Establishing an Agricultural Summit

Abstract

The rapidly growing population in Skagit County, Washington, has placed a threat on agriculture, and agricultural stakeholders were in need of an open discussion with public policy officials. In response to this need, we at Washington State University Skagit County Extension organized the first Skagit Ag Summit in 2016. As a result, stakeholders and public policy officials were able to meet to discuss their differing opinions. According to 2016 and 2017 Skagit Ag Summit surveys, a vast majority of attendants desired that we continue to host the event annually. We provide a description of our process and other useful information and encourage other university Extension offices in similar circumstances to host agricultural summits.

Keywords: population growth, natural resources, networking, consensus building, community

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Introduction

Skagit County, Washington, is a scenic region rich in diverse agriculture and natural resources. Situated between Puget Sound and the northern Cascades, Skagit Valley is a desirable place to reside due to its mild maritime climate and abundance of outdoor recreation. The region's population increased from 50,000 in 1960 to 120,000 in 2010 and is expected to increase by another 100,000 by 2060 (Cheney et al., 2011). This projected increase has raised concerns about protecting farmland and natural resources while accommodating the growing population.

Background

Since the 1990s, Skagit County commissioners have sought to organize an agricultural summit to allow agricultural stakeholders and public policy officials to openly discuss solutions for keeping farming economically viable while accommodating a rising population. In 2012, the Economic Development Alliance of Skagit County addressed the standing need for an agricultural summit and set the wheel in motion by seeking and receiving federal funding for the summit. This funding resulted in the formation of the Skagit Ag Summit (SAS) committee,

which comprised representatives from Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, Western Washington Agriculture Association, the Board of County Commissioners, and Washington State University (WSU).

In 2015, we at WSU Skagit County Extension agreed to host the first SAS. We began by assembling the SAS planning committee, which was made up of the original members of the SAS committee along with other agricultural stakeholders, and then met monthly with the intention of planning and coordinating the summit. Our three objectives were as follows:

1. Raise awareness of challenging issues in agriculture.

2. Collaborate to create solutions to these issues.

3. Encourage networking between farmers and industry members.

A questionnaire was sent to agricultural stakeholders, and 64 individuals responded, sharing suggestions for the summit. Sixty-one percent of survey participants believed an agricultural summit was a great idea, and 39% responded positively with a "maybe," under the pretense that it be done correctly. No participants selected "No." The majority of the respondents preferred a 2-day summit during the week in the winter. Participants identified "regulations" and "innovative technologies" as preferred topics of focus for the summit.

The Summit

2016

The 2-day event was scheduled for the beginning of March. Advertisement was done via electronic mailing lists, social media, and the local newspaper. We also conducted fund raising to help lower the cost of admission. One hundred forty individuals registered for the event.

At the inaugural summit, 50 speakers presented content on regulations and innovative technologies. Multiple breakout sessions were offered so that participants could choose sessions that best fit their areas of interest.

On the first day (Thursday), participants engaged in a group activity. Easel pads were placed around the room—six containing discussion topics and an additional 14 to allow participants to generate more topic ideas. After all the topics were generated, participants discussed the topics and voted on those that were most important to them; results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Results of Skagit Ag Summit Discussion Topic Activity

Topic	Respondents ranking topic as most important
Land use regulation	11%
Water quality	9%
Labor	9%
Innovative technologies	9%

Succession planning	7%
Organic research and marketing	7%
Public policy and rule making	6%
Farmland preservation	6%
Processing and value added	6%
Access to new markets	5%
Attract new processors to valley	5%
Trade agreements	4%
Transportation	4%
Business planning and training	3%
Climate change	3%
Irrigation	2%
Government awareness of ag	2%
Leadership development	2%
Commercial driver's license for all ag drivers	1%
Building codes and enforcement	1%

Note. Totals do not equal 100% due to rounding.

At the end of the second day (Friday), participants took part in a social hour hosted by a local brewery. Here, the participants were able to network and build relationships, fulfilling our third objective.

Each day, participants were invited to partake in a survey. On Thursday, 87% of participants responded that they were more aware of challenging issues in agriculture and associated solutions because of the conference, and on Friday, 100% of participants responded thusly. This finding was encouraging because it suggested that we had accomplished our first two objectives. Furthermore, 97% of Thursday's participants and 100% of Friday's requested a 2017 SAS.

2017

The SAS planning committee maintained the 2016 objectives for the 2017 SAS agenda while placing more emphasis on driving change. In response to feedback from the 2016 SAS survey, the summit was condensed to a 1-day event held on a Saturday, with the thinking being that more agricultural producers and workers would be able to attend. We also offered translation to encourage more attendance from the Latino community. Thanks to fund raising, the first 100 seats were offered for free, and 110 individuals registered.

The agenda was built around three highly requested topics from the previous year: water, labor, and economic viability. During planning sessions, the committee voted to invite a group of presenters with diverse views to cover each topic.

Following a model used in the Skagit Forums in the early 2000s (Haaland, 2004), the SAS included a panel discussion following the presentation on each topic. During the panel discussions, questions were submitted through the use of a web-based program called Poll Everywhere. This program allowed audience members to anonymously submit questions from their laptops, smartphones, or mobile devices. Once questions were submitted to the system, the audience voted on the most important questions to ask the panel, and questions were directed either to the group or to individual panelists.

Again, the summit concluded with a social hour to allow participants to network while enjoying locally crafted beer and appetizers.

Surveys were distributed at the end of the summit. Once again, the majority of the survey participants (90%) felt they were more aware of challenging issues in agriculture and associated solutions because of the conference.

Conclusion

Each year the SAS was successful in raising awareness of agricultural issues, identifying potential solutions, and providing networking opportunities. Though many people of differing opinions gathered in the same room, everyone remained cordial and worked together toward creating solutions and strengthening relationships within the community. The majority of participants each year requested an annual SAS.

We discovered a few effective techniques along the way that we highly recommend:

- Establish objectives and build an agenda early on during planning.

- Advertise as much as possible.

- Use Poll Everywhere or a similar program to identify questions during panel sessions.

- Host an enjoyable social hour.

We encourage university Extension offices in regions undergoing population growth to consider organizing agricultural summits. Our experience hosting the SAS serves as a model for other counties and Extension offices seeking to encourage community building and agricultural success in regions of high population growth.

References

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