

**Sustainable Agriculture in Action: National Continuing Education Program for Cooperative Extension and Other Agricultural, Natural Resource, and Community Development Professionals**

**Online Course Module 1 Preview—NACAA National Conference—July 21, 2005**

**Summary of Participant Comments and Feedback**

**Session Format**

Two 1 ½ hour sessions. Participants each had their own computer workstation and worked through the online course at their own pace. Discussion followed centering on the following questions:

1. Was the information useful in learning the basic principles of sustainable agriculture? Why or why not and be specific.
2. Did you find the interactive sections engaging and helpful in retaining the information? Why or why not and be specific.
3. Was the information presented in a pleasing manner? 4) How would you use this course and information in your job?
4. What incentives would make you more willing to take the course?

**Participants**

36 people attended the two sessions representing all regions of the country.

West: Alaska-2, Arizona-2, Washington-1

South: Florida-4, Maryland-1, North Carolina-1, South Carolina-2, Tennessee-1, Texas-1

North Central: Michigan-3, Minnesota-2, Missouri-3, North Dakota-1, Ohio-2

Northeast: New Jersey-2, New York-2, Pennsylvania-2, Vermont-2, Virginia-2

**Summary Notes**

***Course Content / Format / Interactive Elements***

**Morning Group**

- Good text. Generalized overview is a strength (broad applicability), also potential weakness.
- Three circles image is good. Expand diagram to show relationship to food and marketing system. Check text in Env./Ecosystem pop-up—covers crops
- Good historical summary
- Valuable to show wide range of players in S.A.
- Need better course navigation system. Expandable outline. Should be clearer to show where you are in relation to whole course. Use notation “page xx of xx”
- When you click the Next button/arrow, it would be nice to get some indication of activity while the next page loads.
- Science and sustainable ag section is very weak (only 2 screens) and not applicable to CE field staff.
- Needs more interactive components.
- Too many interactive components (annoyance factor when you just want to read the material).

- Put more text on a screen page.
- Needs more on IPM, and clarification on how IPM relates to S.A. This can really help people transition to the concepts of S.A.
- Too wordy.
- Example with New Jersey Fresh should be correctly named to just “Jersey Fresh”
- Indicate at beginning the length of time needed (range min. – max)) to complete the course.
- Need Index of all Web links in the course.
- Glossary will be good addition: had differing opinions about whether or not to hyperlink words in the course direct to pop-up glossary.
- Drag-Drop overlapping circles activity needs work: some indicators can go in more than one circle, let students drag the item to whatever circle they want, when an answer is correct it just disappears—it should reappear somewhere on the page, re-design in some way to help show how goals and priorities come into play. Current content for this activity seems kind of pointless.
- Need more info on SARE grants and say in the course what you can find at the site—don’t just link to it.
- Can free text field entries be stored in CECP system?
- Would be great if, when a student comes to a stopping point, the system bookmarks where they are and they have the options of printing what they’ve covered to so far. That print out they could then post at their desk to remind them to re-visit the course and also where they left off. Ideally for re-visiting students, they should also get a link when they log-on that says “take me to where I left off” or something along those lines.
- Elements of S.A. graphic needs work. Hot button areas need to be better defined. Also put the number you’ve clicked on in the pop-up box that comes up.
- Add a “Getting Started” page that explains how course works and different activities.
- Identify in text that information resources in the course are research-based.
- Photos: should all be realistic (not idealistic), all should be from sustainable farms and then advertise that fact, some photos of poor quality (e.g. soil pit and peach), some clip art too cutesy.
- All paragraphs should be under 6-7 lines of text.

#### Afternoon Group

- Good basic information that can be passed on to others.
- Adequate knowledge base—course assumes fairly beginning level.
- Includes practical production information.
- Biased against large scale / corporate agriculture; sets up agribusiness vs. family farms, when in actuality many large scale agri-business operations are family operations.
- History section leads us down path that leads you to believe we’re not talking to large-scale farmers. Urban development and sprawl are also a major factor in loss of farms.
- Stress conservation of natural resources and BMPs.
- Great to have so many outside links for resources.
- On some of the interactive pieces (e.g. year that s.a. was first in print), if you get the correct answer, then you miss out on the feedback for incorrect answers. Instruct people to check out significance of other dates.

- Not always clear where there were interactive elements.
- Interactive stuff is annoying. Easier to just read it.
- Good balance between text and photos.
- Would rather have more text per screen/page and then have to scroll down.
- Videos are problematic given that many offices are still on slow, low-bandwidth lines: Have videos downloadable as separate file?, graphics and video on CD?, offer text/transcript of video?, offer audio only? Not all agents have sound at their desks. One individual in Florida doesn't even have PCs in her office: she works at a terminal.
- Length of course: 20-30 minutes per unit seems appropriate. That would total 1 hour for this first module.
- Anyway to automate bookmarking of links within the course? Related to comment above about indexing all the outside links.
- Take out "type in your own text" activities—fake interaction.
- On Meismer farm example have budgets downloadable.
- Good to have so many female farmer examples.
- Provide links to ATTRA and AFSIC, and outline what's there. Don't just give the links.
- Indicator Tools section does not have any Coop. Ext. examples—FINPAC FINBIN. Noted that these are not integrated, systems approach products.
- Make sure the resources map of the U.S. has link to Extension page for each state.
- Change text: should be "as much about 'social work' as about technical advice". But we really should come up with a better term than social work since that has certain connotations and might reduce our effectiveness in getting our main points across.
- The section on working with farmers insults county agents' intelligence. They know all this. Social skills distinguish the artist from the average agent. They all know that—talking about it is not necessary. Besides it's unrealistic to take the time to work in this mode with all clients. This may overwhelm some students.
- Reading the farm section needs more depth—a case study??
- Need more links for Units 2 and 3.
- Examples should all be current, representative across the nation, diverse.
- Would use the course for: self-education, resources, review in preparation for writing a grant proposal.

### *Incentives*

#### Morning Group

- Completing course will help you apply for SARE grant.
- Access to travel funds.
- Continuing Ed. credits

#### Afternoon Group

- Knowing that this will help in work
- Credit toward academic degrees
- Certification / CE hours (CCA, Hort, Farm Mgmt., Animal Sci)
- It's free – no charge
- Pre-req for travel funds, bonus points for grant applications
- Books and other free resources

*Summarized by David Chaney*