Evaluation Report

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Web Site
Web Site developed by Elaine Wolff (University of Illinois Conferences and Institutes) in collaboration with Deborah Cavanaugh-Grant, Conference Chair and 5th National Small Farm Conference

Questions regarding the information provided in this report should be directed to Mary.Peabody@uvm.edu.
5th National Small Farm Conference

The 5th National Small Farm Conference was held September 15-17, 2009 in Springfield, IL. This conference, held every three to four years, brings together land grant universities, community-based organizations and other stakeholders who work with small-scale farmers and ranchers. The intent of these conferences is to strengthen collaboration and partnership among groups and provide an opportunity to share new ideas in research, extension and outreach. The national small farm conference is primarily a networking and professional development opportunity for educators, researchers, outreach specialists, technical assistance and service providers.

The conference included preconference short courses, concurrent sessions, posters, exhibits, plenary sessions, and educational tours. The proceedings of the 2009 conference are available at http://www.conferences.uiuc.edu/resources/20033/5th%20Small%20Farm%20Conf%20Proceedings%20-%205-10.pdf

Conference evaluation process and data collection.

The conference evaluation process was designed to assess the following:

- How well the conference encouraged the development of new and/or renewed partnerships and collaborations focused on meeting the needs of small and limited resource and beginning farmers and ranchers
- How well the conference fostered the exchange of technical expertise, best practices, new knowledge and insights for reaching small-scale farmers and ranchers and providing effective education, outreach and technical assistance.
- How many participants learn/adopt new methodologies and resources for providing outreach and education to small-scale farmers?
- The planned and actual impacts of conference attendance on small farm programming
- Basic feedback on the conference that will be shared with the funders and future conference planning committees

Evaluation data was collected in 3 stages.

1. End-of-Conference evaluation (Paper Evaluation) – Available in registration packets this 1 page (2-sided) survey captured immediate impressions about the conference and various aspects of the conference facilities, logistics and planning.

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2. Post-conference email evaluation. To ascertain how participants planned to use the information learned at the conference (i.e. new programs, expanded programs, new contacts, etc.) a survey link was emailed to all participants within a month of the conference. This was delivered using a web-based survey program. Two follow-up reminder emails were sent.

3. Six-month post-conference follow-up. Using a slightly modified version of the post-conference evaluation, a link to the survey was emailed to all participants to assess the impact of the conference in their work with small-scale farmers and ranchers. Two follow-up reminder emails were sent to the email addresses provided during the conference registration.

**About the attendees**

583 individuals participated in the conference.

70 individuals (12%) completed the paper conference evaluation. 264 (45%) individuals completed the post-conference email evaluation. 165 (28%) individuals completed the 6-month follow-up.

With respect to geographic region (Figure 1), the highest participation was from the North Central region which is to be expected since the conference was hosted in that region. The regions with the lowest participation were the West and the Northeast. This may be a function of distance to the conference and the consequent higher travel costs associated with longer flights. Also, economic challenges resulted in many organizations facing budget constraints which restricted out-of-state travel.
1862 Land Grant Universities and 1890 Land Grant Universities were well-represented at the conference as were non-profit/NGO organizations (Figure 2). Participation of 1994 Land Grant Colleges and Hispanic-Serving Institutions was low.

Eighty-four percent of the respondents reported that they work directly with farmers and/or ranchers. Over half of this group reported reaching more than 50 farmers in a year and over thirty percent reported that they reach over 150 farmers in a typical year. Nearly three quarters of the conference participants were educators, technical assistance providers, researchers and/or outreach specialists or some combination of those professional activities. This represents the conference’s intended audience and indicates that the conference marketing did reach the target population. However, in reviewing the written comments it appears there is still some confusion regarding the role of farmers/ranchers as participants at the conference.

**Why They Attended**

The most-cited reason for attending the conference was “Expand my network for potential partnerships and collaborations” which was followed closely by “Gain new ideas for my educational programming” and “Stay connected to existing partners and collaborators”. The results of the evaluations appear to indicate that both of these aspirations were attained by the majority of attendees.
Usefulness of information provided

Ninety percent of those responding to the post-conference survey reported that they had gained new ideas that would be useful in their work with farmers/ranchers. When asked to quantify how many new strategies and tools they picked up at the conference the most common response (75%) was “1-5”.

