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Planning for Successful Bi-State Crop Conference: A Case Example of the Red River Crops Conference

Abstract

The Red River Crops Conference, consisting of a diverse group of county planning committee members from Oklahoma and Texas, has been successful in creating a high-quality program to support clientele in the Red River region. From the past evaluation results, the number of acres managed by attendees per conference were 69,440 acres for cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum* L.) and 67,620 acres for summer crops, such as native and improved grass pastures and row crops including but not limited to wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.), grain and forage sorghums (*Sorghum* spp.), canola (*Brassica napus* L.), guar (*Cyamopsis tetragonoloba* L.), and sesame (*Sesamum indicum* L.). An average of 50% of the respondents expected to change their production and/or marketing practices based on the information they received at the conference. The cumulative economic impact of the Red River Crops Conference on improved production and economic practices in the region over the past eleven years has been approximately \$7.15M.

Introduction

The Red River region reaches across the state lines of Texas and Oklahoma and offers high agricultural potential when environmental conditions align. Challenges to producers include weather extremes such as hot, dry summers and bitterly cold winters.

Introduced and native grasses can support various cattle enterprises, while crop land can support production of many row crops including wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.), grain and forage sorghums (*Sorghum* spp.), canola (*Brassica napus* L.), guar (*Cyamopsis tetragonoloba* L.), and sesame (*Sesamum indicum* L.). To be successful, agricultural producers in the region need updated information on various production practices. To maximize outreach, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension joined together to help address the Texas Rolling Plains and Southwest Oklahoma's specific agriculture production issues and problems. Thus, the Red River Crops Conference was born in 2014: a two-day conference addressing cotton topics on one day and in-season and summer crops on the other day. The Conference location rotates between Childress, Texas and Altus, Oklahoma.

Methods

Collaboration

The Red River Crops Conference is unique in that two State Extension Services, Texas and Oklahoma, come together to plan, design, implement, and evaluate the program to address the needs of our clientele in the Red River region. The Red River Crops Conference Planning Committee members, with representation across the entire region, focus on clientele needs in both states. Each member actively participates in monthly planning committee meetings to determine the critical needs of producers in the region and identify emerging issues that should be discussed in the conference. General tasks required to accomplish a successful conference are summarized in Table 1. The most important task of the conference planning committee is the selection of topics and speakers. Since all committee members have daily contact with producers and industry personnel in the area, ideas for topics are brought to the committee meetings and then the most appropriate issues or topics are selected for that year's program. This is a

great example of how diverse groups, with a common interest, can create high quality programming to support our combined clientele.

Table 1. Timeline for developing a successful conference.

Month	Tasks
Apr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select conference venue and dates. • Create committee for communicating with catering services and conference venue.
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select and finalize topics and speakers. • Contact speakers and confirm their availability.
Jun	
Jul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss and finalize door prizes and speaker gifts. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Door prizes include hats, pens, and padfolios with a conference logo. ✓ Speaker gifts include coffee mugs with the conference logo
Aug	
Sep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop brochures.
Oct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Print the brochures (Figure 1).
Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mail out brochures and letters to growers and County extension agents. • Purchase door prizes and speaker gifts. • Prepare grower, sponsor, agents, and media letters/article. • Mail out sponsor letters.
Dec	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange catering and refreshments. • Publish media articles (examples: link 1, link 2, and link 3). • Develop welcome, sponsor, and agenda boards (Figure 2) for display.
Jan	<p>Before conference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish the second round of media articles and update Facebook (link). • Set up chairs and tables (day before conference).
	<p>The day of conference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage registration table. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Distribute packets to the attendees with speakers, sponsor list and contact information, agenda, and committee members. ✓ Sign up participants on the registration sheet, containing name, address, email address, and phone number. • Manage technical aspects (sound system and PowerPoint slides) of the presentations. • Have a session moderator to introduce sponsors prior to the beginning of each session and speakers prior to each presentation. • Conduct and collect evaluations.
	<p>After conference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean up conference venue.
Feb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize the evaluation results and share results with sponsors and appropriate administrative personnel at both Universities.



Figure 1. Front (l) and back (r) of the Red River Crops Conference brochure in 2024.



Figure 2. Agenda board for the Red River Crops Conference in 2016.

