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Highlights of the Virtual 2021 North American Agricultural Safety Summit

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our lives in ways never before imagined. Individuals, businesses, and organizations adjusted to restrictions and redirections on virtually every aspect of their daily lives and future plans. The multi-year preparation for the national conference of the Agricultural Safety and Health Council of America (ASHCA) was equally affected and, yet, the outcomes and impacts were more positive than anticipated. The 2021 North American Agricultural Safety Summit was held online via a virtual conference platform, March 22–24, the same period previously planned for in-person in Las Vegas (Figure 1). This brief report provides highlights of the Summit and perspectives on the outcomes and impact of a national agricultural safety event held during a global pandemic. (Visit the website www.ashca.org for more information about the organization.)

Background

ASHCA was established in 2007 with a mission to “*to proactively address ongoing and emerging occupational safety and health issues affecting U.S. agriculture in ways that yield positive results.*” ASHCA’s leadership primarily comprises agricultural business and farm organization leaders for whom safety is a value, but not a full-time focus. In its first 15 years, ASHCA has grown from a small group of committed individuals to a member organization that serves as a united voice for protecting our nation’s agricultural workforce. ASHCA convened conferences in 2010,¹ 2013,² and again in 2018³ with attendance by a mixed audience

with results that included the development of new partnerships, published results, and strengthened commitment to safety. In 2020, ASHCA secured a three-year conference support grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to plan, execute, and conduct follow-up activities for a series of three annual Summit events that would include participation from influential agricultural leaders, safety practitioners, researchers, policy-makers, and others. The first event of March 2020 was cancelled just one week in advance because of the COVID-19 outbreak and impending restrictions on travel. To achieve at least some of the 2020 Summit objectives, a series of three 1-hour webinars were developed to include brief (three-minute) videotaped research presentations and safety awards. An average of 50 participants joined each webinar, and later 41



Figure 1. Logo of 2021 summit event.

research abstracts were published in the *Journal of Agromedicine*.⁴

By September 2020, a decision was made to replace the in-person 2021 North American Agricultural Safety Summit with an online conference platform that would provide some of the options typically provided in-person, including panel discussions, networking opportunities, exhibits, demonstrations, research abstracts, and contact information of fellow attendees. The Conference Planning Committee and several subcommittees launched a process of regularly scheduled video meetings and teleconferences that addressed most aspects planned for the in-person event.

Event components

The Summit's opening session set the stage for communicating safety principles and motivating a culture of safety within agricultural enterprises. The film SILO, depicting a grain bin engulfment of two workers, was aired in its entirety. This was followed by an open discussion that included the movie's producer, the ASHCA Board Chair, and a Grain Handling Safety Coalition member. Reactions depicted the emotional toll a tragedy has on an accident victim's family and first-responders within the context of the social fabric that holds rural communities together.

The overriding theme of the Summit was "Lessons Learned" from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the agricultural workforce. A keynote address was given by Dr. John Howard, Director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), predicting the future of work in agriculture and describing NIOSH guidance on agricultural worker safety during the pandemic. Plenary sessions addressed pandemic responses on large- and small-scale agricultural operations as well as specific experiences in feedlots and pork production facilities. Several speakers commented on vaccine availability for workers and incentives to overcome vaccine hesitancy. Two speakers described experiences with on-farm vaccine clinics (Figure 2).

Other plenary session topics addressed future labor force and worker sustainability issues, unique challenges of immigrant workers, emerging technologies, extreme weather impacts on physical

and mental health, employers' roles in helping workers secure childcare services, and dealing with prescription marijuana and opioids at work. A final session offered the American Farm Bureau Federation's perspectives on how the new Biden Administration's federal safety and health policies might impact production agriculture and its workforce.

The Summit program included the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Board of Certified Safety Professionals (BCSP) and ASHCA, signifying agreement to collaborate on new initiatives and to promote each other's safety training activities. This relationship is built upon previous "Friends of ASHCA" collaborations, which include many NIOSH agricultural research centers and other non-government organizations addressing safety and health in agriculture.

