

NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE WESTERN U.S.



Executive Summary



Identifying Information Gaps and Future Directions for Research and Outreach

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The research team was charged with identifying current and future research and outreach needs related to sustainable agricultural practices and systems among Extension educators, non-profit, and non-governmental agencies in the Western U.S.

The project started by developing a contact list of educators representing organizations (for profit/non-profit/government) actively working in the area of sustainable agriculture in the Western U.S. This was done through web-based searches and social media analytics/mentions using keywords encompassing of sustainable agriculture efforts in the Western U.S. A contact list of all Extension educators in the Western region was also located.

A web-based survey was then developed, tested and distributed to 4,824 potential respondents. Responses were obtained from 1,234 individuals resulting in a 26% response rate. Respondents represented every Extension systems in the Western region (n = 992) and organizations from across the U.S. working in the Western region (n = 242).

Highlighted Findings

State Level Efforts a Priority

Collaborate to Increase Impact

State Coordinator Support

Water Identified as Top Issue

The Younger Generation

Subsistence Producer Needs

Include Cost/Benefit Analysis

Specific Learning Opportunities

Supporting the Pacific Islands

State Level Efforts a Priority

State-level projects were found to be most valuable, followed by those that focus at the local level. W-SARE should consider de-prioritizing multi-state projects and/or not encouraging them in requests for proposals.



Strategic Collaborations Could Increase Impact

Extension professionals are more highly educated but have been working in the field for a shorter amount of time than their non-Extension counterparts. To capitalize on the different points of view collaborations between the two should be encouraged. Perhaps a request for proposals could be developed that emphasizes collaborations.

Non-Extension educators are working more closely with large-scale producers than Extension. Small-scale producers do not have as large of a footprint (and less potential impact) when they adopt sustainable practices than their larger counterparts. Funding projects that target working with large-scale producers could result in larger impact than those targeting small-scale producers.

Non-Extension educators are working more with this group so should be utilized as strategic partners or leads on these types of projects. Western SARE has an opportunity to work as a hub to connect Extension and Non-Extension educators and researchers together in a meaningful way through planning grants and/or other networking experiences.

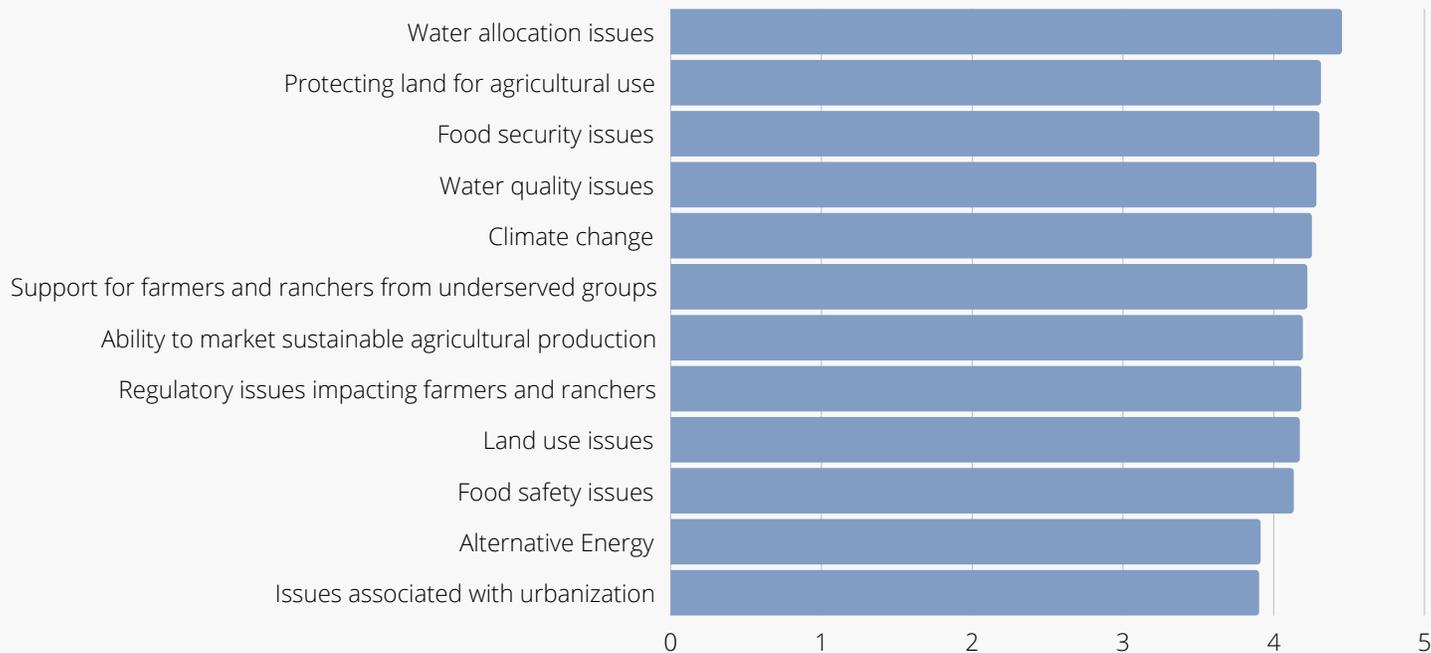
Support State Coordinators in the Development of Networking Experiences

