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AN INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS: GREAT PLAINS WINDBREAK RENOVATION & INNOVATION CONFERENCE, 2012

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ABSTRACT

In March of 2011 discussions began among conservation agencies and organizations in Canada and the U.S. about the need for a region-wide conference or training session on windbreak renovation. Representatives from three Provinces, eight States, numerous local agencies and two federal agroforestry centers met to plan such a conference. That was the beginning of the Great Plains Windbreak Renovation and Innovation Conference that was held in July of 2012 at the International Peace Garden on the border of the U.S. and Canada. The end result after a year of planning was a conference attended by 82 people in-person from 11 states and 3 provinces and about 35 people remotely via the internet. The key components of the planning process that led to a successful conference included: region-wide representation from local, provincial, state and federal conservation partners; a survey of agencies on the likelihood of the number of people they would support to participate in the conference; and a commitment to create learning opportunities apart from the primary conference site. Participant evaluations of the conference indicated that the mix of science, real-world experiences and new techniques and equipment helped make the conference a success. Results from the initial Great Plains conference include: Provincial windbreak renovation meetings, a Southern Great Plains Windbreak Renovation Conference and an online lecture series utilizing ten speakers from the original conference.

Keywords: science delivery, technology transfer, outreach

INTRODUCTION

Windbreaks have been a part of the Great Plains agricultural landscape for over a hundred years. The Prairie States Forestry Project (1935-1942) funded the planting of more than 222 million trees on farmlands from the Dakotas to Texas to combat the severe soil erosion of the Dust Bowl years and to protect the crops from the drying winds. In the Canadian prairies the Government of Canada began distributing seedlings for windbreak establishment as early as 1901. Like any infrastructure, windbreaks age, deteriorate and require maintenance, refurbishing and even removal when they cease to function as desired. The last regional windbreak renovation workshop/training was held over a decade ago. For many years conservation partners in the Great Plains have developed and delivered science-based windbreak tools, technical notes, and training sessions. In spring of 2011, the USDA National Agroforestry Center (NAC) and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Agroforestry Development Centre agreed to work together with other federal, state, provincial and local partners to sponsor a conference focused on windbreak renovation and innovation.

METHODS

In April of 2011 NAC asked the representatives of the Great Plains Forestry Initiative, GPFI, about their interest and perceived value of a region-wide meeting on the subject of windbreak renovation. The GPFI consists of state forestry agencies in the northern Great Plains. At the same time the leadership of the Plains and Prairie Forestry Association, the Agroforestry Development Centre at Indian Head, Saskatchewan and the state foresters with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in the region were similarly approached. In each case the response was a definite desire and perceived need for such a meeting or symposium. By July of 2011 a region-wide planning team was assembled and began the process of planning a windbreak renovation meeting.

The agencies and organizations that were active on the planning team were:

- Agroforestry Development Centre, Agriculture & Agri-Food Canada
- Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development
- Colorado State Forest Service
- Kansas State Forest Service
- Kansas State University Extension
- Montana NRCS
- Nebraska Association of Resources Districts
- North Dakota NRCS
- South Dakota Division of Resource Conservation & Forestry
- USDA National Agroforestry Center

The planning team began with a series of monthly conference calls with four main objectives. First, determine the priority subjects to be included in the agenda and format of the event. Second, select the date and location or multiple locations of the event. Third, identify and acquire funding to offset participant registration costs. And fourth, identify individuals in the team to lead the development of specific aspects of the conference such as publicity, finances, field tour and internal information coordination.

DISCUSSION

Unexpectedly, the objective that required the most time, effort and deliberation was selecting the location of the event. The factor that was identified as the greatest barrier to participation was not the international boundary, but rather the ability to travel on company or agency time and expense for both participants and presenters. An alternative that garnered much support within the team was to support satellite locations throughout the Great Plains where remote participants could participate through live and interactive internet connections. As a part of this scenario the satellite locations would also host a local field tour to coincide with the timing of the field tour at the primary event location. Although this scenario was desired by nearly everyone on the planning team it was ultimately abandoned because of the great amount of time, energy, expense and staff time necessary to support the logistics of multiple event locations. The chosen alternative was a single event location with an option for live and interactive internet connections for individuals at their local computer.

The planning team acquired the services of Digital Visions Enterprise Unit of the U.S. Forest Service, DV, to support the live internet connection and recording of the presentations for future access. Digital Visions provided the host connection, technical support in advance of the event, as well as during the event, and processed the recorded presentations for posting on the web and analysis of online participation of the event. The decision to contract the services of a knowledgeable organization such as Digital Visions turned out to be very beneficial. Several unforeseen technical difficulties arose that may have proven insurmountable if the decision were made to simply use an unsupported internet meeting system.

The primary event location universally was desired to be near the Canada and U.S. border. As a part of the process to determine the event venue, an online survey was created to determine the likelihood of agencies to support their staff people to attend a meeting on the subject of windbreak renovation. The survey was distributed to staff managers in local, state and federal agencies throughout the Great Plains. Results of the survey suggested that travel restrictions would restrict participation for many agency field staff to attend a multiple day meeting regardless of the travel distance. After considering the various agency restrictions on international travel, potential field tour sites and host facilities it was decided to hold the event at the International Peace Garden, situated directly on the international boundary between Boissevain, Manitoba and Dunseith, North Dakota. The International Peace Garden reflects the cooperative nature of the planning team and the common issues affecting windbreaks and conservation in both countries.