Each year, ASHCA solicits nominations for safety awards in different categories. During the Summit program, two sessions each featured four award recipients. The emcee described the awards solicitation and selection process with award categories including farm owner, researcher, agricultural organization, educator, policy-maker, and lifetime achievement. A "research to practice" funded award was sponsored by Workers Compensation Fund (WCF) insurance. The

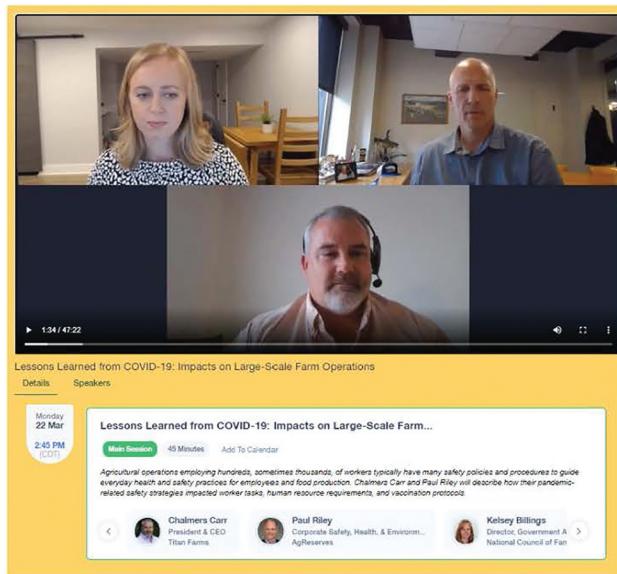


Figure 2. Screenshot of session with Moderator, Kelsey Billings with speakers, Paul Riley of Ag Reserves and Chalmers Carr of Titan Farms.

emcee provided details on each recipient's contributions to agricultural safety and health and "presented" them with their engraved glass bowl gift (**Figure 3**). (Visit the website www.ashca.org to view the ASHCA Achievement awards.)

Another program component was the research lightning talks and poster presentations, which were incorporated during four different sessions. Several months prior, a committee selected 26 abstracts with topics ranging from emerging community needs (e.g., Aging on the Farm, Multidrug-Resistant Foodborne Pathogens) to research strategies and intervention development (e.g., Maintaining Farm Cohort Studies, Development and Use of Topic-Based Agricultural Youth Work Guideline Booklets, Constructing and Validating a Knowledge, Attitude, and Practices Questionnaire) to topics related to COVID-19 (e.g., Taking Care of Children While Working on the Farm, An Outbreak of COIVD-19 among H-2A Temporary Agricultural Workers in Florida, Development of Protocols for In-Person Safety Trainings During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Recommendations for Efficient Rollout of COVID-19 Vaccine in the Agricultural Sector). Of these abstracts, 17 were presented during the conference as three-minute-long pre-videotaped lightning talks.

Using a commercial online conference platform, the three-day Summit event was held from 11:00 AM to 4:00 PM (ET) each day, which included occasional breaks during which time attendees could visit the hands-on demonstrations, research posters, and exhibits. Registered attendees could

update their personal profiles with a photo, employment or academic details, and description of interest areas regarding agricultural safety and health. These details were intended to encourage post-event networking. A modest registration fee of 100 USD (ASHCA members) or 125 USD (non-members) helped defray the costs of the online platform.

Outcomes and impacts

Evaluation feedback was secured from several mechanisms. Online evaluation surveys were used to solicit and quantify participant perspectives on the Summit program and to assess the event's planning committee perspective on the one-year process. Additionally, informal, qualitative feedback was secured from a post-event wrap up meeting and a subsequent ASHCA Board of Directors meeting.

There were four specific objectives for the 2021 Summit, and to some extent, each was accomplished. The first objective was to plan, execute, and conduct activities to ensure a high-quality event. There were 119 individuals who purchased tickets to the event, with an average session attendance of 59 individuals ($SD = 14$). Of the attendees, 61% were members of the ASHCA organization. The majority of attendees were associated with research-related institutions (53%), followed by agricultural organizations (including associations, federations, and cooperatives; 22%), producers (8%), insurance (8%), and governmental offices (5%). Analytics from the online platform indicated that participation in the event remained steady, with a slight drop-off in attendance throughout the day and over the course of the three-day event, as noted in **Figure 4**. The highest attended session was the keynote address by Dr. John Howard, followed by the viewing of the film SILO (reflected by the two peaks in attendance during day 1 of the event).

Evaluation results from the attendees and planning committee indicated high levels of satisfaction with the online event. Following the event, attendees were emailed a link to an evaluation survey; 35 attendees completed the post-event evaluation survey (29% response rate). Attendees rated the event an 8.32 ($SD = 1.85$) out of 10, with the most common scoring of 9 (57% of respondents rated the conference a 9 or 10; range 2–10, with 1 = Waste of Time and 10 = Excellent Event). Written comments from



Figure 3. ASHCA award gifts.

