



## WESTERN SARE SOUTHWEST SUBREGIONAL CONFERENCE

~June 10-11, 2008 ~  
Best Western Rio Grande Inn  
Albuquerque, New Mexico



8-5-08

### Participants in Southwest Subregional Conference rank priorities

The Southwest Subregional Conference, held in Albuquerque June 10-11, 2008, was designed to capture and prioritize the needs and issues expressed by participants during guided discussions. About 100 people from Colorado, Arizona, Utah and New Mexico attended.



Margaret Campos converses with Harold Trujillo during a break at the Western SARE Southwest Subregional Conference in Albuquerque.

The 470 individual comments recorded during the first day's tabletop discussion were refined the next morning during additional roundtable discussions and followed by eight presentations by a delegate from each of the tables to the Western SARE Administrative Council.

Reports of the delegates' oral comments, representing discussion among the eight or nine participants at each table, follow:

## Cindy Torres, Colorado



Torres emphasized the importance of making consumers aware of the benefits that come from sustainable agriculture practices beyond the values of better tasting, more nutritious food. Consumers also need to know about things like clean air, clean water, more open space and other values that flow from sustainable ag.

She acknowledged the need to better serve socially and economically underserved communities that haven't previously been engaged. And she added that money should be set aside specifically for youth projects in sustainable agricultural practices.

Torres sees a strong need for becoming more persuasive in the arena of public policy. "We need a strong focus on how important it is to advocate for policy that supports our values in sustainable agriculture," she said.

## Margaret Campos, New Mexico

Campos agreed that consumers need to understand the values of food and to learn the skills of how to prepare it – home economics skills. "Most people only know value of food in a package," she said.

She emphasized the importance of having processing facilities for agriculture at the local level, notably animal and milling processing facilities. Campos said agricultural producers are not in an economic position to be able to foster such facilities, so it is incumbent on government to outline public policy that accommodates and encourages them.

Production improvements for local processing and infrastructure should also include distribution, said Campos, noting the "big path from field to table, from conception to consumption."



SARE's outreach in promoting its programs and projects has met mixed success. "If we don't know about it, (the communication) can't have been successful," said Campos, adding that researchers who receive the grants should play a larger role in outreach. She recommended more news releases, especially releases that provide "the face of someone" like Don Bustos of New Mexico for the communities you're trying to reach.

Noting that most farm equipment is designed for large-scale production, Campos said she'd like to see more research into local small-scale food production systems.

She'd also like to see SARE focus on:

- Water conservation use, storage and the protection of quality, as well as the legal protection of water rights and improving the efficiency of water use
- Affordable and renewable on-farm energy
- Youth-based programs
- Outreach to socially disadvantaged producers

On this last point, Campos admonished SARE to help develop capacities for the leaders to come from their own communities; otherwise you displace and disenfranchise them.

## **Harold Trujillo, Colorado**

Trujillo expressed concern over the agricultural infrastructure, especially for processing livestock, a common lament among several presenters.

Another concern is water quality and the amount of water that's available. He suggested more exploration of drip irrigation and on-farm storage techniques.

Local production and marketing are also at the top of Trujillo's interests. He advised support that encourages crop diversification and season extension.

Toward the goal of assisting small, local producers, Trujillo urged efforts to support cooperatives that could help overcome the high cost of equipment, and he urged research into "smaller equipment that fits smaller operations."

He recommended youth programs that expose young people to traditional foods and how to prepare them as a way of boosting their appreciation for whole foods. "Youth are our future," he said.

Finally, he encouraged exploration into on-farm energy programs, including education about carbon sequestration programs that get farmers involved in selling credits.



## **Trudi Kretsinger, Colorado**

We need to come up with public policy, said Kretsinger, that truly supports sustainable agriculture, especially processing facilities for both animals and produce.

“It’s often impossible for small producers to start up because of the prohibitive costs and the ocean of regulations,” said Kretsinger, adding that there are too many conflicting regulations with federal agencies and between state and federal agencies. There are even different interpretations of the same regulations from different inspectors.



At her table, said Kretsinger, water issues bubbled up, including water rights, use, safety and security. “These should be priorities for Western SARE.”

On a personal note, Kretsinger said she enjoyed the experience of learning more about Western SARE and providing suggestions about the needs and issues for the future.

“I’ve been feeling a greater distance between us in the country and people in the city,” she says. “It feels like the separation is growing, but this kind of meeting is helping to bridge the gap.”

## **Ed Costanza, New Mexico**

A major concern Costanza expressed is the shrinking number of farmers as many migrate off the farm.

“Our parents told us to leave the farm, get an education and get a good job,” said Costanza. “This has left a void in agriculture. We’ve lost our farms and we’ve lost our land as land and water rights have been sold off. We’re losing our resources.”

He added that many small farmers are losing their markets as grocers look for larger suppliers who can fill their needs for both quality and quantity, although he said some of these trends are being reversed with projects like Farm to Table and the rise of incubator kitchens.



Costanza echoed concerns about onerous government regulations, which he said are needed to protect the food supply but which are forcing farmers out of business.



He offered two recommendations for SARE to consider:

1. Encourage more backyard food production as well as the use of idle land, often owned by “gentlemen farmers,” for sustainable agriculture.
2. Encourage grants that will develop cooperative farming endeavors.