Consistently over seventy-five percent of respondents reported that the conference met the stated goals of a) professional development; b) personal development; c) opportunities for scholarly presentations; and d) opportunities to explore new tools and technology.

In the follow-up survey 75% of those responding indicated that they had been in contact with some of the new/renewed partners or collaborators. The most common category for the number of these contacts was ‘1-5’.

In reporting what actions had resulted from attending the conference, 145 individuals were able to identify at least one action. The most popular actions selected were “expanding an existing education or outreach program” and “identifying one or more partners or collaborators to work with”.

Figure 3. Primary job responsibilities
Participants were asked in the post-conference survey what activities they planned to take as a result of their participation and then they were asked the same question again six months later. The results suggest that while the respondents’ enthusiasm led them to overstate what they could realistically accomplish, there was a respectable level of accomplishment in every category.

Participants were asked to indicate which types of information (drawn from the workshop tracks) would be most useful to them in their work with farmers and ranchers. In the six-month followup, participants were asked which types of information (using the same categories) had been most useful. There was very little change in the reporting over the six month interval.

“I especially appreciated the opportunity to learn some strategies for introducing small farm audiences to the internet, use of computers.”
“I am always eager to learn how to help farmers in my state. The most important thing is to form a relationship to build trust in helping farmers keep records and have their farm certified.”
Planning and organizing an event of this size is a monumental task. Successful conferences require hundreds of hours of volunteer time on the part of the planning committee, presenters, and host organization as well as the generosity of sponsors and the willingness of participants to allocate scarce resources (both time and money) to be present and participate. The positive tone of the evaluations as well as the registration numbers both at this conference and those in the past indicates that there is a need for a national small farm conference. Given that the conference rotates from region to region it is of limited value to evaluate the conference facilities in too much detail.

“Some of the practices learned (re: water management and conservation) have been shared with local farmers and adapted to their irrigation plan.”

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“We held a meeting of people who work with Hispanic and minority farmers and during that meeting we also shared notes and discussion about successful programs and techniques we had learned about from attending the conference. So 7 other people who could not attend still received the information they could use.”

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“I modified our beginning farmer course to spend less time in the classroom and more time in the field exploring diverse farm enterprises.”

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“Developed a national network system with peers from other institutions with similar clientele needs and challenges.”
The following is information that may be of interest to the future planning committees.

Overall participants were very satisfied with the conference facility, the online registration process, the overnight accommodations, the number of meals included with the registration and the onsite registration assistance. Many positive comments on the addition of local food.

There were a few random comments about the registration system being unavailable and not working properly. There were the usual comments about uneven room temperatures. There were several suggestions encouraging future conference planners to be more “green” in the use of materials for the conference (ranging from paper products to limiting the availability of bottled water).

The comments related to tours were mostly positive. Several suggested that more detailed descriptions (length of bus ride, amount of walking, etc.) might help individuals make better selections.

The largest number of criticisms seemed to be related to the workshops having too many people presenting for the amount of time available and the tension between whether the sessions were appropriate for farmers and ranchers. This is a recurring issue for these conferences and although the number of comments is relatively small it is the case that farmers and ranchers seem most likely to comment negatively.

Recommendations for consideration by future conference planning committees

- The planning committee should come to consensus on the role of farmers/ranchers in the conference and then clearly articulate that in all marketing materials
- Reach out to 1994 Tribal Colleges and Hispanic-Serving Institutions
- Identify funds to be used for travel scholarships to even out geographic participation
- While the balance between types of activities seemed welcome there were a number of comments about the workshops being too short to accommodate the number of panelist. It would be worth considering whether the conference goals and objectives could not be better met with either longer breakout sessions or a strict cap on the number of speakers in a session.
- The effort to source local food is worth the effort.
- Look for ways to continue to strengthen the research, education, and outreach integration.
- Consider ways to improve the poster sessions to make it a better investment of the presenters’ time.