Evaluation

To gain a perspective on the success/failure of the conference, participants are asked to provide their candid responses in an evaluation. This evaluation is a critical part of the future planning for conference (Hatchfield et al., 2013) and includes the following five questions or statements that were developed by Professor Stan Bevers (retired Professor and Extension Economist and former RRCC committee member) and his colleagues in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Texas A&M University:

- How would you rate the quality of speakers? (1-5; 1 poor, 5 excellent)
- How would you rate the facilities? (1-5; 1 poor, 5 excellent)
- How would you rate the overall conference? (1-5; 1 poor, 5 excellent)
- I will make changes to my production and/or marketing plans based on the information I received at the conference (1-5; 1 definitely not, 2 would not, 3 undecided, 4 minimally would, 5 definitely would).
- Acres planted for each crop under your operations.

Questions 1 to 3 are utilized to improve future programs based on the comments received from participants, while the fourth and fifth questions allow us to measure the change in the participants' operations. Based on the comments from the participants who say they would at least minimally change their plans and the average number of acres of crops planted annually, a financial impact figure can be determined. For example, it is assumed that those that indicate a 5 (definitely would) on question 4 for cotton would increase their net income \$10 per acre for the acres of cotton planted and \$7.50 per acre for the other crops. Likewise, for those respondents indicating a 4 (minimally would), it is assumed that an improvement of \$7.50 per acre of cotton planted and \$5.00 per acre of other crops planted is in order. These changes may be in the form of better marketing, risk management, varietal selection, etc. Once the economic impact of an individual respondent is determined, values are averaged over all respondents, and multiplied by the total numbers of attendees.

Results

Survey responses from previous conference attendees are a critical part of program development, helping the committee to improve the conference (Jayaratne, 2016). The average number of attendees over the past eleven years was 107 people for summer crop day and 153 people for cotton day in the two-day conference (Figure 3). In the past eleven years, we have provided critical information to a total 2866 people (Figure 3). Average acres managed by all attendees per conference were 69,440 acres for cotton and 67,620 acres for summer crops (Figure 4). Each survey respondent managed an average of 1,486 acres of cotton and 2,356 acres of summer crop lands. One of the evaluation questions asked is whether attendees would make changes to pending production and/or marketing plans based on the information they received at the conference. This question addresses whether the topics and depth of the presentations were useful to attendees. Results indicated that an average of 50% of respondents expected to, at least minimally, change their production and/or marketing plan based on the information they received at the conference.

