Science Societies

Sustainable Agronomy Conference marks fifth year

By Kristen Coyne

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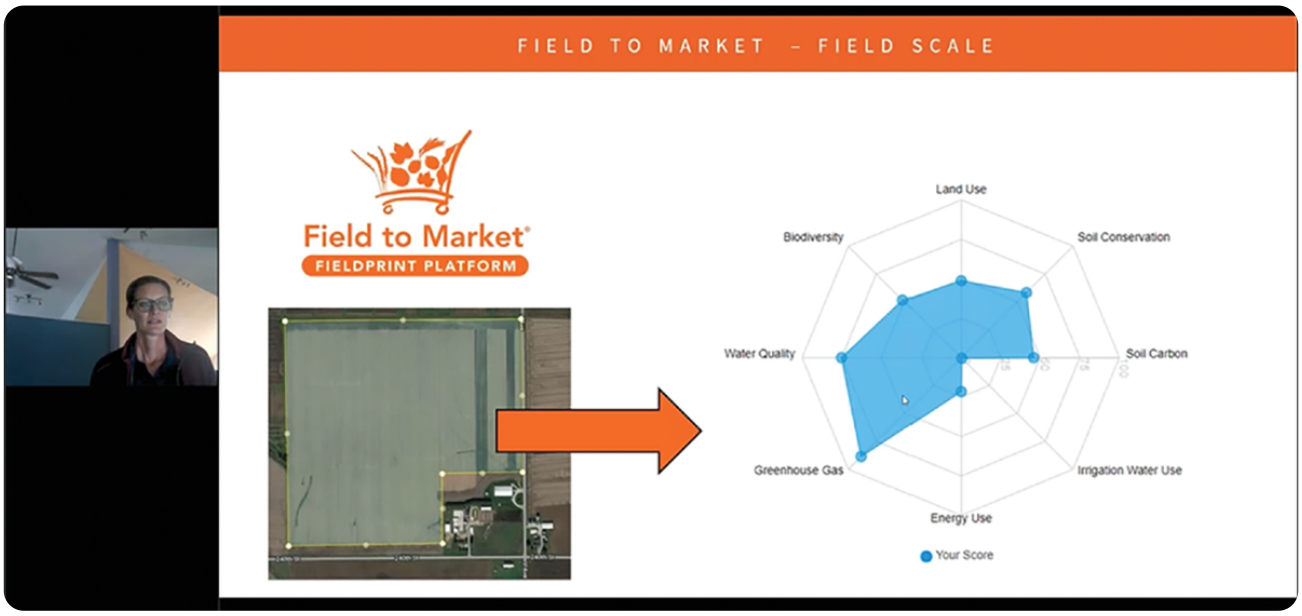


Gina Nichols of Field to Market shows how her company's online tool provides feedback to farmers who want to improve their sustainability efforts.

The demand for reliable, practical information on sustainable agronomy remains as high as ever. Helping meet that demand for the fifth straight year, the American Society of Agronomy (ASA) this summer offered a successful online conference on the topic that attracted more than 3,000 attendees from 85 countries.

The goal of the 2022 Sustainable Agronomy Conference was to show CCAs, agri-sales professionals, and growers the latest tools, trends, and research related to implementing sustainable agronomy in the field. Registrants were—and still are, through Oct. 9, 2022—eligible to earn continuing education units (CEUs) for the sessions. Anyone who missed the live presentations can still view them online (see box next page).

Presented in four two-hour sessions over four weeks, the **program** covered carbon and ecosystem services markets; nutrient management and soil health; on-farm research and metrics; and precision agriculture. Sponsored by ASA through its CCA program, the conference featured dozens of speakers from conservation organizations, ag companies, sponsor agencies, and universities.

