Science Societies

CCAs—Who are they and what do they do?

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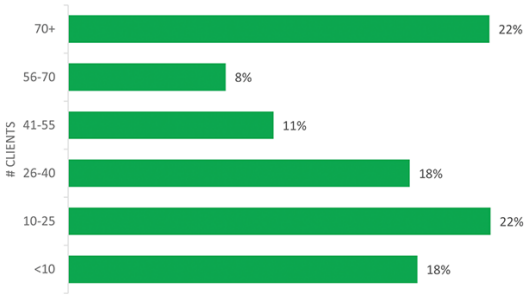


CCA John Heard (left) working with a grower.

The International Certified Crop Adviser (ICCA) Program conducted a program-wide survey earlier this year with funding provided by The Nature Conservancy (TNC). We wanted to publicly thank TNC for its support of the survey as well as its collaboration on several educational programs and the continuing relationship we share.

The 2020 survey had some intentional similarities to the survey we conducted in 2013, so we could measure change over time. We also included some new questions related to conservation and sustainability. We emailed it to more than 11,000 CCAs who have agreed to receive communications from the program and received just under a 20% response rate. Thank you to all who participated. Below, I would like to share some of the results from the survey.

Demographics



Number of farmer clients per CCA.

The ICCA Program has more than 27 years of history with the first testing taking place in 1993. There are 13,522 CCAs throughout North America represented by 34 local boards and served by more than 400 volunteers. According to the survey, the average age decreased from 50 to 48 between 2013 and 2020 while the percentage of women CCAs increased from 7 to 14%. In terms of education, 90% of the CCAs have at least an associate degree while 77% have at least a Bachelor of Science degree. The vast majority, 85%, work in the private sector with ag retail/farm cooperative type positions leading the way at 63%, which is no significant change from 2013. The top three inputs sold by CCAs also remained the same: fertilizer, seed, and crop protection.

Clients and Acres

We are often asked how many clients/farmers and acres a typical CCA covers. These were new questions in 2020, so we do not have a comparison from 2013. As you can see in the graph below, 30% of the CCAs say they provide services to 56 or more clients on a regular basis. When asked about acres, 28% say they are working with 40,000 or more acres (see graph on the next page). Naturally, this will greatly depend on the types of crops being grown.

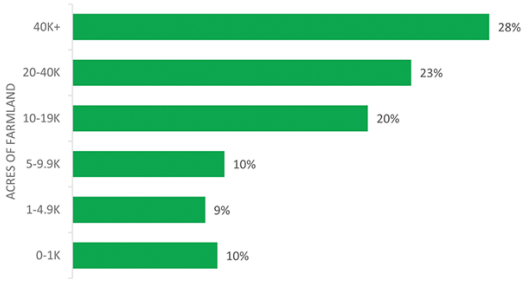


2020 CCA and CPAg program participants.

CCAs represent between 205 and 288 million acres according to the survey. We have looked at several reports to try and determine what the total acres would be to establish some context for CCAs as a group. Farm acres in the U.S. total 915 million,

including permanent pasture and forestry land. That number really depends on what gets included though. For the sake of this article and discussion, we settled on 389 total crop production acres in the U.S. Using this number means CCAs touch somewhere between 52 and 74% of the crop production acres in the U.S. If we use the total farmland number of 915 million acres, then it would be 22 to 31%.

Why be a CCA?



Number of acres served per CCA.

The survey asked CCAs why they became certified and why they maintained their certification. Just as in 2013, the top reason stated was that it "conveys professionalism." The numbers increased from 2013 to 2020 from 74% for obtaining it to 80% and 73% for maintaining it to 83%. These answers given by CCAs are consistent with why the program was started—to set a level of professional conduct and establish crop-advising standards. The second reason given for becoming certified and maintaining certification was that it "provides personal satisfaction." In terms of becoming certified, "increases employability" and "improves advising ability" were the third and fourth reasons given while the order of the last two was switched for the third and fourth reasons given for maintaining certification.

Education

We have consistently heard over the years that the Soil and Water Management category is the hardest requirement to meet with the least available continuing education. That has not changed, but the overall availability of CEUs has improved. In-person conferences and meetings are still the number one preferred way to earn continuing education followed by recorded webinars. We have seen webinar

participation greatly increase over the past five years. There is a strong desire to have education programs that are focused at the state/province/region level and relevant to that geography. The top suggested topic for continuing education was cover crops followed by enhanced-efficiency fertilizers, field-level profit mapping, and complex crop rotations. Regardless of delivery method, topic or subject matter were the leading influencer for deciding to participate in a continuing education event followed by number of CEUs offered.

Influence

Conservation and sustainability practices are important, hot topics, so we wanted to see who influences the farmer's decisions. In both cases, if there was going to be a more frequent conversation about these topics, it was going to be initiated by the CCA more than the grower. Eighty-one percent of the CCAs perceive sustainability as a "long-lasting, impactful trend," and 61% see "on-farm advising employment opportunities in sustainability." The CCA is a critical partner with the farmer on enhancing conservation and sustainability practices.

Satisfaction

There were several questions related to services offered by the ICCA and local board segments of the program to gauge satisfaction. Overall, 75% of the CCAs indicated they were satisfied with the program, which is up from 53% in 2013. Some areas such as CEUs did receive a high satisfaction rating. However, there is still room for improvement as not all areas ranked important received high satisfaction ratings such as communications, marketing, and building awareness of the program with farmers and employers. These are interrelated and are key components of the ICCA strategic plan. Seventy-six percent (up from 67%) of CCAs said they would recommend certification to a colleague while 89% (up from 78%) said they will maintain

certification for the next five years. Board members and staff all work for continuous improvement, so the credential does add value for the individual who is certified; this is not a goal in and of itself but an ongoing process.

Summary

This article is not intended to cover all aspects of the survey but just to provide some highlights. If you are interested in learning more, please contact Luther Smith at lsmith@sciencesocieties.org.

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