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Putting the social back in science

By Julianna Parker Jones

When severe weather shows up on the radar, scientists go to great lengths to determine what can be expected from the atmosphere.

But if that information isn't given to the public in a way that people can use, it won't actually save anybody's life. Effort needs to be made to supply meteorological information in a way that's relevant to the public, geographer Eve Gruntfest said.

That's the premise behind an initiative she started last year at the National Weather Center called Social Science Woven Into Meteorology (SSWIM).

"There's so much expenditure and brain energy that goes into understanding the atmosphere," Gruntfest said. But the only important goal of those efforts is to help people, and that's where social science comes in, she said.

"It helps with the 'so what?' part, the societal impacts," she said.

Social science asks important questions that sometimes aren't addressed in the typical way of thinking in the natural sciences, she said.

"What makes people vulnerable?" asked SSWIM deputy director Heather Lazrus, describing her research focus. "Why you can have perfect warnings, but you still have damage and fatalities."

Many natural scientists -- meteorologists, hydrologists and the like -- focus on developing important tools to study weather and climate, but if they look at the societal impact at all, it's an add-on, she said.

SSWIM works to bring a social science perspective to weather and climate studies, so that the end user's needs are addressed more fully.

"It's not brain surgery -- it's something that really should have been happening all along," Gruntfest said.

Gruntfest, who works most of her time from Colorado; Lazrus, a postdoctoral research associate at the National Weather Center; and OU graduate student Gina Eosco make up the staff of SSWIM.

But SSWIM doesn't just want people thinking about the impact their work will have on society, it really is an effort to bring the scientific principles used in social science into the natural science arena, Lazrus said. That includes surveys and interviews and study groups to determine how people use weather technologies and understand how different cultures can be affected.

"I think we live in a world today where we can't afford to not think about how people are affected," Lazrus said.

SSWIM accomplish its goal through two methods, she said.

They work to raise awareness in the natural science community about the importance of incorporating social science into their work, but they also work on specific projects, doing the research that adds the social science aspect to projects, she said.