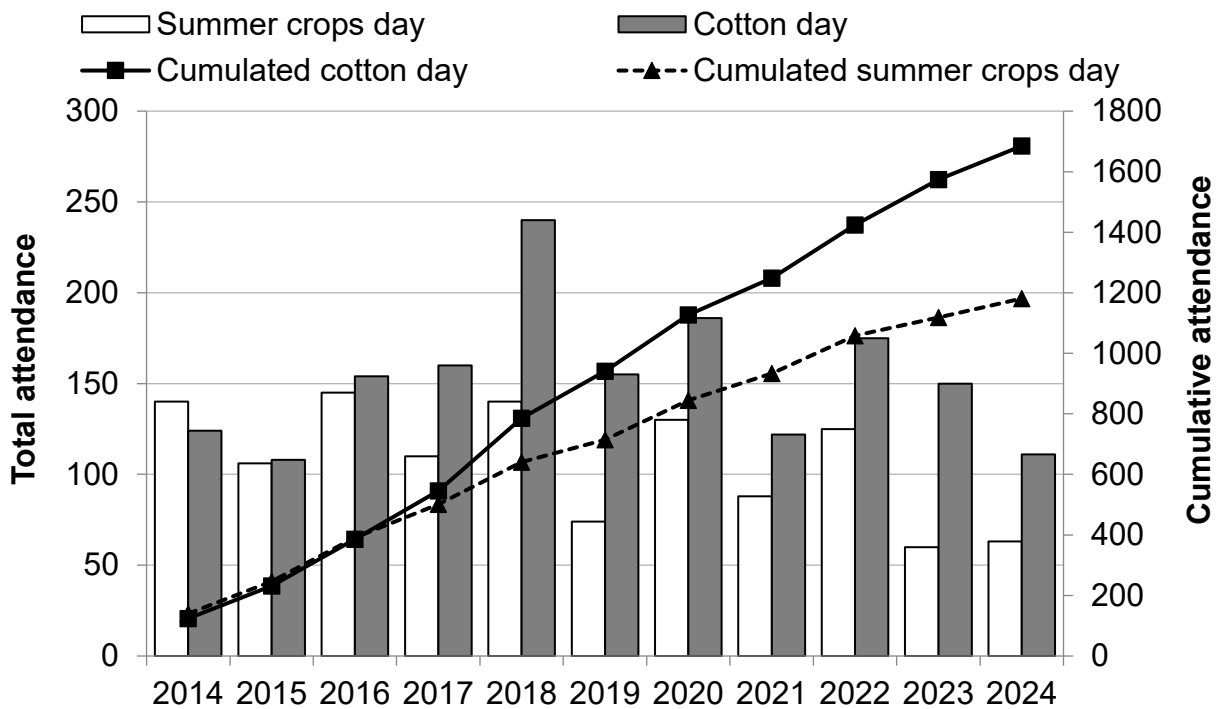


Figure 3. Total (left axis) and cumulative attendees (right axis) for the Red River Crops Conference during 2014 to 2024.

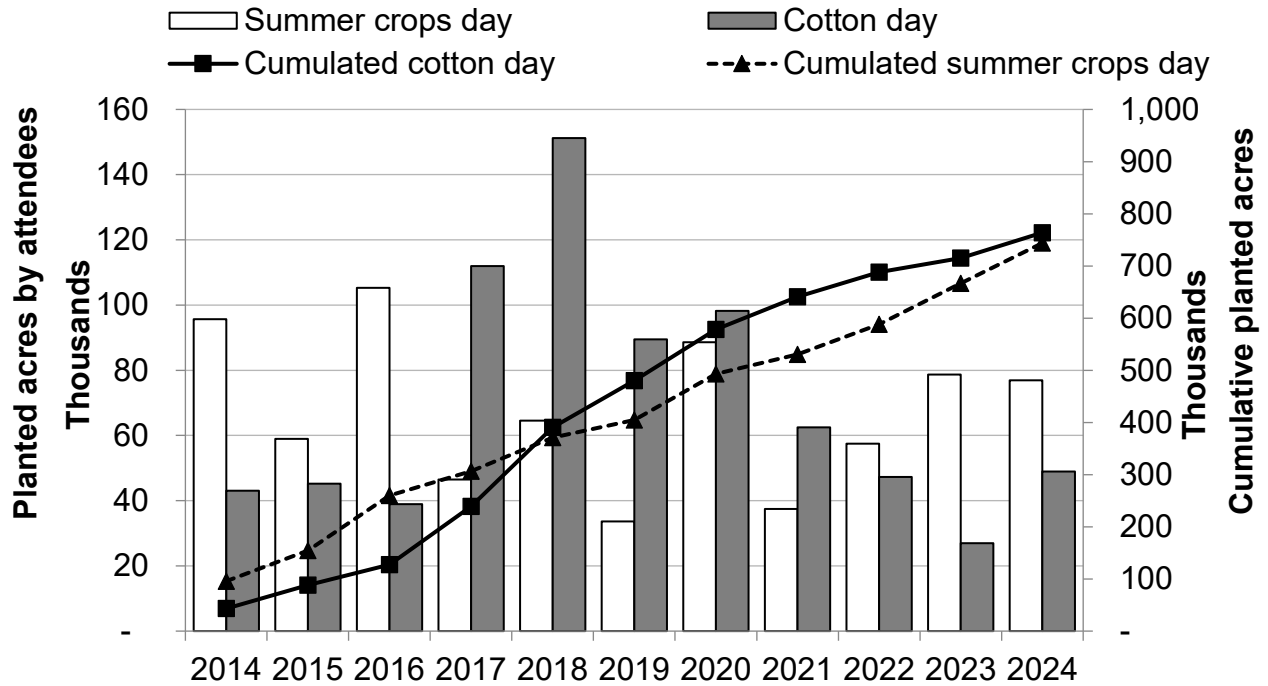


Figure 4. Total planted acres per year (left axis) and cumulative planted acres (right axis) managed by conference attendees during 2014 to 2024.

Economic impact

Based on the respondents who said they would at least minimally change their plans, the conference planning committee measured the economic impact of the conference. The average economic impact that this conference brings to the region is \$650,064 per year, while cumulative economic impact the Red River Crops Conference has made over the past eleven years to the region was estimated to be \$7.15M (Figure 5).

Partnership with industry and commodity groups

The partnership developed with industry and commodity groups is very important to the success of the Red River Crops Conference. Another added benefit of the conference is valuable networking opportunities for industry colleagues, growers, commodity groups, and university colleagues.

