

Search for Excellence in Crop Production

Pandemic Response Programing to Support Crop Production in New Jersey

Introduction

In March 2020, White House officials declared a national emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortly thereafter, Rutgers University suspended all in-person instruction and initiated remote teaching and work-from-home requirements. This announcement suddenly and dramatically changed program delivery for Extension, where clientele interactions typically occur via face-to-face meetings. These changes required a timely response from Extension and a mechanism for sharing information with partner agencies, colleagues, and the agriculture industry. The State of New Jersey and Rutgers Cooperative Extension were among the first to experience disruptions due to the pandemic. The sudden changes necessitated unprecedented adaptation of program delivery to ensure continuity of communication across farmers, Extension professionals, and other industry groups. Though all segments of crop production were affected, particularly impacted were crop marketing, distribution, and farm labor.

Educational Objectives

The primary program objectives included:

- 1) using available online tools to efficiently deliver programming and resources to producers and industry partners.
- 2) developing a weekly webinar series to remotely continue consultations and provide an open forum for farmers.
- 3) Educate clientele about pandemic-related topics including farm labor, state executive order compliance, supply-chain disruptions, livestock processing, farmer assistance programs, and other emerging issues.
- 4) Ensure continuation of Extension services and programming.

Program Activities

To meet programmatic goals, the team developed online instruction sessions, social media posts, newsletter articles and developed guidance documents to reach the largest possible number of clientele. Applied research and demonstration programs in hemp production also continued. This was particularly important as 2020 was the first year of legal hemp production in New Jersey. Although COVID-19 pandemic challenges were priority, farmers still required traditional services provided through Extension programming, including crop recommendations and management information.

Teaching methods

The use of web-based platforms to disseminate Extension programming has been proven to be an effective, timely, and cost-effective means of information delivery. Many of our team members have a long history of using webinars to deliver extension programming. Team members have used webinars to deliver equine pasture and home garden programs for over 15 years. This experience enabled rapid transition of programming to an on-line format under the pandemic restrictions. Our use of the technology offered an innovative opportunity for communication that resulted in tremendous networking across farmers, agricultural agencies, not-for-profit organizations, and others working in the agriculture industry.

The team utilized on-line teaching methods, both WebEx and Zoom, to disseminate research-based information to clientele. Key programming components included the following.

Ask the Ag Agent: In response to the unique challenges brought by the pandemic, we immediately developed a weekly webinar titled "Ask the Ag Agent" (AAA). The primary goal was to share timely information with the agricultural community while maintaining health, safety, and compliance with university directives. The web-based delivery method provided opportunity for commodity-specific reporting from producers and Extension. For example, Extension specialists presented information on seasonal crop topics such as weed management, crop status, and disease management. Agricultural agents and service providers discussed topics related to their areas of expertise. The webinars proved an opportunity to provide Extension clientele updates on Extension office operating statuses, programs, campus services, regulatory changes, and other information related to Extension programs and services. Participant numbers for the series totaled 258. A Journal of Extension article was published detailing the program.

On-Farm Direct Marketing During Covid-19 Webinar Series.

Pandemic concerns and social distancing requirements greatly impacted all areas of direct farm marketing. Producers in the state needed timely and rapid information to assist them sell their crops. In response a direct marketing webinar series was initiated. The following 4 webinars were held.

Maintaining Social Distancing and Food Safety Handling: Guidance for Farm Markets <https://go.rutgers.edu/pqalghh7>

Meeting Customer Demands for New Jersey Agricultural Products in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic <https://go.rutgers.edu/8u8r4qb8>

U-Pick Best Management Practices During COVID-10 and Executive Order Compliance <https://go.rutgers.edu/dy026twh>

Farmer Panel - Changes Made to On-Farm Direct Marketing Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic <https://go.rutgers.edu/zm5msjt0>

COVID-19 Safety Tips for Agritourism Operations

Community transmission of COVID-19 presents challenges to agritourism. The Rutgers Agritourism Working Group developed farm assessment resources titled, [Considerations for Agritourism Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), to assist producers with agritourism activities as part of their on-farm marketing strategies. Considerations listed are designed to help operators evaluate management strategies that align with State executive orders and federal/state safety guidelines enacted to reduce transmission of COVID-19. A two-night webinar was provided to educate producers about the document. There were 94 participants.

Pasture and Hay Management Webinars

Six programs on pasture and hay were conducted during the pandemic. These programs were originally scheduled as in person programs but shifted to virtual events. Programs offered 9.0 hours of instruction in topics including: pasture management, soil fertility, identifying weeds; and pasture renovation. Program participants numbered 360.

Hemp Webinars

The 2020 growing season was the first year for legal hemp production in NJ. Several in person meetings were planned prior to pandemic restrictions, including a two-night Hemp Production Boot Camp. The Boot Camp was rescheduled as an online event. Additionally, four other on-line hemp trainings were offered. In total 8 hours of trainings were offered. Total participants were 435 people.

Applied Research

The team also conducted hemp field research trials with producers. Research was initiated and conducted to continue to assist growers in the newly emerging crop of hemp. Delaying this work would result in NJ growers falling behind growers across the country and possibly result in a competitive disadvantage.

Social Media Posts

As a tool to promote programs and provide critical updates to clientele considerable use of social media was used. Several outlets were used including:

- Rutgers University Sustainable Hemp Facebook Page
- Rutgers Ag and Natural Resource Facebook Page
- Rutgers Plant and Pest Advisory Newsletter
- Rutgers YouTube Channel

Evaluation

As with any extension program, evaluation is a critical component to determine if needs of clientele are met. The team made use of surveys and teaching evaluations. As a whole, response to programming during the pandemic has been very favorable. These programs have regularly been well attended. Accolades for the programs have been documented in University Administration, Department of Agriculture, and Farm Bureau reports.

Results and Impacts

Review of program participation numbers for on-line events has indicated that participation numbers have typically increased 30 to 50 % over previous in-person events. This may be attributed to easier program access without the need to travel to events.

Evaluations of hemp programs over the period have indicated that 85% of participants would use information from the programming to assist with their decision to produce hemp. Ninety three percent of participants indicated the program was of value.

Reviews of the Direct Marketing and Agritourism Programming were very positive with 85% of participant surveys indicating the program was useful or very useful. The popularity of the Ask the Agent program was evidenced by grower requests to continue the program in the late summer. Details of the program were shared with colleagues via a Journal of Extension paper.