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## **The Utah Urban and Small Farms Conference: A Model for Small Acreage Producer Extension Programming**

*Katie Wagner, Ruby Ward, Kynda Curtis, Sheriden Hansen, Melanie Stock*

### **Abstract**

*The Utah Urban and Small Farms Conference (USFC) provides outreach to small acreage and urban producers facing urbanization and environmental challenges and offers marketing and profitability opportunities. The annual event attracts new and existing farmers, stakeholders, and representatives. The USFC model may assist communities facing similar challenges, helping producers navigate obstacles and opportunities through localized information sharing.*

### **Introduction & Problem**

Topographical and environmental factors influencing production in Utah's semi-arid climate include growing season length, soil quality, water quantity and quality, intense high-elevation solar radiation, extreme daily temperature fluctuations, and ranging growing zones across relatively short distances. Most Utah farming operations are small acreage: 1 to 9 acres (34% of farms) or 10 to 49 acres (29%), with only 11% of operations exceeding 500 acres or more (NASS, 2020).

According to the 2020 U.S. Census, Utah was the fastest-growing state from 2010 to 2020 (Davidson, 2020). Rapid population growth has resulted in the development of mountain benches that were historically fruit orchards and fresh produce farms. Urban development has occurred along Utah's I-15 corridor, which houses some of Utah's most fertile agricultural land. Despite these challenges, the Wasatch Front is home to a thriving urban agriculture community. A 2019 needs assessment found that Salt Lake County residents (n = 386) perceived that Extension should extend great efforts to strengthen the local food system. Among the perceived importance of Extension efforts, this issue ranked number 8 among 35 critical societal issues (Narine, 2019).

### **Response & Target Audience**

The USFC was developed by Utah State University (USU) Extension to train small and urban agriculture producers on innovative conservation practices to mitigate Utah's environmental challenges and explore emerging technologies and opportunities for enhanced profitability. Furthermore, an annual event was needed where local agriculture producers and Extension professionals could gather to learn, ask questions, and network. We organized the USFC to meet this need for localized information. From 2013–2020, we hosted, on average, 250 in-person participants at the USFC annually. The pandemic forced the conference to deliver webinars in 2021, and the conference has been held virtually since then. Virtual attendance skyrocketed to approximately 1,000 attendees annually, and participants from several states and a handful of international countries tuned in for four conference days. Despite the lower attendance, when held in person, the USFC provided face-to-face networking opportunities and chances for

Extension specialists and county faculty to discuss new ideas and projects and personally meet with growers.

The USFC targets novice to experienced producers seeking technical production information, business and marketing guidance, and improved knowledge of local/urban agriculture issues. Each year, the conference holds themed track sessions that respond to constituents' needs. Tracks have included vegetable production, berry production, micro-farming, cut flower production, and animal operations. Annual topics are selected by the conference planning committee using feedback from previous conference evaluations, with special consideration of emerging topics of urgent need (i.e., Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) rule changes and severe drought conditions in the Western U.S.). We consistently provide sessions on marketing and finance and federal grant and loan programs due to their importance for farm profitability (Marshall, 2012). One key to the success of the USFC is using a combination of academic speakers, government personnel, and producers. Including presentations by producers, along with faculty-led science-based research, has likely led to higher information adoption rates.

## **Outcomes & Impact**

### *Supporting Small Acreage Farmers*

The conference has become an asset for new and seasoned faculty to provide Extension outreach in their expertise, connect with statewide clientele, and assess needs. For example, new Extension faculty organized a micro-farming pre-conference track in 2018 targeting micro-scale (< 2 acres) growers. Over 80 small-scale growers (45% of conference attendees) attended the track, and they all participated in a needs assessment to better understand their challenges and needs. Since 2018, 487 individuals have attended the micro farming track, and overall, 91% of attendees say they will implement the information learned during sessions into their operation.

### *Uniting Cut Flower Producers*

Another example includes a new Extension small farms specialist who implemented a cut flower track in 2019. Cut flower farmers are one of Utah's most recent and rapidly growing small acreage groups. These nontraditional farmers are often new to agriculture (i.e., have no farm experience) (Stock, 2020; NASS, 2017). Cut flowers are among the highest-value crops produced on limited land, with average net returns of \$2.50 per sq ft (Lewis et al., 2021), as opposed to mixed vegetables at \$0.17 per sq ft (Curtis et al., 2015). To reach this demographic, the cut flower track has been held at the USFC for the last four years and attracts approximately 25% of conference attendees.

### *Partnering to Aid Refugees*

Additionally, the USFC facilitated a connection between refugee farmers and Extension faculty. Starting in 2015, a separate session was organized annually for refugee farmers participating in the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) New Roots program that helps train refugee farmers. Collaboration with the New Roots program through the USFC has yielded partnership efforts between New Roots and USU Extension on grant projects, educational outreach materials,

and other collaborative efforts. For example, USU Extension partnered with New Roots on a USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program (BFR) grant (2017–2021), which funded the establishment of a new 15-acre farm site, expanded an existing farm site in Salt Lake County, and established an incubator farm site in Logan, Utah in partnership with the Cache Refugee and Immigrant Connection (CRIC).

