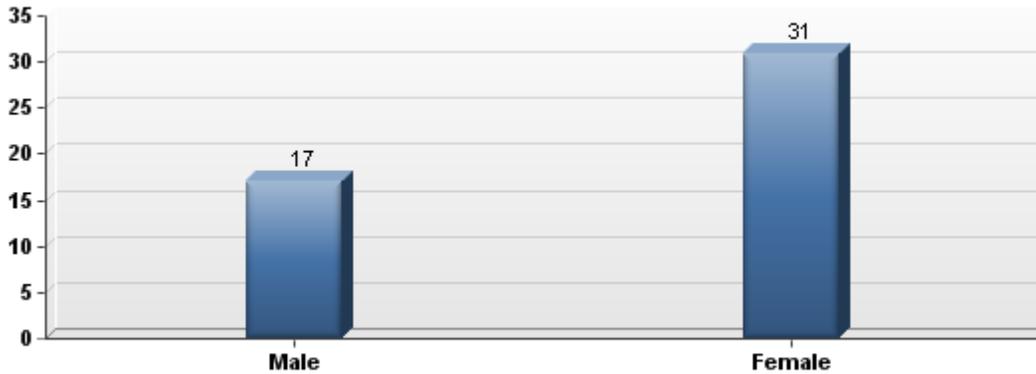
Question 21

What age range do you fall in?



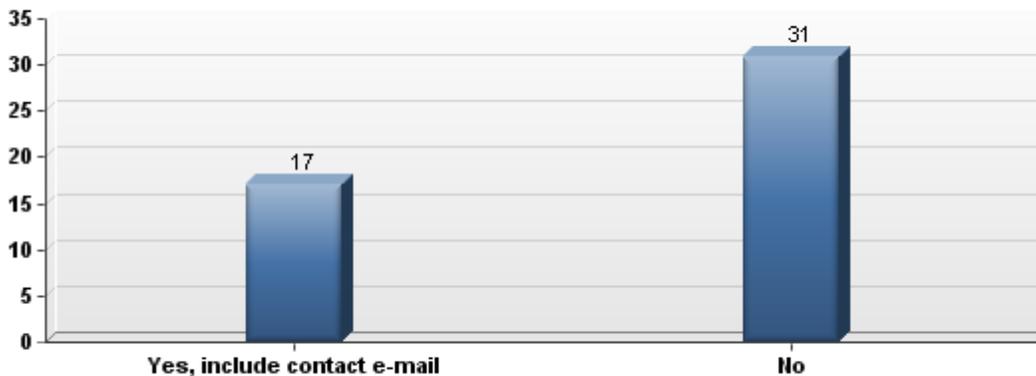
Question 22

Please indicate your gender.



Question 23

Would you be willing to participate in an online focus group?



Discussion/Recommendations

Results of this study show that UF/IFAS is perceived positively by majority of legislative aide respondents. With respect to information seeking, mixes of online and face to face sources of information were consistently preferred. Web, communication with experts and constituent email were rated as the top sources they used for gathering policy information, while email, web and face to face were the top choices they selected for receiving information from others related to policy. Printed brochures and printed material in general were perceived as less desirable methods of communicating and informing respondents. Terms respondents chose to associate with IFAS included trustworthy, credible, valuable and science based. When asked, unaided to identify words respondents thought described IFAS, research, informed, agriculture, accessible, and knowledgeable were words

respondents most associated with IFAS. From a public value standpoint, respondents chose to allocate public funds to research, followed by extension and then teaching. Interestingly, while respondents felt environment, families and consumers, agriculture and disaster preparedness and recovery were topics that were most important to their work, they were most likely to use IFAS to find information on agriculture and 4-H, followed by environment. Families and consumers and disaster preparedness and recovery were rated at the bottom of respondents' lists for this item. The current theme, Solutions for Your Life, had very high levels of lack of awareness among respondents; however it was perceived positively as a theme that could be associated with IFAS. 17 LA respondents stated that they were willing to participate in a follow-up online focus group/panel.

Strategic Recommendations

Based on the results, the following strategic recommendations can be made:

- Develop information awareness messages that focus on IFAS' traditional information resource strengths with this audience (agriculture, youth) but find ways to raise awareness of IFAS resources and fill the "information gap" with respect to their concerns – families and consumers, environment, disaster preparedness and recovery.
- Test a new message strategy/sub theme that focuses on attributes that resonate with this audience.
- Focus information efforts on electronic/online methods, and away from printed materials.
- Conduct online focus group/panel with LA respondents at least once a year to stay current with perception/opinion trends of this important set of opinion leaders.
- Conduct similar survey with commodity association lobbyists on the Ag Council.