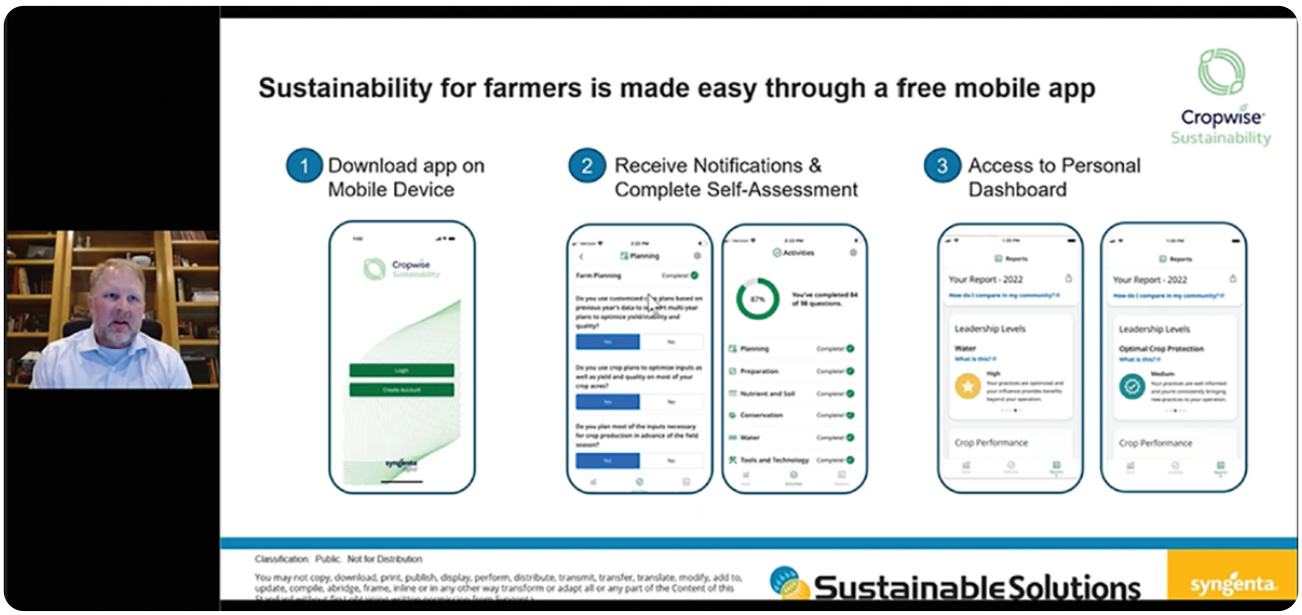
Pest Management

The first day of the conference, which tackled precision agriculture, featured a session on pest management. Curt Hadley, business development manager for the non-profit company **FieldWatch**, discussed his company's goal of protecting bees and sensitive crops from pesticides. Their approach: Use technology to help farmers, beekeepers, and pesticide applicators communicate.

"We are out there helping protect the pollinators and sensitive plants, as well as people," Hadley said. "That's the core of who we are and what we do."

FieldWatch created a tool, Hadley explained, that is “brutally simple.” Beekeepers and crop producers (the tool works for corn, cotton, rice, soybeans, with more crops slated to be added) register their apiaries and sensitive fields to special registries. On their end, pesticide applicators use an online portal to check areas they are scheduled to spray and take precautions around organic and other sensitive crops and pollinators. Sprayers might contact beekeepers before spraying near their property, for example, so they can protect the hives. The systems are free and voluntary for everyone to use.

Since the tool launched four years ago, 22 states have signed on, plus the District of Columbia and a Canadian province. It sparks important conversations, Hadley said. For example, soybean farmers on adjoining properties—one whose crops are dicamba-tolerant, the other whose crops are not—can both benefit from knowing what the other is doing. “It helps bring neighbors to the fence row to have a conversation about what’s going on,” Hadley said.



Trent Wimmer of Syngenta explains his company's online tool for helping farmers assess their sustainability efforts.

Online Tools for On-Farm Research, Metrics

Attendees also learned about online tools during the second day of the conference, which focused on on-farm research and metrics. Trent Wimmer, key account sustainability lead at **Syngenta**, gave an overview of his company's Sustainable Outcomes in Agriculture (SOA) standard, a tool farmers can use through the company's Cropwise Sustainability app. After entering several qualitative metrics, farmers get feedback and suggestions for improvement. As a sector that can sequester greenhouse gasses, not just emit them, agriculture can especially leverage this kind of data to communicate their efforts, according to Wimmer.

"We truly believe that modern ag is a sustainability story," Wimmer said. "We need to tell that story often."

Gina Nichols, science and research manager for **Field to Market**, discussed another online tool her organization developed for farmers that also measures the environmental impacts of their crops and identifies opportunities to improve. Called the **Fieldprint Calculator**, the tool relies on both quantitative and qualitative metrics entered by the farmer, including biodiversity, water quality, soil erosion, and energy use. The tool then generates a "fieldprint" that assesses the farmer's efforts and compares them to state and national averages.

Such tools are important. Field to Market's 2021 **National Indicators Report** found that, after many years of progress, sustainability trends in U.S. agriculture have not increased in the past decade. "There's definitely room for progress," Nichols noted. She hopes the calculator will help: To date, it has been used to assess 4 million acres, she said.

During the Q&A session, one attendee wanted to know if these online tools will eventually put agronomists out of business. Not a chance, said Wimmer. Rather, they

will help agronomists and farmers showcase their sustainability work.

“It is going to be exciting to see where ag goes in the next 5 or 10 years,” Wimmer said. “It is definitely going to be different—in a good way.”

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