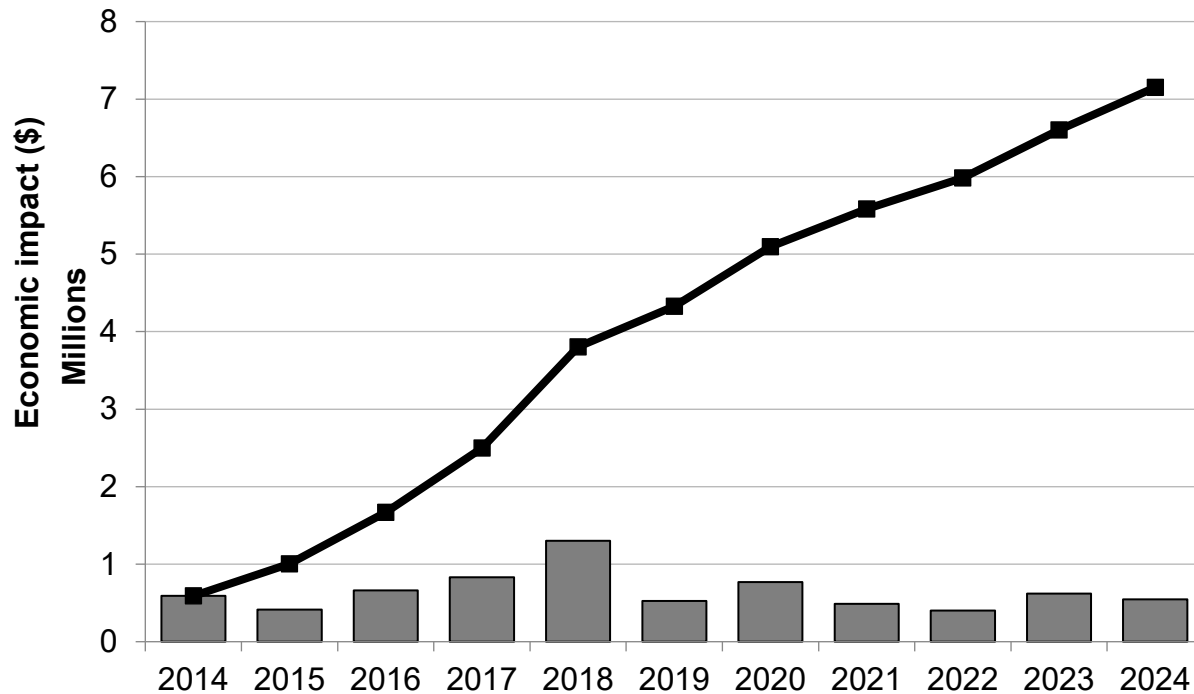


Figure 5. Economic impact of the conference during 2014 to 2024.

Lessons learned in conference planning

Get the speakers confirmed early

We select important topics that need to be addressed at the upcoming conference; however, if the desired speaker is not available, we then change the topic. Therefore, we make sure that the speakers are confirmed six to seven months in advance of the conference in order to ensure that we can deliver the most appropriate topics to conference attendees.

Close communications among committee members

With two state universities organizing the conference, close communication is very important. Since different universities are involved in running the conference, complications can be the result relating to budget management, reporting, and policies (e.g. differing policies during the COVID-19 pandemic). However, the benefit of having the entire agricultural area represented outweighs the challenges. As long as we have good communication among committee members, we are able to overcome challenges.

Limitations and potential solutions

The limitation of the Red River Crops Conference is the rate of evaluation response. An average rate of response to the evaluation is 45% with the range of 32% to 60%. We limit the number of evaluation questions to as few as possible so that the attendees are not reluctant to fill out the evaluation. However, we need to improve the response rate at future conferences. A potential method of improving the response rate of the conference attendees includes using the evaluation paper as a meal ticket or conducting an interactive evaluation using web-tools (e.g., Survey Monkey) so that audience can view the evaluation results instantly.

Conclusion

The Red River Crops Conference is an example of successful multi-state Extension collaboration. Using a post-conference evaluation that includes questions on adoption and acreage, we estimated the economic impact of the conference on the Red River agricultural producer to be \$7.15M. The Red River Crops Conference has been well received by agricultural producers, industry supporters, and agricultural media outlets as evidenced by the number of attendees, their willingness to adopt suggestions made by speakers, and the positive feedback received from the attendees.

Literature Cited

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