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## Internet Protocol (IP) Videoconferencing for Networking During a Crisis

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## Internet Protocol (IP) Videoconferencing for Networking During a Crisis

### Abstract

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) responded to clientele needs during the severe droughts in 2006 and 2007. The ACES Agronomic Crops Program Priority Team utilized interactive videoconferencing through Internet Protocol (IP), allowing real-time communication between producers, agricultural industry representatives, and state and federal officials. Travel time and costs were minimized, while information exchange was maximized. Planning through teleconferencing prior to the videoconference allowed on-site moderators to function efficiently with regard to time and topic management. Our intent is to develop procedures and infrastructure to allow faster response time and more efficient information exchange during times of crisis.

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## Introduction

Budgetary restraints limit travel and staffing within many Extension systems and increase the need for more efficient delivery and training methods (Pinkerton & Glazier, 1993). Technology can reduce travel time and expense and link educators, students, researchers, and administrators across the United States and around the world (Kelsey & Mincemoyer, 2001; Vergot, 2004). "E-conferencing" (Futris, Adler-Baeder, & Dean, 2004) has been shown to be effective in information delivery and training (Hanson & Parsons, 2000; Lippert, Plank, Camberato, & Chastain, 1998), and adult education (Nudell, Roth, & Saxowsky, 2005).

Non-interactive satellite videoconferencing has been used successfully to deliver information across Alabama (Streumpler, Jelinek, Brown, & Sanders, 1997). Interactive videoconferencing over Internet Protocol (IP) is now available with 30 off-campus sites, 1 Alabama A&M University site, and 11 Auburn University on-campus sites. While programming can be delivered through distance technology (Heil & Herrington, 1997), the challenge is in its utilization to bring together Extension educators, state agricultural leaders, private industry, and elected officials during times of crisis.

## Methods

The ACES Agronomic Crops Program Priority Team (PPT) responded in 2006 to requests from row crop producers concerning: 1) how to manage field crops during a severe drought and 2) how to best express producer concerns to policy makers at the state and federal levels. As others have shown to be effective (Bosch, 2004), traditional methods were utilized in delivering information suited to clientele needs. As was predicted by Ezell (1989), videoconferencing was also utilized due to the level of urgency coupled with the need for interaction and information. The pending economic disaster caused by the drought called for rapid information flow from producers to policy makers.

As a result of personnel redirection and infrastructure enhancement across the state, IP videoconferencing was deemed the most effective method available. Real-time interactive format and procedures were developed to allow participants to have an effective discussion (Pankow, Porter, & Schuchardt, 2006). Seven sites within the state were chosen based on proximity to the primary crop production areas. One site in Washington, D.C., Senator Jeff Sessions' office, was selected to allow interaction with elected officials.

Rules developed for the videoconference were as follows:

1. The designated Extension leader at each location was in charge of running the system and helped to keep the discussion limited to the spokesperson(s) for each site;
2. Participants were reminded that the specific purpose for the videoconference was the drought. They were encouraged to keep the discussions away from other peripheral topics;
3. A time allotment was given to each site as the managing conference coordinator deemed necessary. The primary responsibility for limiting time was the facilitator at each location; however, if this system failed, the coordinator was to call time and move on to the next location and/or speaker;
4. In an effort to maintain professionalism and let our clientele know that we were focusing on their concerns, participants were encouraged to keep radios and cell phones turned off or at least muted. Also, because it was deemed to be very distracting for someone to conduct other business during such a meeting, we asked everyone to keep traffic in and out of the sites to a minimum for the duration of the conference.

## Results

Enhanced response time through IP videoconferencing allowed clientele needs to be met quickly. Procedures were developed by a committee comprised of an agricultural economist (chair), agronomist, regional Extension agent, information technology specialist, and the assistant Extension director for Agriculture and Natural Resources. Through a teleconference held 3 days prior to the videoconference, on-site moderators were designated to have one to two producers represent each location. Political representatives or aides were primarily contacted through cooperation with Extension and agricultural industry leaders within the state.

The videoconference was well attended, and producers were positive in feed back given to agents on a local level (Table 1). The videoconference was successful in that it allowed clientele to interact directly and in real-time with policy makers at the state and federal levels. Regional and county agents and specialists provided basic situational information, after which producers were allowed to describe their plight and suggestions for possible solutions. It was our experience that time and topical management were best left to the moderator at each site. With proper planning prior to the conference, problems were minimized.

**Table 1.**  
Level of Participation in the Drought Videoconference in Alabama, 2006

<b>Location</b>	<b>Producers</b>	<b>Congressional Representatives or Aids</b>	<b>Extension Professionals</b>	<b>Other</b>
Auburn	3	2	7	
Belle Mina	5	1	6	1 crop insurance adjuster
Chilton	3		2	
Evergreen	3		2	

Mobile	5	2	2	2 crop consultants
Winfield	5	2	2	1 probate judge 2 county commissioners
Montgomery (non ACES-site)	4			4 industry leaders
Washington, D.C.		3		
Total (69)	28	10	21	10

The success of the 2006 videoconference led producers to request another similar event due to the severe drought in 2007 (Table 2). Overall participation in the event increased from 69 in 2006 to 107 in 2007. Participation for each personnel category increased 54%, 40%, 14%, and 260% for producers, congressional representatives, Extension professionals, and other participants, respectively. It was our experience again in 2007 that on-site moderators were best suited to manage time and keep discussion focused. The practical nature of this technology can be used to increase time and funding efficiencies (Vergot, 2004); however, our intent is to develop techniques and the infrastructure to better respond to the critical time-sensitive needs of our clientele.

**Table 2.**  
Level of participation in the Drought Videoconference in Alabama, 2007

<b>Location</b>	<b>Producers</b>	<b>Congressional Representatives or Aids</b>	<b>Extension Professionals</b>	<b>Other</b>
Auburn	3	2	10	2 state agricultural representatives
Autaugaville	2		2	3 state agricultural representatives
Belle Mina	9		4	2 state agricultural representatives 1 industry leader
Linden	2		2	
Marion Junction	4		2	4 state agricultural representatives 1 industry leader
Mobile	8	1	1	1 crop consultant 2 state agriculture representatives
Winfield	5	2	1	1 probate judge 1 county commissioners
Montgomery	4	2	2	4 industry leaders
Tuscaloosa	5			3 state agricultural representatives
Florida (via teleconference)	1			1 industry leader
Washington, D.C.		7		

## Conclusions

The use of IP videoconferencing allowed the Agronomic Crops PPT to respond quickly to clientele's needs during times of crisis. One of the advantages of utilizing interactive technology is in the shorter length of time required for organizing and conducting the conference. In both instances, the total time required from conception to the meeting was approximately 2 weeks. This was a winning scenario because time and travel funds were spared for all participants involved. Overall reaction of the ACES administration to the IP videoconferences was also extremely positive. The Agronomic Crops PPT has been encouraged to find additional uses for the technology in the areas of training, team building, and clientele response.

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