



Farmers and ranchers have weathered dramatic shocks and financial challenges in the past few years, from weather extremes to trade conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions to markets and well-being. Federal assistance plus strong market growth in 2020 and into 2021 have helped economic prospects for many producers, but key risks and uncertainty remain, including long-run market expectations, current supply chain constraints, significant upward pressure on production costs, and policy uncertainty across a wide range of issues.

Helping producers prepare for, adapt to, and overcome these challenges is part of the broad educational mission of the Extension Risk Management Education (ERME) program. The North Central ERME Center is funded through USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture to deliver programming and fund educational projects throughout the North Central region. The Center supports educational projects that address the five broad areas of agricultural risk from marketing to production, financial, legal, and human risk to help producers achieve real risk management results and improve farm profitability and business success. Identifying issues and needs is an important first step to understanding and addressing agricultural risk and is part of the Center's on-going mission.

As part of its needs assessment effort, the center works with multiple stakeholder groups, including an Institutional Listening Group representing stakeholders from production agriculture as well as professionals, organizations, and institutions serving agriculture and a committee of Extension farm management specialists from across the North Central Region. Meetings in August 2021 provided input on current risk management education needs and programming considerations.

Educational Needs

The stakeholder input provided a broad perspective of risks and educational needs. An often-mentioned topic was the needed emphasis on stress management and farmer/rancher well-being, often tied to financial health. Attention to rising production costs and other production and management challenges was mentioned as was the increased attention to marketing, whether a focus on commodity markets or a focus on marketing for value-added and direct-to-consumer market channels. In those value-added markets as with other markets and opportunities for producing ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, the role of contracting is critical and the knowledge of legal issues and risks is an important issue. The general principles of economic decision making were also listed as a need across a broad range of issues from analyzing management inputs and decisions at the margin to incorporating multiple elements of an integrated risk management portfolio to working with a team of advisors or professionals as well as using "big" data to make management decisions. There was not an area of risk unmentioned as labor issues and policy issues were also mentioned, noting the challenges and uncertainties of addressing both at this time. A summarized list of topics follows below:

- Farm financial health and farmer/rancher well-being
 - Farm income volatility
 - Pandemic impacts on personal/family well-being
 - Stress and mental health – need for "Employee Assistance Program" for producers
 - Health insurance issues
 - Rural childcare
- Production and management decisions
 - Cost control
 - Budgeting
 - Herbicide drift and management
- Crop insurance utilization and decision-making
 - Links to cost of production and marketing plans
 - Records to use crop insurance effectively, particularly WFRP
- Drought
 - Response and resilience
 - Management decision making

- Marketing
 - Consumer changes during and post COVID-19
 - Impacts on marketing channels
 - Direct marketing opportunities
 - Competition issues/concerns
- Contracting
 - Livestock
 - Renewable energy
 - Ecosystem services
 - Value-added enterprises
- Environmental practices and ecosystem services
 - Economics
 - Market opportunities – emerging carbon markets are “Wild West”
 - Conservation program incentives
 - Regulatory issues and challenges
 - Legal issues
- Economic decision making
 - Marginal analysis
 - Holistic risk management
- Production
 - Marketing
 - Crop insurance
 - Finance
- Advisory and management teams
- Resiliency of decisions
 - Volatility
 - Short-term decisions with long-term implications
- Data and information
 - Sources of information
 - Making management decisions
- Labor
 - Supply
 - Workforce readiness for agriculture
 - Management in post-pandemic environment
- Policy uncertainty
 - Biofuels
 - Renewable energy (solar, wind)
 - Climate and carbon
 - Tax policy

Programming and Delivery Considerations

Beyond specific risk management issues, all of the stakeholder groups provided important insight on programming and delivery considerations, including partnerships and collaborations, target audiences, and deliver methods. A summarized list of considerations follows below:

- Role for partnerships with entities that serve underserved producers
 - Producers underserved by crop insurance
 - Socially disadvantaged producers
- Targeting young producers, including recent grads or current students that are or will be producers
 - Undergraduate preparation for agricultural production and management is often limited
- Focus on the entire farm management decision team
 - Producers
 - Ag professionals
 - Management/advisory teams
- Delivery
 - Multiple methods, including multiple communication methods
 - Focus on multidisciplinary learning
- Role for education on grantsmanship
 - Focus not just on grant writing, but grant management