



## Cultivating Collaborations: Western Ag Safety and Health Conference

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## EDITORIAL

### Cultivating Collaborations: Western Ag Safety and Health Conference

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has funded research, education, and outreach work in the agriculture, forestry and fishing (AgFF) sector since 1990. This was a major milestone and shift from earlier years, providing a new resource for agricultural safety and health research and outreach, in addition to extension and education activities funded by USDA and, to some extent, the private sector. Starting from the early years, the regional agricultural safety and health centers became the most prominent part of this NIOSH-funded effort, and currently there are ten regional centers, plus one focusing on children and youth in agriculture. During the first decade, regional centers took turns organizing conferences, bringing together researchers from NIOSH and regional AgFF centers to share information about their work. However, given how much time and resources went into organizing these growing national conferences, the centers discontinued these conferences and joined forces with other conference organizers, particularly the International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health (ISASH, previously NIFS) and, more recently, the Agricultural Safety and Health Council of America (ASHCA). This reduced duplicative work and offered opportunities to mix with agricultural safety and health practitioners, not only from the NIOSH-funded centers and teams, but also from the extension, insurance, agribusiness, and other organizations. However, this also left many gaps for NIOSH-funded researchers and experts. Much of the traditional agricultural safety and health activity has been Midwestern production agriculture centered, with less attention to Western and coastal areas. Forestry and fishing have not been well represented. “Bench scientists” focusing on chronic health issues have not found a home in these

conferences. Broader topics, like one health, climate change, mental health, sustainability, etc. have not been at the forefront.

About 4 years ago, when the NIOSH agricultural safety and health centers were planning their next 5-year proposals, the idea about specific NIOSH-funded research driven conferences emerged again. The Pacific Northwest Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (PNASH) took the lead and found strong support for the idea among other western centers located in California, Colorado, Nebraska, and Texas, as well as the NIOSH AgFF office. From the beginning, the conference planning committee, headed by Marcy Harrington, Richard Fenske, and Mike Yost from PNASH, had a clear goal that this conference was going to be carefully planned, centered on central themes, engaging leading experts and their current and future visions, and equally representing the broader agriculture, forestry and fishing research sector. Themes and moderators were chosen, leading experts were invited, and multiple presentation opportunities for participants were offered in the thematic sessions, lightning talks, poster sessions, and roundtable discussions. The University of Washington Seattle campus provided an outstanding learning and sharing environment for the Western Regional Agricultural Safety and Health Conference.

By all accounts, this conference strategy and format was a great success. The conference reached 170 attendees and covered a broad spectrum of topics, with the help of collaborating centers, presenters, partners, and sponsors. A major part of the conference focused on multi-modal dissemination and sharing of information, not only to and between participants, but also making the conference presentations and materials freely available online to the worldwide audience on the conference website at: <https://deohs.washington.edu/pnash/west-ag-safety->

conf. Starting from thought provoking keynote presentations by Drs. Richard Fenske and Marc Schenker, to 48 scientific presentations in 8 thematic sessions, 23 lightning talks, 53 posters, and 22 roundtable topics; this conference presented the state-of-the-art in agriculture, forestry and fishing health and safety research and practice in the United States and beyond.

Last, but not least, the conference organizing committee offered and reached an agreement with the *Journal of Agromedicine* to publish a special edition of papers presented in the conference. This effort resulted in the publication of papers and editorials from multiple disciplines. With the distribution opportunities through the *Journal of Agromedicine*, we hope to reach the international research community and make a lasting mark, moving the AgFF safety, health, and wellness research forward. The manuscripts and editorials that follow highlight some of the exceptional conference content.

Through this conference and subsequent dissemination efforts, several issues have become clear: 1) this small but important research sector has come a long way from its early beginnings in the 1990s; 2) there is a generation change going on as early innovators and visionaries are retiring, and the new, energetic, highly skilled, well trained, and growing generation is taking over; 3) forestry and fishing have become integrated with agriculture, giving these very hazardous sub-sectors an equal seat at the table; 4) Western and coastal regions have developed strong research centers and teams dealing with the unique

and diverse issues in these regions; and 5) the agricultural safety, health, and wellness community has grown to deal with a broad spectrum of issues, which has been evident in the response to the current pandemic. NIOSH, with expertise from around the AgFF centers and beyond, quickly developed national guidelines for agricultural employers and workers.

What next? There are no immediate plans at this time to repeat a similar regional conference effort in the future. However, based on the success of this Western conference, NIOSH and AgFF center leaders might put this issue on their agenda for discussion, particularly as the centers are again preparing to write proposals for the next 5 years. In the meantime, publications from this conference, including papers in this special issue, form an enduring resource that can be used in developing policies, practices, training, and education for farmers, ranchers, foresters, fishers, family members, hired workers and others that keep the agriculture, forestry, and fishing industry going. Finally I would like to thank the PNASH leaders, members of the organizing committee, presenters, and those who participated in this outstanding conference.

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