### *Impacts on USFC Attendees*

In 2017, we conducted an online evaluation with participants from the 2013–2016 conferences in addition to the session and conference evaluations conducted each year. Evaluation results showed that 60% of respondents had incorporated a significant amount (> 3 on a 5-point scale) of the material presented at the conference into their operation, and 89% were *likely* to or would *definitely* attend a future USFC conference. Respondents were primarily small-scale growers selling through farmers' markets, farm stands, and restaurants, and 54% had increased their farm sales since attending the conference. Participants' financial and social impacts are reported in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1**

*USFC Participant Feedback on Operation Impacts (2013–2016 Conferences)*

<b>Operation impact from attending</b>	<b>Increase</b>	<b>No change</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Decrease</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>
Range of products offered	16%	50%	17%	8%	9%
Range of product varieties grown	33	41	16	0	9
Type or amount of irrigation used	42	42	8	0	9
Number of employees	25	33	8	0	34
Financing amounts/options	16	33	16	0	34
Number of customers	50	25	8	0	17
Overall operation profitability	25	42	16	0	17

*Note.* The evaluation was conducted online in 2017, and conferences from 2013 to 2016 were offered in person. The evaluation model follows a self-assessment and does not establish a cause-and-effect relationship between conference attendance and operational changes taken by producers.

**Table 2**

*USFC Participant Feedback on Conference Impacts (2013–2016 Conferences)*

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Moderately agree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Moderately disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
My farming operation is now more economically viable.	0%	34%	66%	0%	0%
The quality of life on my farm has improved.	0	50	50	0	0
My farming operation is now efficient.	0	42	58	0	0

My family’s goals are now easier to achieve. 0 39 61 0 0

*Note.* The evaluation was conducted online in 2017, and conferences from 2013 to 2016 were offered in person. The evaluation model follows a self-assessment and does not establish a cause-and-effect relationship between conference attendance and operational changes taken by producers.

In 2021 and 2022, we conducted online evaluations for the virtual USFC. As shown in Table 3, participants planned to use the knowledge and skills learned at the conference, use the conference materials as a future resource and were more informed on available resources. They were also better prepared to manage changes in their operation, evaluate new ideas, and manage risk. Of the 2022 evaluation respondents, 60% said they would incorporate most/a great deal of the information into their operation.

**Table 3**  
*USFC Participant Feedback on Experience at the 2021-2022 Virtual Conferences*

Statement	Mean rating 2021 <sup>a</sup>	Mean rating 2022 <sup>b</sup>
I will reevaluate aspects of my operation/program as a result of what I learned.	4.51	4.27
I am better prepared to evaluate new ideas and manage my risk.	4.56	4.35
I am more aware of the information/resources available (i.e., speakers, agencies, websites, etc.).	4.70	4.47
I will use the conference materials as a future resource.	4.70	4.52
I plan to use the knowledge/skills I learned.	4.80	4.59
I will share the skills learned/information gained at this conference with others.	4.59	4.42
I am better prepared to address changes in my operation/program.	4.51	4.29

*Note.* Responses were rated numerically using the following scale: 5 = *strongly agree*; 4 = *somewhat agree*; 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*; 2 = *somewhat disagree*; 1 = *strongly disagree*. <sup>a</sup>2021 numbers are *N* = 249. <sup>b</sup>2022 numbers (*N* = 98) are preliminary as the conference was recently held.

### Public Value & Next Steps

Conference organizers adapted the USFC to meet the needs of Utah's beginning, advanced, and new urban and small-acreage farmers. The conference has also become a cornerstone event that links existing producers with new farmers, stakeholders, representatives, and organizations. Projected increased urban population densities and continued loss of prime Utah farmland, coupled with unique new challenges, such as severe drought, will continue to challenge the profitability of urban agriculture. By connecting urban and small acreage producers with extension specialists, governmental agencies, and resources, the USFC has become essential for helping local producers navigate these challenges and diversify market outputs. The localized information-sharing model of the USFC helps Utah’s urban and small acreage producers mitigate

Utah's environmental challenges and explore emerging technologies and opportunities for enhanced profitability.

The USFC has spurred community partnerships and supported the careers of Extension professionals through constituent needs assessments, program recognition, and educational outreach opportunities. These connections help strengthen the broader local food network and enable USU Extension faculty to fulfill their roles to respond to emerging needs and issues affecting agriculture in Utah.

Finally, evaluation results indicate that the USFC successfully attracted the small acreage farming audience, conference attendees implemented information they learned at the conference, and many attendees are likely to attend the USFC in future years. By incorporating feedback from attendees, the planning committee and conference organizers will continue to structure future conferences to meet the needs and interests of attendees, as well as guide to the challenges and opportunities facing Utah's urban and small acreage farmers. The USFC model should be shared with other states and communities with similar urbanization and environmental challenges to help local producers navigate obstacles and opportunities through localized information sharing and market diversification.

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