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"Ask the Ag Agent" Weekly Webinar Series: Agriculture-Focused Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted traditional delivery of Extension programs. Our group of Rutgers agricultural agents responded by developing a weekly webinar series to remotely continue agricultural consultations and provide an open forum for farmers. Pandemic-related topics included farm labor, compliance with state executive orders, supply-chain disruptions, livestock processing, farmer assistance programs, and other issues. Participation from 258 farmers, agricultural agencies, and other groups resulted in effective networking and timely delivery of information to the agriculture industry. By using available online tools, we were able to efficiently deliver Extension programming and resources to agricultural producers and industry partners. Our efforts may be informative for others as needs related to the pandemic evolve.

Keywords: [COVID-19 pandemic](#), [agricultural agent](#), [webinar](#)

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Introduction

In March 2020, White House officials declared a national emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (The White House, 2020). Shortly thereafter, Rutgers University suspended all in-person instruction and initiated remote teaching and work-from-home requirements for all faculty, staff, and students (Rutgers University Office of Emergency Management, 2020). This announcement suddenly and dramatically changed program delivery, particularly for Extension, where clientele interactions typically occur via face-to-face meetings. These changes required both a timely response from Extension personnel and a mechanism for sharing information with partner agencies, colleagues, and the agriculture industry. The State of New Jersey and Rutgers Cooperative Extension were among the first to experience disruptions due to the pandemic. The sudden changes experienced necessitated unprecedented adaptation of program delivery to ensure continuity of communication across farmers, Extension professionals, and other industry groups. As needs related to the pandemic evolve, others in Extension may benefit from information about our response.

The important role Extension plays in emergency response is well documented due in part to Extension's

ability to provide timely information and materials across various agencies and clientele groups (Eighmy, Hall, Sahr, Gebeke, & Hvidsten, 2012). The unique relationship between Extension professionals and the community allows for both rapid needs assessment and prompt deployment of resources (Cathey, Coreil, Schexnayder, & White, 2007). This relationship has been used to provide an innovative and timely response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples include development of creative solutions for providing services (Fawcett et al., 2020) and a call for effective virtual youth programming (Arnold & Rennekamp, 2020).

In response to the unique challenges brought on by the pandemic, we immediately developed a weekly webinar series titled "Ask the Ag Agent" (AAA). The primary goal of these web-based meetings was to share timely information with the agricultural community while maintaining health, safety, and compliance with university and executive directives. The use of web-based platforms to disseminate Extension programming has been reported to be an effective, timely, and cost-effective means of information delivery (Pulec, Skelly, Brady, Greene, & Anderson, 2016; Rich et al., 2011). Our use of the technology offered an innovative opportunity for communication that resulted in tremendous networking across farmers, agricultural agencies, not-for-profit organizations, and others working in the agriculture industry.

Program Description

Using the Cisco Webex Meetings platform, we conducted the AAA series for 8 weeks during April and May 2020. Meetings were held during the evening to allow for maximum participation and outreach.

Promotion of the webinar series was an industry-wide effort. New Jersey Farm Bureau sent member email blasts and published newsletter announcements. Announcements occurred via the Rutgers Cooperative Extension events calendar, Rutgers Plant and Pest Advisory website, Rutgers Agriculture and Natural Resources Facebook page, and individual email distribution lists. This multifaceted marketing approach ensured that many agricultural producers and agencies were included. The webinars provided farmers the most current information available and presented an opportunity for participants to discuss individual concerns related to the pandemic. Such discussion provided Extension personnel with real-time needs assessments, which directed future COVID-19 programming efforts and facilitated weekly discussion topics.

Although we guided the direction of topics covered during the webinars by addressing "water cooler topics," much of the time was allocated to responding to producer questions or concerns related to the pandemic. Participants were encouraged to give reports, to network, and to problem solve together. This open forum prompted discussions on a myriad of timely topics (Table 1). Areas covered during the AAA series included crop production, marketing, and regulations as well as health and safety issues. Ongoing timely topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic also were addressed. These topics included New Jersey Department of Health farm labor guidance, best practices for complying with state executive orders, issues with distribution channel disruption and product availability, meat and dairy processing concerns, and government assistance programs.