Western SARE should consider supporting state coordinators through non-competitive grants designed to create state-specific planning experiences that bring Non-Extension and Extension professionals together with the intent of participants engaging in project planning that would result in a collaborative proposal submitted to Western SARE for future funding.



Water Identified as the Top Issue

Water allocation issues were identified as the top issue facing the agricultural industry in the West; therefore, water-specific calls for proposals should be developed. Water quality and climate change concerns were also expressed; therefore, how climate change impacts water could also be considered.



Contributions from the Younger Generation

Younger educators (Millennials and Gen Z respondents) were more racially diverse (21.4%) than their older counterparts (14.6%). They were also more concerned about support for farmers and ranchers from underrepresented groups. A call for proposals could be put together that focuses on early career researchers/extensionists focusing on working with underrepresented populations.



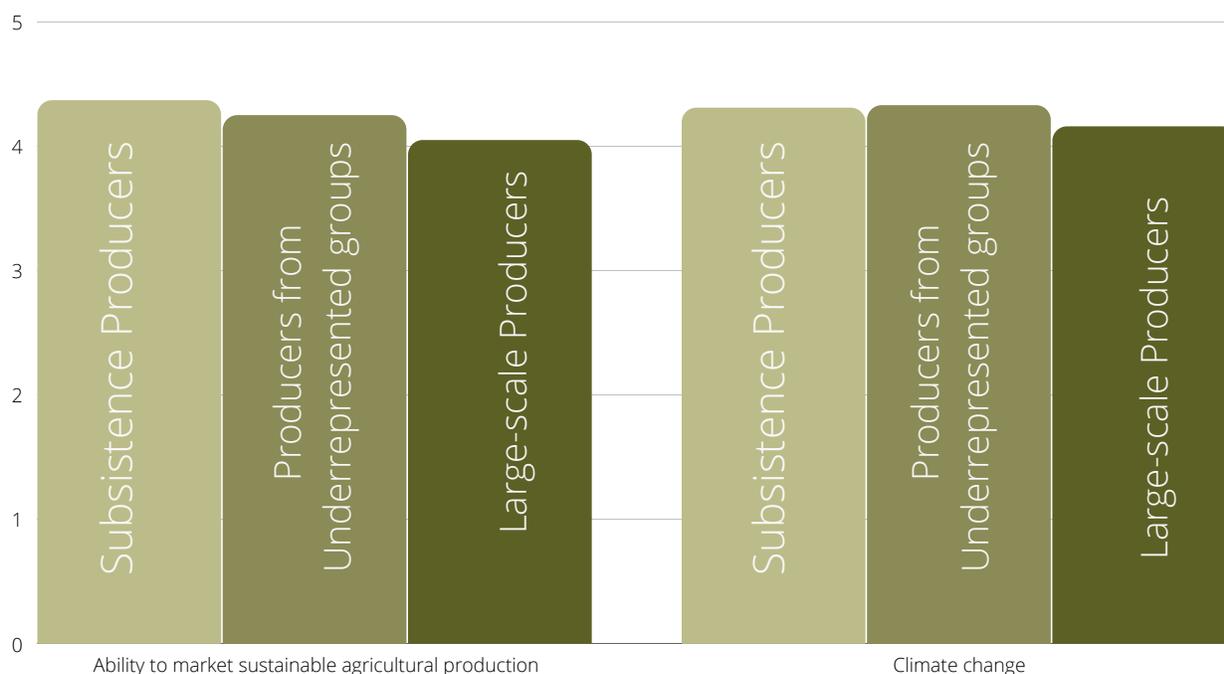
Western SARE should ensure younger educators are engaged when conducting strategic planning for the next 5 – 10 years. Acknowledging the Great Resignation is occurring, proactively engaging members of the younger generation will ensure the viability of the work being done by Western SARE into the future.

