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## PROGRAM UPDATE

# USAID LEAF conducts legal workshops to improve protected area land use compliance



*“Celebrating the New Year is very important to us, but these trainings are equally so. Without much land available to grow food, we need to learn how to better use our forest resources and follow the regulations so our livelihoods improve and the entire community benefits.”*

– Village head Mr. Xiengphonekham

Houaphan Province in Laos, like much of the country, is covered with dense mountainous forest. However, forest cover throughout Laos has been steadily decreasing over recent decades, including in Viengxay and Xam Tai districts, where USAID LEAF is working with government partners and local communities to reduce pressure on the forest resources of the Nam Xam National Protected Area (NPA). One way in which USAID LEAF is doing this is by raising the awareness of important regulations governing use and management of forest resources among communities located inside and adjacent to Nam Xam.

At the request of the Nam Xam NPA office, 83 men and women from villages in Xam Tai district attended two legal dissemination workshops organized by USAID LEAF in February 2015. Located in and near Nam Xam, these villages are heavily reliant on its land and forest resources for their livelihoods. They practice shifting cultivation, harvest timber and non-timber forest products, and hunt and fish. The villagers were very motivated to participate in the workshops, as evidenced by a village elder who walked 11 kilometers to attend.

The workshops incorporated a series of presentations on topics such as NPA regulations, forestry laws and laws governing terrestrial and aquatic animal use. However, it was the informal discussions about climate change that proved most useful, with participants recounting the very real effects being felt in their villages. There was a general feeling of concern among participants about the consequences of climate change, particularly on food production.

The legal dissemination workshops are part of an integrated program of support USAID LEAF is providing to district and provincial governments, headed by the Nam Xam NPA office. This includes consultative planning and development of a mechanism for community-based management of the Nam Xam NPA. This mechanism will guide land and forest use for communities living in or accessing resources from the Nam Xam NPA and is expected to be approved by the provincial authorities. USAID LEAF will also support the distribution of Nam Xam NPA regulation handbooks to all targeted villages.

The consensus among legal dissemination workshop participants was that their communities did not want to violate NPA regulations, but felt they had few alternatives. Village populations are increasing, yet there is little new land available for expanding food production. Some of the workshops that took place in the middle of New Year celebrations did not detract from the villagers' willingness or enthusiasm to participate. Village head Mr. Xiengphonekham said, “Celebrating the New Year is very important to us, but these trainings are equally so. Without much land available to grow food, we need to learn how to better use our forest resources and follow the regulations so our livelihoods improve and the entire community benefits.”

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