Table 1.

Dates, Topics Discussed, and Attendance for "Ask the Ag Agent" Webinar Series

Session	Date	Topics discussed	Attendance
1	April 8	• Rutgers Cooperative Extension operational status	27

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migrant labor visas, travel restrictions, and transportation issues • Supply chain disruptions • Federal programs • Partnering agency updates • Crop production issues • COVID-19 state regulations 	
2	April 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labor regulations • Farm market safety recommendations • Alternative marketing strategies • Current image of agriculture • Meat processor shut-downs 	38
3	April 22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rutgers Cooperative Extension field visits/procedures • COVID-19 resources • On-farm food safety • Sourcing of personal protective equipment • Update on Rutgers services: soils and diagnostic labs • Rutgers Cooperative Extension publications • Spring crop conditions 	29
4	April 29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal funding and resources • Farmers to Families Food Box Program • Social distancing at farm markets • Irrigation permit extensions 	32

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crop status 	
5	May 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Health farm worker guidance • Farm marketing strategies • Rutgers soils lab services update • New Jersey dairy industry update • Meat processing • Federal agency updates • COVID-19 rapid response grant 	31
6	May 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cloth face covering requirements for customers/employees • Federal Coronavirus Food Assistance Program • Status of New Jersey guidance document for farm labor 	37
7	May 20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Health <i>COVID-19 Guidance for Migrant & Seasonal Farmworkers</i> document • New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission update 	43
8	May 27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cloth face covering and customer discontent—wearing while on premises • State-provided cloth face masks—distributed via county Boards of Agriculture • New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection pesticide credits for applicators with licenses expiring in 2020 • Comments from Rutgers ag agents/Extension specialists • Updates from State Board of Agriculture meeting 	21

Although COVID-19 pandemic challenges were a priority, farmers still required traditional services provided through Extension programming, including crop production recommendations and management information. The web-based delivery method provided opportunity for commodity-specific reporting from producers and

Extension personnel. For example, Extension specialists presented information on seasonal crop topics such as weed management, crop status, and disease management. Other agricultural agents and agricultural service providers discussed topics related to their areas of expertise. The webinars also proved an opportunity to provide Extension clientele updates on Extension office operating statuses, programs, campus services, regulatory changes, and other important information related to Extension programs and services.

Discussion

The webinars gave farmers the opportunity to obtain timely information, discuss hardships, and plan for contingencies due to the pandemic. In the initial stages of the pandemic, the agricultural community was bombarded with a tremendous quantity of information about COVID-19. We needed a reliable forum for discussing and disseminating the best available science-based, timely, and accurate information to farmers. The AAA series also assisted Extension in redirecting focus to and raising awareness of timely resources such as the Rutgers Plant and Pest Advisory e-newsletter, Rutgers On-Farm Food Safety website, Rutgers Agriculture and Natural Resources Facebook page, and Rutgers online fact sheets and production manuals. The format provided us with the opportunity for real-time needs assessment, allowing us to provide resources and programs much faster than through traditional activities. We used the issues discussed to customize other rapid-response online programs in response to the pandemic. Examples included an online livestock producers marketing roundtable, an on-farm direct marketing webinar series, and a hemp boot camp educational series for farmers. These webinars also served as modified advisory meetings with stakeholders and clientele to maximize the effectiveness and timeliness of our Extension program delivery.

Conclusions

The opportunity for farmers to engage remotely with agricultural agents who they already knew and trusted was invaluable during the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Farmers were able to have access to Extension personnel, other agricultural service providers, and much needed resources to cope with the dynamics of a national crisis. The webinar series availed communications with agricultural clientele on fast-changing aspects of this essential industry. The program demonstrated that we can adapt Extension programming to web-based options while still providing timely, science-based information. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, remote meetings, trainings, and other synchronous remote educational opportunities will be more widely offered by Rutgers Cooperative Extension and others. As the COVID-19 pandemic affects other regions of the United States, Extension professionals should consider developing alternative program methods, such as webinars, to effectively deliver timely information to agriculture clientele.

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