Village Livestock Improvement

With the help of USAID LEAF, villagers in Huaphan province in Laos are learning to better manage precious forest resources while gaining new skills in veterinary care. This will enable them to increase their incomes, reduce forest degradation, and still benefit from the natural resources they rely on for their livelihoods. Twenty people from four villages recently completed a study tour in Khammouane province in central Laos observing a successful livestock-raising program.

The 20 villagers had completed a USAID LEAF training on Livestock health and were selected to represent their villages in the LEAF program. This continuation of training ensures that capacity is being built up through an ongoing series of interventions.

With training complete, participants will return to their villages with new knowledge and skills in proper veterinary care, vaccine use, disease prevention, nutrition, and livestock health. Families practice subsistence farming, keeping chickens for food and typically raise between one to five animals such as cows or buffalo over several years to sell at market. If a cow becomes ill, disease can easily spread beyond the family’s holdings to the larger community. Livestock are valuable to these poor villages; they represent an investment requiring several years’ return and are a form of savings. They are also used as labor in the fields in the absence of tractors or other automated machinery and losing an animal to disease has significant economic impact on people’s livelihoods.

As a result of this training, the participants can now better care for their animals, and more importantly, are equipped to teach other members of their communities these new skills. By establishing a ‘train-the-trainer’ scenario, participants can use the knowledge and skills gained to improve their lives and ensure that the entire community benefits.

Subsequent follow-on training will be supervised by LEAF specialists and district livestock units, but delivered by the individuals who received the original training. These villagers will manage this ongoing training, ensuring that newly acquired skills are propagated throughout the community in an ongoing process of continual learning and improvement. LEAF has developed training materials, handouts, forms, and manuals, and one representative from each village was provided with a livestock first aid kit and vaccines. These vaccines are key to preventing the spread of disease.

Prior to USAID LEAF intervention, livestock were not generally vaccinated. In 2015 LEAF will help establish a vaccine shop in each village, providing a refrigerator for vaccine cold storage. Initial funding will be provided by LEAF, but villages will then be responsible for stocking vaccines and making them available. To achieve this, USAID LEAF is working to engage the private sector to help fund this important work.

The decision to focus on livestock came out of an assessment by LEAF in conjunction with the provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office. A baseline survey in 2012 gathered information on the mortality rate of livestock. Monitoring and evaluation is planned for later this year and LEAF expects the mortality rate to decrease by 40-50%, based on similar experiences and case studies.

Improving the ability of villagers such as these in Houaphan provides them with greater livelihoods, earning money through the sale of livestock, and providing food for their families. Because they live in or near protected forest areas, the efforts of USAID LEAF are directly helping to reduce the effects of forest degradation and deforestation by reducing the amount of resources villagers typically extract from the forest. They are less reliant on gathering foodstuffs and with extra income, many have switched to using efficient cookstoves, burning less wood more efficiently.