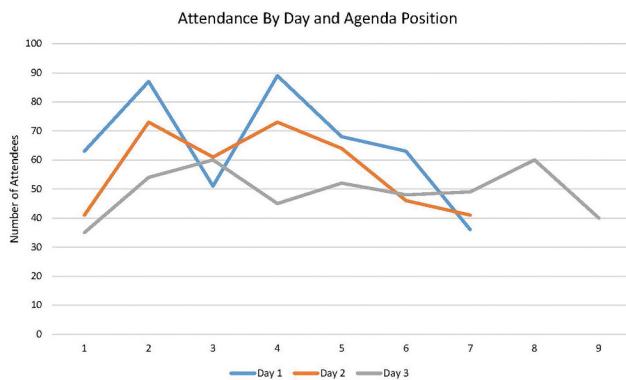


Figure 4. Trends in attendance by day and agenda position.

attendees reflected positively on the diversity of topics presented and the excellent quality of speakers. Attendees were asked to rate the main features of the conference using a scale of 1 = Poor and 5 = Excellent. Viewing of the film SILO received the highest average rating, 4.52 ($SD = 0.96$), followed by the keynote address, 4.45 ($SD = 0.74$) and lightning talks, 4.04 ($SD = 0.98$). Virtual booth space for Tools of the Trade presentations, Research Posters, and Exhibitors experienced varied attendance, with 4 to 32 unique individual views throughout the event.

Planning committee members were invited to complete an online survey one week following the event. Ten individuals (83%) completed the survey, and this excluded the evaluator. All questions related to the planning process received a high rating (scored with 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree), with “Having the online/virtual Summit was a worthwhile activity” having the highest mean score of 4.78 ($SD = 0.42$). Based on open-ended questions regarding the planning process and discussion following the event, factors contributing to the quality of the event included strong collaboration and coordination, which kept the process moving and working together in concert. Another outcome was the ability to confirm agricultural leaders as speakers for an online program that did not require considerable time away from their jobs. Recommendations from the planning team for future events included establishing a standing committee for conferences and initiating from planning at least one year in advance.

The second objective was to facilitate new partnerships, leading to the adoption of best agricultural safety and health practices that keep pace with

changes in food production and worker profiles. In addition to the signing of an MOU between BCSP and ASHCA, other informal friendships and collaborations were formed. Having representatives or major agricultural organizations and owners of farm operations speak directly to the audience brought attendees closer to influential and successful leaders. Examples include the Director for Producer and Public Health of the National Pork Board, the owner of Titan Farms (Georgia peach grower), and the Director of Idaho Dairymen’s Association. Best practices for a variety of workplace management issues and workforce well-being, including immigrant and seasonal employees, were conveyed by speakers sharing timely, relevant experiences. The up-close screen time created a “presence” that would not have occurred in a large conference venue. The conference outcome for facilitating potential partnerships with new collaborators received a score of 3.58 ($SD = 1.23$; scoring ranged from 1 = Poor to 5 = Excellent) on attendee post-event evaluations. Feedback from the planning committee included the challenge of facilitating interactions in the online platform. Subsequent interactions between speakers, moderators, and attendees have not been formally documented but may be part of longer term evaluations that will guide future events.

A third objective was to identify research priorities based upon the industry’s anticipated future needs. “The Future of Work” in agriculture was the keynote address, describing issues that impact the workplace, work, and workforce. In agriculture, these will include 1) new technologies driven by food demand and population growth, desert agriculture and seawater farming, and increased genetic engineering; 2) new types of farms such as vertically stacked greenhouse operations; and 3) changes in worker profiles, especially with increasing use of robotics. Several speakers expanded on these topics and highlighted gaps in knowledge and the research implications regarding human/worker health and safety in the future.

The fourth objective was to publish proceedings, abstracts, commentaries, and relevant research studies in the *Journal of Agromedicine: Practice, Policy & Research*, which is being accomplished, in part, in this issue. Subsequent issues are expected to include manuscripts with a focus on the future of work in agriculture.

Following the three-day event, the online platform remained open for one month, allowing late registrations and continued and repeated viewing by participants. In addition, the ASHCA website is retaining certain components of the Summit program for a year. Thus, the event will have a continued online availability beyond a typical in-person conference.

Summary

Planning and conducting an online conference in lieu of a scheduled in-person event created new, unanticipated challenges. With a flexible, creative planning team and a commercial conference platform, those challenges were overcome. The organizers were able to offer a high-quality agricultural safety and health event that addressed timely topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the future of work in agriculture. In 2022, the conference planning team anticipates holding an in-person event at the same venue previously scheduled for 2020 and 2021 (Figure 5). The process of hosting a successful online event, combined with feedback and encouragement from participants, will lay the groundwork for broader audiences, practical solutions, and new partnerships that strengthen the culture of safety for workers in agriculture.



Figure 5. Event logo for 2022.

Mark your calendar!

The next North American Agricultural Safety Summit is March 28–30, 2022 at Bally's of Las Vegas. Hope to see you there!

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Disclosure statement

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