

CONFERENCE SUMMARY



The third annual Western Regional Agricultural Safety and Health Conference, “Cultivating a Sustainable Agricultural Workplace,” convened September 12-14, 2004 in Troutdale, Oregon. The venue—McMenamins Edgefield—was most appropriate to the theme. It is the former Multnomah County Poor Farm, where residents once sustained themselves and supplied other county facilities by their agricultural production.

“Cultivating a Sustainable Agricultural Workplace” established worker safety and health as an essential part of social equity, one of the three elements of sustainable agriculture: environment, economics, and equity. The conference was designed to address how occupational safety and health can be integrated into sustainable agriculture practices and how research and outreach can contribute to that effort.

Conference planners believe the event was the first in the nation to focus so extensively on these goals. To achieve our objectives we:

- 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 associated worker health and safety issues.

One remarkable feature of the conference was the broad range of participants, both by discipline and geography. In addition to Oregon, California, and Washington, attendees came from Idaho, Hawaii, Nevada, and as far away as North Carolina. A little more than half of our 110 conferees were from academia, including 12 students. Almost a quarter came from public agencies, mostly those of western states. Producers, business people, private consultants, and several non-profit organizations were well represented; and health care providers, labor representatives, and members of the Yakama and Paiute Nations also attended.

The conference keynoter was Karla Chambers, co-owner of Stahlbush Island Farms, a 2,000-acre sustainable family farm in Corvallis, Oregon.



A fifth-generation Oregon farmer, she immediately underlined equity in her operation. Chambers said she and her husband began farming sustainably because, “we didn’t want to ask our workers to do anything that we were no longer willing to do.” Their commitment to workplace equity continues with worker benefits, including a retirement plan; good wages; and good housing.

More than 20 other speakers addressed the forum on topics as diverse as worker standards, zoonotic diseases, new safety interventions, and injuries to workers in both California and the Northwest. Dinner speaker Judy BlueHorse Skelton, a Portland herbalist, educator, and writer, talked about “Sustainability through Native American Eyes.” She sees agricultural products such as corn and salmon not as resources to be extracted but as relatives to be cherished so they can continue to nourish us. Skelton emphasized that, “when we say salmon is our brother, we are not speaking as though it were a child’s story about salmon. It’s that we should treat salmon with respect because it’s like a brother. The elders mean he is our flesh and blood.”

In addition, 16 posters were presented. *Pesticides, Genetics and Risk of Parkinson's Disease—Pilot Study Update* by Anne Greenlee was judged to be the best. Greenlee, who did the research while at the Marshfield Clinic Research Foundation, is now with the Oregon Health Sciences School of Nursing in LaGrande.

One conference aim was to showcase sustainable agriculture success stories from the West Coast. Conference organizers believe in the philosophy of the microbiologist and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, Rene Dubos, who said: “Since there are countless ways to go wrong but only a very few ways to do right, our best chance to deal successfully with our contemporary problems and those of the future is to learn from the success stories of our times.”

Conferees learned how producers at several Columbia Valley orchards—Washington’s Inaba Produce Farms, California’s Swanton Berry Farm and Fetzer Vinyards, and Oregon’s Stalbusch Island Farms—are succeeding in improving the workplace and the quality of their land, water, and crops. For workers, they described their efforts with housing, health care, shared management, and strategies to provide year-round work. For the environment, they related their move to organic farming, strip tilling, cover cropping, composting, and using low pressure irrigation and pesticide alternatives. Presenters from the Oregon Sustainability Board and Portland-based Food Alliance spoke to how sustainability can be supported by policy and certification.

Another aim of the conference was to begin to develop a research agenda for improving worker health and safety in sustainable agriculture. Many attendees felt most issues they identified overlapped with conventional farming. Those issues that could be classified as specific to sustainable agriculture included the worker health and safety implications of labor-intensive work and pesticide alternatives. Conferees noted the need for quantitative data to promote sustainable agriculture and to proactively define worker health and safety within its practice. One focus should be to devise ergonomic solutions to musculo-skeletal problems that can result from sustainable practices, such as hand weeding.

In their evaluations, attendees gave networking, another aim of the event, one of the highest scores. Conferees noted that the small venue offered better accessibility for networking, with plenty of time to talk and a refreshing diversity of attendees with whom to network. Registration, the program, the food, and the Columbia Gorge tour also received high marks. The keynote and the *Current Workplace Practices and Challenges* panel were the top-rated presentations. Conference room facilities received the lowest rating, with thematic table discussions scoring next lowest.

The variety of stakeholders attending, especially producers and worker advocates, gave the event a lot of translational relevance not typical at university events. It also foreshadowed the “Research to Practice” theme of next year’s conference, to be held at Asilomar Conference Grounds, Monterey, California, September 7-9, 2005.

“Cultivating a Sustainable Agricultural Workplace” was hosted by the Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health (PNASH) Center, University of Washington, and co-sponsored by the Western Center for Agricultural Health and Safety, University of California Davis; the University of Washington Northwest Center for Occupational Health and Safety; the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health; and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.