

## SDSU Extension Crop Hour

### Search For Excellence in Crop Production

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many challenges to educational efforts around the world. The SDSU Extension Competitive Crops team, chose to make light in a difficult situation, and create bigger and better winter programming that could be accessible to as many people as possible. After much planning and discussion, the team decided to work together by blending the traditional in-person regional winter crops clinic model with a large-scale webinar effort that would span across multiple agronomy topics and cover all regions of the state.

The *SDSU Extension Crop Hour* webinar series took place virtually (using *Zoom* webinar services) every Tuesday through Friday from 10:00-11:00am CT from January 4 to March 26, 2021. This particular time of day was selected to catch farmers and crop consultants during a typical morning break; we used the bi-line “*Take your [virtual] coffee break with us!*” Following each formal webinar, we offered an informal discussion period by making all remaining participants “panelists,” who could use their microphones and cameras. This portion of the program was intended to make-up for the lack of face-to-face interaction that many people have felt this past year, and allow for attendees to ask questions in a more informal setting and network with one another. The objective of the *Crop Hour* series was to provide current and research-based cropping systems updates and information to agriculture producers and agri-business professionals across the state of South Dakota, in order to continue the advancement of local agriculture production during a challenging, socially distant time.

Each week of the series covered a new topic with one to three speakers filling an hour of content for each scheduled day. Topics were strategically chosen based upon farmer and crop consultant needs, and commodities grown across the state of South Dakota; each week was hosted by a team-member who led the logistical planning efforts for the week. Weekly topics included: stored grain, corn, soybean, wheat, field peas/milo/polycropping, oats, soil health/cover crops, forages, sunflowers, understanding SDSU agronomy research, weather/water/climate, and regulatory information/pesticide education. Speakers consisted of SDSU Extension staff, SDSU Research personnel, USDA-ARS personnel, extension staff from surrounding states, and other agriculture professionals.

Registration for the event was free on the SDSU Extension website and continuing education credits (CEU’s) were made available to those who needed them via a QR code following each live presentation. Recordings of each day of the series were also made publicly available on the SDSU Extension website.

A pre-recorded rolling PowerPoint played before each webinar with step-by-step instructions explaining how to use *Zoom* webinar features (such as Q&A, chat, polls, and the “raise hand”). The slide show also explained housekeeping details, such as how to obtain CEU’s, and other logistics.

Each week had an assigned host who organized and communicated with the speakers for the week, as well as SDSU Extension IT staff, to ensure smooth transitions and an overall professional and successful event. The host welcomed attendees at the top of the hour, introduced speakers, and helped run the Q&A session following each speaker. Following each talk, five to ten minutes were allowed for Q&A. In addition, speakers were encouraged to use polls and other interactive options during the *Zoom* webinar to keep listeners engaged. Following the live webinars, a recording was compiled and posted for free

public consumption on our website; this ensured that anyone who was not available to watch a topic of interest, could do so at their convenience.

To ensure a successful webinar series and reach as many viewers as possible, a \$13,000 budget was used to advertise through web, print newspapers, radio, and social media. Weekly press releases and radio promotions were also released through SDSU Extension. In addition, free advertising was used as much as possible by emailing and speaking with representatives from our local commodity groups, private agronomy co-ops and companies, NRCS-USDA, NGO's, and other local agriculture groups. The sizable budget was manageable, as it would traditionally have been used on room rental fees and meals, for regional crop clinic meetings.

Although virtual programming will never be the same as in-person meetings, this program was a great success and reached more clientele than we typically see at in-person regional winter crops clinics. We used a combination of *Zoom* polling following each presentation and a weekly *Question Pro* survey (with the omission of four weeks due to technical difficulties) to measure our effectiveness.

As of March 5, 2021, we have hosted 1,782 participants from 15 different countries over the course of 36 sessions. The average webinar had a viewership of 49.5 unique viewers. Overall viewers consisted 40.6% of "agriculture professionals," 21.5% of "agriculture producers," 10.0% of "extension professionals," 11.3% of "government agency" workers, 5.2% marked "other," and 11.5% were a "combination of one or more" of those roles. The majority of participants were between the ages of 30-59, 17.9% of average viewership was female, with 76.8% male (5.4% unknown/prefer not to respond). As of March 5, 2021, the recorded presentations at our SDSU Extension YouTube channel (accessible from our website) have been viewed 3,146 times.

Following each presentation, participants were asked if they learned something useful from the webinar. On average, 21.3% said "yes a great deal," 42.6% said "yes quite a bit.," and 34.7% said "yes a little." Additionally, 35.5% said that they are "very likely" to share the information they learned, with 40.2% saying that they were "moderately likely" to share, and 21.7% said they were a "little likely" to share what they had learned.

This webinar series was a great success that brought our entire state-wide team together. As of March 15, 2021, ten weeks of the program (ten topics) were completed, with two more planned. From January 4- March 15, 40 separate sessions of the program were completed, with a total of 48 planned by the series' completion. Our team worked cohesively using shared files, held weekly update meetings, and assisted one another daily.

This program providing timely, agronomy-based information, creating an improved understanding of best management practices among our audience consisting of farmers and agri-business professionals. In addition, the virtual platform allowed more information to be disseminated to a larger audience than ever reached by regional crop clinic meetings. The success of this program will shape the type of content and delivery method for crops clinics for years to come. As the stipulations of COVID-19 fade, we will likely still consider using a hybrid model for winter programming, as we have learned from this experience that when proper marketing takes place, our clients find online programming convenient. This effort was made possible by a team of 18 field specialists and state specialist and three IT/news staff.