



Cultivating a Sustainable Agricultural Workplace

CONFERENCE EVALUATION

I. Evaluation Objectives

To evaluate the conference, we aimed to gather information beyond mere opinions. Therefore, we collected additional data to document whether we had reached our goals. Based on the conference objectives, we evaluated whether the conference:

- Gathered experts and interested stakeholders in agricultural worker safety and health and sustainable agriculture from throughout the West.
- Fostered the development of collaborative relationships.
- Stimulated discussion through didactic and participatory sessions.
- Helped participants understand the meaning of sustainable agriculture and at least one associated worker health and safety issue.

II. Methods

Conference response rates are often poor because they are usually completed at the end of the last session when people are in a hurry to depart. They also lack detail and, due to self-selection bias, represent only those few who have strong feelings. Therefore, we took a new approach to resolve some of these problems. We evaluated the conference not only through conventional, voluntary fill-in questionnaires but also did randomly selected¹ face-to-face interviews. These interviews were limited to 42 (38% of conferee population) because of staff and time constraints. They were conducted after Day 1, Day 2, and on the phone one to three weeks after the conference. We also added an extra learning impact indicator to our evaluation.

III. Population

Of the 110 attendees, 63 persons (56%) participated in the conference evaluation. Of those 68 that were not randomly selected for interviews, 26 (38%) voluntarily filled out our general evaluation questionnaire. At the conference on Day 1, we were able to complete 71% of the interviews. This fell to 57% on Day 2 because of people departing early. We were able to interview 86% of those selected for phone interviews, as well as some Day 1 and Day 2 stragglers who wanted to complete the evaluation. This brought up our Day 1 response rate to 100% and Day 2 to 79%.

The 63 interviewees represented a total of 95 different combined professions. It was a diverse group, without any particular large cluster, including producers, worker representatives, health and agriculture professionals, and administrators. The most commonly represented in the evaluation were Safety Professional/Regulator at 16% and Environmental/Public Health Professionals at 12% (Table 1).

Table 1: Evaluation Participants by Profession	#	%
Safety Professional/Regulator	15	16
Environmental/Public Health Professional	11	12
Educator/Trainer	8	8
Industrial Hygienist	8	8
Administrator	6	6

¹ Random selection was stratified to reflect the broad categories designated in the registration list as follows: Academic 53%, Public Agency 22%, Private Organizations 11%, Producers 7%, Health Care Providers 3%, Labor 3%, and Insurance 1%.

Researcher	6	6
Nurse	5	5
Epidemiologist	4	4
Extension Agent	4	4
Physician	4	4
Community Member	3	3
Producer/Producer Representative	3	3
Student	3	3
Worker Representative	3	3
Engineer	2	2
Horticulturalist	2	2
Human Resources Manager	2	2
Toxicologist	2	2
Other	4	4
Ag Economist		
Attorney		
Media Representative		
Professor Anatomy		
Total	95	

Sixty-one conferees (55%) participated in the exercise to define the meaning of sustainable agriculture. A little over half (52%) of these completed the process by returning their post-conference definition.

IV. Results

A. PROCESS

The conference processes were measured with a satisfaction scale 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). Not all items were scored, thus the “n” (responses) does not reflect the total number of individuals that evaluated the conference. The mean is the average, whereas the mode is the most commonly given score.

1. Registration: n=60 mean 4.6 mode 5. The registration process received very positive comments such as “very efficient, extreme last minute registration was easily handled, e-mail very prompt and very smooth.” One participant felt that the line-up of speakers on the Web got their attention. People would appreciate on-line credit card payments.

2. Accommodations: n=54 mean 4.2 mode 5. People were quite divided on the accommodations. Some found it “very interesting,” “a great experience,” would like to return, “excellent for sleeping,” “fun,” and “a big draw.” On the other end of the spectrum were those who found it “dark, depressing, smelly, noisy, and gloomy.” Not having a bathroom in each room drew the most dissatisfied comments.

3. Food: n=60 mean 4.4 mode 5. For the most part, the food got rave reviews such as “excellent, awesome, very good, and gained 5 lbs.” The only negatives were the restaurant breakfast prices and the Monday night dinner. One person’s “too much sugar, not enough vegetables or whole grain bread” was another individual’s “lunches consisted only of rabbit food and “there was not enough food.”

4. Conference Room Facilities: n=19 mean 2.8 mode 3. A third of the respondents commented on the conference room setup, all of which was negative. The room was considered too big, long, and dark. Most of the complaints were related to the poor audio as well as visual system.

5. Columbia River Gorge Tour: n=15 mean 4.6 mode 5. The tour was quite popular with positive comments about both Eric's and Judy's narration. The only complaint was that "it started and ended late" and one that "wished it had lasted longer."

6. Poster Session: n=51 mean 3.8 mode 4. The poster session received mixed reviews. On the positive side, people felt it was informative, presented good topics, and allowed students to participate and demonstrate their work. One attendee felt that the posters were "too scientific" and not understandable for the lay public. On the negative side was the poor lighting in the room, not enough time, and the absence of the presenters to explain their posters.

7. Thematic Table Discussions: n=50 mean 3.7 mode 4. Opinions on the thematic table discussions were dependent on the table attended. Of the tables that worked, participants found them informative, productive, and a great option. Other tables were not so successful. One group decided that their topic didn't exist. Some found the theme tables too social, a waste of time, non-productive, chaotic, not adhering to the topic, too noisy for discussion, or too much for too little time. Presenting or writing up the outcomes of the table discussions was one of the recommendations.