Younger respondents are also most likely going to be the individuals doing the majority of sustainable agricultural education 10 years in the future; therefore, their priorities should not only be taken into consideration but prioritized.



Subsistence Producer Needs

Subsistence producers and those from underrepresented groups need more assistance marketing sustainable agricultural production methods than large-scale producers and are more concerned about the impacts of climate change. These would be two areas of emphasis that should be placed on any requests for proposals targeting these two groups.



Include Cost/Benefit Analysis

Insecurity around potential financial loss, perceived risk, and time investment required to adopt sustainable agricultural practices/technologies were specific barriers to adoption identified and should be addressed in all SARE-funded projects. Therefore, all requests for proposals should include a cost/benefit (economic and human dimension) analysis of practice or technology adoption component. Such analysis should then inform the educational program offered to producers.

Emphasize Specific Learning Opportunities

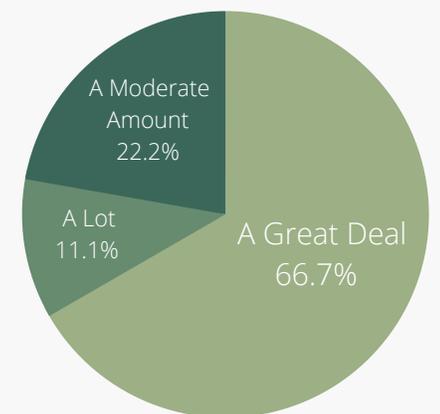
Findings indicated adoption will increase if projects emphasize:

- Providing field days or visits to facilities where new practices can be viewed.
- Real-time online feeds of field days for producers unable to travel to location sites.
- The use of case studies to showcase producers adopting sustainable practices.
- Research partnerships with producers that ensure results are applicable in the field rather than testing new practices under optimal conditions in a lab-type setting.



Strategically Support the Pacific Islands

- Develop requests for proposals that specifically addresses overcoming the barriers felt by those working in this part of the west. They should, specifically, consider cultural influence and indigenous knowledge.
- Support projects that address the lack of access to technology and proper equipment.
- Focus on use of technology available rather than new technologies requiring broadband access (or even electricity) in remote areas.
- There is a perceived lack of knowledge regarding sustainable agriculture in certain geographic locations. Ensuring educational programs/information is available in native languages – both written and verbal - could assist in overcoming language and communication barriers.
- Many respondents working in the Islands indicated a lack of support for grant writing. Western SARE should consider providing resources such as:
 - Budget development and budget justification creation support.
 - Editorial assistance to ensure writing clarity.
 - Final editorial reviews prior to submission.
 - Assistance with clarification of objectives.
 - Support on how to best measure programmatic outcomes.



Perceived Impact of W-SARE in the Pacific Islands

Sustainability Defined?

Findings indicated there is a need to be better communicate the definition of sustainability to ensure broader recognition and support for the Western SARE definition available on the website.

- The short definition of sustainability should be placed in a prominent place on the 'Home' page.
- The definition should be included in every request for proposals to ensure projects address all three parts of the definition and stakeholders have a common definition for sustainable agriculture.
- All three parts of sustainability – economic, social, and environmental – should be considered when evaluating characteristics of proposals and selecting those to fund.