Also unexpectedly, the least complicated objective to achieve was the funding support for the event. Both of the federal agroforestry centers were able to dedicate funding for the conference facilities and services. Two other associations that also supported the event with substantial funding were the Plains and Prairie Forestry Association in the U.S. and the Agroforestry and Woodlot Extension Society in Alberta. As a result of the combined financial support there was not a participant registration fee. The planning team expected that the absence of a registration fee would increase participation in the event.

Conceptually, the content of the agenda was agreed upon with limited discussion. The agenda topics should fall into one of two issues, renovation technology and innovative windbreak technology and research. More specifically the planning team desired to provide information on applied renovation techniques, equipment and results from both agency and landowner perspectives, and innovative designs, planning tools, and uses for windbreaks. The other major component of the event that was universally agreed upon was the inclusion of a full day field tour for participants to watch equipment in action, to discuss windbreak renovation planning for a real windbreak, gain experience in windbreak evaluation and to network with other professionals in a less structured environment.



Figure 1- New ideas that possess some ‘gee-whiz’ factor, like this BioBaler, help encourage field-tour participants to interact and share experiences and other ideas. Photo credit: USDA National Agroforestry Center

The field tour, if well done, can be the highlight of any meeting and the converse is also true. The planning team was fortunate to have two members who work near the event location on both sides of the border. Their combined knowledge of local agency contacts, facilities and their availability to evaluate potential field sites and deliver demonstration equipment were a key in creating a field experience that was rated highly by participants. These two team members and the local field staff helped ensure success because they invested time in early reconnaissance, tracking down details and a final walk through of the field tour prior to the actual event.

It is difficult to estimate how much staff time will go into planning and implementing a regional event. Consequently, supervisor commitment to allow staff time for working on a project such as this event throughout the planning process is critical to success. Each member of the planning team was afforded significant supervisor and agency support to serve on the planning team.

When it came time to accept leadership and assignments related to the development of the windbreak renovation event each team member was able to make commitments without hesitation. It was commonly said among the team members that other team member’s willingness to do the necessary hard work was an encouragement to do likewise. Subsequently, individuals quickly volunteered to take leadership of communications and promotion, finances, field tour coordination, facilities arrangements and recruitment of speakers.

Promotion of the event began with a save-the-date announcement in early February of 2012. At that time only the dates, location and title of the *Great Plains Windbreak Renovation and Innovation Conference* had been confirmed. However, the team decided that promotion needed to begin early to allow potential participants to pursue the support they needed for travel and to

get the date on agency calendars. It was also decided to follow up the initial promotion with event updates whenever they occurred to keep the event in front of people as frequently as possible. The diverse audience for the conference meant that there was no one email list, web site or agency newsletter that would provide broad enough visibility for the conference. The planning team relied on the willingness of the federal, state and provincial conservation agencies, university extension departments to distribute the promotional materials and registration information as it was created. The USDA National Agroforestry Center web site was selected as the point of contact for all information on the Renovation Conference, http://nac.unl.edu/multimedia/conferences/Great_Plains/windbreakrenovation20120724.htm. This site also hosts all of the recorded presentations from the conference as well as PDF versions of the presentations.

As with any event there were many unexpected problems, and unforeseen barriers that arose. In each case the sense of team work prevailed and solutions were always found. The team work and individual sense of responsibility for a successful conference created an atmosphere where participants were able to focus upon the presentations, networking and discussion of ideas, problems and mutual experiences.

RESULTS

The end result of over a year of planning was a conference attended in-person by 82 people from 11 states and 3 provinces and about 35 people remotely via the internet. Post conference activities included numerous communications among participants and presenters, the sharing of information and purchasing of new equipment featured at the conference.



Figure 2 – Conference participants at the International Peace Garden, July 26, 2012. Photo credit: Agroforestry Development Centre, Canada.

There have been nine related workshops in Alberta with over 200 participants. In each of these workshops Renovation Conference presentations were utilized.

In May of 2013 a Southern Great Plains Windbreak Renovation Conference was held in Dodge City, KS. In addition, the Canadian Institute of Forestry, which hosts “The Forest On Your Desktop National Electronic Lecture Series” every Wednesday, aired a Windbreak

Renovation series from April 10, 2013 until May 29, 2013. All of the series presenters were from the Renovation Conference. The windbreak renovation webinar series averaged over 300 participants each week.

When travel is limited by agencies and organizations, when budgets are tight and people are regularly asked to do more with less, meetings such as the Great Plains Windbreak Renovation and Innovation conference are still supported and attended. The willingness to overcome barriers, such as those above, in order to develop and attend face-to-face conferences reflects the value that people place on such conferences, symposia and meetings.

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The Great Plains Windbreak Renovation and Innovation Conference received high marks in the participant conference evaluations in large part because of the commitment and hard work of the Conference Planning Team and many local conservation partners.

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