

Annual Conference on Agricultural Safety Education: The Safe Farm Steward Model

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Introduction

The agriculture industry is one with growing career opportunities, representing almost 28% of the global workforce (International Labour Organization, 2025). Nonetheless, an abundance of opportunity is met with production risk, as a reported 3.5 deaths per 100,000 full-time industry workers were reported in 2023 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Due to a high rate of production agriculture incidents, increased safety awareness, education, and practice are increasingly prevalent needs across the United States. In agricultural safety education, a well-reported need for interactive, real-world situation experiences fosters optimal engagement of students, producers, and faculty alike (Pate et al., 2019; Toole et al., 2025)

The Safe Farm Steward Project (SFS) is a multi-collegiate, federally funded project intended to facilitate an innovative, hands-on approach to agricultural safety education amongst students and farmers alike. 14 diverse institutions across 10 southeastern states participate in the project by teaching a week-long curriculum and facilitating student-led farm safety evaluations of local farm equipment and facilities. Extension agents involved with the project are tasked with evaluating five or more farms and facilitating farm equipment safety workshops for their communities. This initiative highlights collaboration between faculty, students, field experts, and extension for shared education and reflection. An invaluable element of this project is an annual training for faculty and extension staff.

How it works

This conference is structured into three phases: preparatory logistics, training, and future planning. This structure was facilitated to allow preparation, participant engagement, and reflection while structuring time for inevitable risk management and mitigation.

Phase 1: Preparation (Two days)

- PI meets with hotel staff to finalize hotel rooms and arrival, and confirm conference rooms. The research team is briefed on any changes.
- Graduate students unload materials and finalize any other preparatory logistics.

Phase 2: Conference Seminar and Training (Three days)

Day One: Roundtable yearly overview with returning institutions. Introductions, summary of inventory, and project overview. Introduction to curriculum implementation: A, B, C & D options are presented.

Day Two: SFS Application Overview and Practice. Collaboration with local extension allows for three farm tours for application practice. A round table discussion of any potential improvements for the research team and implementation procedures amongst themselves is held.

Day Three: Overall review of the reporting system, an in-depth overview of the annual new curriculum option, or “Option A,” and set expectations for participants before departure.

Phase 3: Reflection and Future Planning (One Day)

- PI's post conference meeting with the resort, bill finalization, and scheduled dates for the following year.
- Graduate students send thank-you letters and complete appropriate correspondence before drafting a comprehensive list for the next year's conference.

Results to date/Implications

This conference's initiatives have resulted in a total of 465 farm evaluations to date, with 4,313 equipment/facility constructs assessed by students and extension agents alike. Additionally, participants complete an exit form to evaluate the effectiveness of the program each year. All participants reported scoring 7/10 or above on confidence in teaching farm safety after analyzing the curriculum. Plans for this initiative include annual curriculum expansion, institution and extension recruitment, and subsequent project growth. Data collected during exit forms and roundtable discussions, such as a reported need for more student infographics and research team classroom visits, offer opportunities for longitudinal implementation.

Advice to others intending to plan a conference includes early planning and building strong community partnerships. Although the event is 5 days, preparatory action is required much before. Upon the conclusion of the 2025 conference, planning initiatives for 2026 began immediately. Conference location is another element the research team recommends considering. When hosting a seminar, choosing a location most convenient for participants as opposed to staff has proven to be vital for SFS. Dolly's Dreammore Resort and Spa was chosen not only for prestige, but as the relative geographical center of the southeastern United States. This location is also convenient for participants with families, as they can explore the surrounding area of Gatlinburg/Pigeon Forge during sessions.

Costs

SFS is a five-year grant, entering year four, funded by the Southeast Center for Agricultural Health and Injury Prevention and is valued at over \$1.2 million. These resources provide a \$1,500 annual stipend to each participating institution, a housing allowance for the participant's three-day training, a graduate student for program planning and implementation, as well as any costs associated with curriculum materials such as Oculus, PTO shaft demonstration carts, and printouts. Breakfast vouchers and a working lunch are provided to participants, as well as transportation during farm visits.

References

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