Costanza said the cooperatives could be formed around someone who owns some land, as little as an acre, combined with others who could provide equipment or other resources. Then people who need a second income or are willing to provide labor could be trained in production and marketing techniques.

Costanza commented that SARE is a great program and that the subregional conference was a “real eye-opener.”



### **Jim Valliant, Colorado**

Valliant emphasized that processing and marketing need to be developed in concert. “The one thing we can do is produce many crops, but often we can’t market them.”

He also urged SARE to look at youth development – “We’ve got to encourage our youth to come back to the farm,” he said.

SARE grants should be afforded a longer period for completion, said Valliant, to enable more thorough research results to be developed. Also, producers hampered by disadvantages in language or technology should be provided with grant-writing assistance.

In addition, Valliant said there needs to be an effort to affect change in government policy to maximize the efficient use of water, and there needs to more focus on renewable energy.

Valliant, chair of the Southeast Colorado Resource Conservation and Development Council, cited the work being done in his area on both wind energy and water conservation.

“Everyone at our table was extremely pleased with being able to participate in the conference,” he said. “We had a lot of fun.”

## **Tisha Casida, Colorado**

As did several other tabletop groups, Casida's urged a focus on animal processing facilities and produce storage as well as a review of the supply chain from field to fork.

"We need help improving the efficiency throughout the entire process," she said, adding that "pennies can add up quickly if you're monitoring this all year long."

Casida said advantages can be achieved through cooperative production and marketing efforts.

And she added that SARE money would be well spent in post-project information dissemination, especially using new technologies and new media, like online information podcasting, which is an important venue for youth. "But going out and talking directly to producers is also important," she said.

In addition to disseminating more grant information, Casida said SARE should make efforts to promote the nutritional values of sustainably grown food.

"If consumers knew about nutrition and taste benefits, it would be a great marketing tool," she said.

Casida said her group agreed it is critical to increase research and education dollars spent on whole-farm systems.



## **Milt McGiffen, California**

McGiffen, who conducts cover crop research that spans Arizona and California cropland, advised that attention be paid to creeping urbanization on agricultural lands. Urban encroachment, he said, makes it more difficult to farm and creates problems for water quality and quantity.

He said cooperative efforts among farmers are needed as are increased animal processing facilities.

Youth education is another critical area, and McGiffen suggested encouraging vocational agriculture teachers to put sustainable agriculture into their curricula.



McGiffen recommended research on water conservation, efficiency and quality, and he said that if Western SARE were to be allocated another million dollars, the program should conduct youth-based programs

“More and more of our population is moving away from the farm, and they don’t know much about where their food comes from,” he said.

He and Casida also emphasized the needed for help with grant writing, and both suggested sample grants that can serve as models for how to do it.

## **Western SARE Administrative Council Responds**

Responding to reports from the tabletop discussion groups, Karl Kupers, chair of the Western SARE Administrative Council (AC), listed a couple of actions that participants and their constituents can take right now.

One way is to apply for a Sustainable Agriculture Farm and Ranch Tour, new this year offering up to \$2,000.



Karl Kupers, chair of the Western SARE Administrative Council, responds to comments from conference participants.

“With the tour you could invite educators, policy makers and consumers to visit farms that embrace sustainability,” said Kupers. “This is an excellent method of connectivity back to the consumer, and you can talk to them about being food activists.”

In response to comments about the need for more ag cooperatives, Kupers advised participants to craft SARE grant applications that talk about a cooperative approach to agriculture, bringing together diverse individuals under a common goal as a cooperative.

Jill Auburn, director of SARE at the national level, said she is honored to work every day for a program like SARE that is “absolutely values-driven” and has turned government hierarchy upside down.

A desire to rethink government policy toward agriculture bubbled up frequently during the conference, and Auburn laid the challenge back on the participants.

“(Policies) that need to change will take citizen action in ways that SARE cannot accomplish,” she said. “I would encourage all of you to get active in your local food organizations and other groups that can impact government.”



Jill Auburn



Mark Frasier



Stacie Clary

Mark Frasier, past chair of the Western SARE AC, reiterated that SARE needs to try to impact youth. And it also needs to do a better job of outreach.

“We need to inform our constituents about our program’s successes and what those can mean to producers’ success,” Frasier said.

Stacie Clary, chair elect of the Western SARE AC, said attending the conference helped her to understand the context of what will be needed for the future.

“I learned a lot coming to a region of the West that I hadn’t been to before,” said Clary. “So much support is needed in markets and infrastructure as well as in youth development and providing support for the underserved.”

The conference concluded with an open microphone, allowing people to make general observations about SARE and the sustainability of agriculture, including these:

- Creativity is something we need to keep investing in. There is a component of creativity that means taking risks.
- The professional development program needs to look more at entrepreneurship and the business management side of farming and ranching.
- Climate change and energy need to become a larger share of the dialogue. How well will agriculture work if the temperatures are higher, if droughts last longer, if fuel prices reach \$8 a gallon?

Auburn concluded with this charge to participants:

“We can pose the questions, but the answers are in the hearts and minds of the creative thinkers out on the landscape.”