8. Program Schedule: n=59 mean 4.2 mode 4. The program schedule got many positive comments such as "fantastic," "a nice mix/diverse," "fun hearing from creative farmers." Some found it too packed and a little intense, especially on Monday when an extra session on cholinesterase was added. Generally, people felt that time-keeping was good. Several felt more down or catch up time could have been build in.

9. Networking: n=59 mean 4.3 mode 4. Networking received the second highest score of the conference. One attendee commented that "the small venue offered better accessibility for networking." There was "plenty of time to talk" and the conference included "a refreshing diversity of the attendees with whom to network." Some of the suggestions were more downtime for networking and the inclusion of workers. On average, collaborative activities were developed with 2-3 people per participant. The most significant comment came from one participant who, as a result of hearing Frank Mitloehner's presentation, warned his team about previously unrecognized risks of structural injuries on dairy farms. They are initiating collaborative work on this and other issues.

10. Question and Answers: n=59 mean 3.9 mode 4. Most comments about opportunities for question and answers focused on time constraints and technical problems. The shape of the room and lack of microphones made it difficult for many to hear the questions and fully participate. But when time allowed, discussions were thought provoking.

B. SESSIONS

The respondents rated the following sessions the best in terms of level of interest, relevance, and knowledge building:

Keynote: Making the Workplace Safe, Healthy and Sustainable: Chambers

- I learned to define sustainable ag vs conventional.
- I got to hear pesticide alternatives from a grower.
- An excellent keynote.

Current Workplace Practices and Challenges: Panel

- The farm safety practices that were presented were inspiring.
- Ann and Jim's real stories were great!
- The panel had specific examples demonstrating worker pride and clear mission statements.

Health and Safety and Mega Dairy/Cattle Farms: Mitloehner

- It was all very interesting.
- I know least about this topic.
- I had some background in this area, but it improved my knowledge.

Other high ranking sessions for interest relevance and knowledge:

Fatallah's *Stoop Posture and its Effects on Workers* was considered a top session because it brought to light the importance of musculo-skeletal problems as a worker health issue.

Although some voiced "disappointment that there was not consensus" on the *Developing Worker Standards* panel, it was also rated in the top five for level of interest. One commented that it was in this session that they learned the most about sustainable agriculture. Erik Nicholson received numerous accolades for his presentation.

Chomel's *Zoonotic Diseases and Worker Health* ranked in the top five for relevance and knowledge building as it was a new, interesting topic for many.

Grantstein's *Sustainable Agriculture: Global, National, and Regional Trends* also ranked in the top five for increasing people's knowledge because it was an "excellent summary of sustainable agriculture."

C. IDENTIFIED WORKER HEALTH AND SAFETY ISSUES WITHIN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

The vast majority (83%) of respondents identified issues that were highly relevant to either sustainable agriculture or issues that were raised in the workshop. They clustered around the following topics (See Table 2):

- Social equity—addressing the human aspects in sustainable agriculture.
- Ergonomics—musculo-skeletal worker health issues.
- Machinery—health hazards to workers.
- Worker health and safety in general and the provision of health care specifically.

D. DEFINING SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE.

Over half of the attendees (55%) at the beginning of the conference reported how they define sustainable agriculture. Of these, 52% repeated the definition post conference as a measure of change.

Pre-conference Definitions: Of the 29 for whom we have only a pre-conference definition, 31% included Karla Chambers' 3 E's —economics, environment and equity—in their definition. Beyond that, the most common definition discussed environment alone.

Pre- and Post- conference Definitions: Of the 32 paired responses, 22% had economics, ecology, and equity both before and after the conference, 44% changed to the latter definition, and 34% had incomplete definitions both before and after. Within this latter group, most often missing from their view of sustainable agriculture was economic viability.

E. SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

Most of the suggestions we received centered on technical problems: the audio visuals, lighting, and room layout. A number of people suggested more breaks, shorter sessions, and longer meals to network and enjoy the setting. Many liked the group work—one characterizing its benefits as “more thinking and less listening”—and suggested more. Substantive suggestions included more technical sessions, clinically relevant talks for rural physicians, workers included in the conference for their perspective, sessions that better describe current working conditions on the ground regardless of regulatory status, and more pragmatic topics, such as a review of workman's compensation.

F. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The voluntary comments were overwhelmingly positive. Most centered on the conference itself because of the unique theme, diverse collection of attendees, and panel members who shared real examples of sustainable agriculture. Many stated that the conference was a real learning experience as well as informative and relevant to their work.

VI. Discussion

Looking both at the attendance list and professions of those who evaluated the conference, it is clear that the conference met its goal to gather experts and stakeholders in both agricultural worker safety and health and sustainable agriculture. The western region was also well represented, with attendees coming from Washington 41%, California 25%, Oregon 17%, and other states 13%. Qualitative comments about the venue, schedule and group work, plus quantitative data on contacts made during the conference demonstrate that collaborative relationships were fostered. Although not all sessions allowed adequate participation, people seemed to feel the thematic lunch tables, workshop groups, and conference setting itself stimulated good interactive discussion. Finally, the evaluation does indicate that the participants were able to identify the issues related to worker health and safety within sustainable agriculture. Also a substantial proportion of the attendees did understand of the meaning of sustainable agriculture, if not before then as a product of the speakers and panels.

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