

Advisory Committee on Biotechnology and 21st Century Agriculture (AC21)

Venues and Conveners subgroup meeting

Conference Call Summary

February 2, 2016

A two-hour telephone meeting of the Venues and Conveners *ad hoc* subgroup was held on February 2, 2016. The official members of the subgroup are Latresia Wilson, Leon Corzine, Josette Lewis, Barry Bushue, Melissa Hughes, and Chuck Benbrook. All members participated in the conference call except for Dr. Lewis, Mr. Bushue, and Dr. Benbrook. In addition, AC21 member David Johnson participated in the call as did *ex officio* member Julia Dougherty. Michael Schechtman, AC21 Executive Secretary and Designated Federal Official, convened the call.

Subgroup members first discussed the proposed charge for the subgroup, namely:

- What potential State or local bodies, organizations, or structures might be utilized in different localities to bring together growers for the development of joint coexistence plans or for the resolution of local coexistence issues?
- How might it be decided which organization is most appropriate in each locality?

There was no disagreement about what was contained in the charge. There was discussion about whether both public and private groups/organizations should be included, with one member noting that private groups may have their own agendas. It was decided that for a first examination, all potential groups should be listed. One member suggested that the work group start with the list of potential general (as opposed to State-specific) venues/conveners provided by David Johnson, and that list should be combined with additional candidates from the previous discussion by a few members of this subgroup, which discussion is not considered a formal meeting of the group since there was not a balanced participation of interested represented among the participants. Dr. Schechtman provided the following list from Dr. Johnson:

- State Departments of Agriculture
- State and County Extension
- Crop Improvement Associations
- Crop Commissions
- NRCS
- Water Districts
- FFA Chapters
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA's) Coalition www.csacoalition.org

- Chamber of Commerce
- State Agricultural Marketing Boards
- State Task Force (e.g., OR has one in place on GE vs Non-GE)
- State Farm Mediation Boards
- Coalition of Agricultural Mediation Programs
- Counties Associations
- Towns Associations
- Agriculture Community Engagement organizations (e.g., in WI)

Dr. Schechtman agreed to develop the combined list and circulate it to AC21 members. Dr. Schechtman then raised the question of how local choices might be made as to who would be involved in a local process. He asked whether State Departments of Agriculture might be generally involved in initiating the process or passing it along to others. Another member noted that some organizations, such as Chambers of Commerce, might not have the required expertise, but it was noted that such organizations might be a first point of contact and a conduit. Participants agreed that organizations involved need to be held in high regard by all participants, and that it would be key to get out the necessary information as efficiently as possible.

Participants also noted some potential additional relevant organizations: Land Grant Universities, private nonprofit agricultural organizations (such as Black Farmers of America), and third-party certifiers.

One participant wondered whether USDA might provide grants, perhaps outreach grants, to organizations who take on this type of work. Dr. Schechtman noted that he didn't know whether that might be possible, but that in any case there would not be money available to fund 50 pilot projects in all the States. Other members raised the possibility of concentrating the activities in areas where there is most contact or friction between production types, or conducting regional activities.

Another member suggested that retailers like Walmart or grain purchasers, like Lynn Clarkson's company, might bring stakeholders together. Such retailers/purchasers might frame their discussions in terms of a new product they might want to bring forward, and would want to get a conversation going including all relevant interests to see if it raised a coexistence issue. There was additional discussion as to whether such entities would be willing to put in the requisite time and to look beyond their immediate bottom line considerations. It was noted that such discussions could be beneficial for companies, to help them figure out where the new product should be grown.

Participants then discussed how to sort the potential groups in terms of relevance. It was decided that groups could be sorted by different roles: getting the word out, holding conversations, mediating, educating or providing technical expertise, etc.

A couple of other potential venues/conveners were noted: the American Seed Trade Association and other seed organizations, such as Crop Improvement Associations.

In an aside, participants noted that establishing Grower Opportunity Zones was not really bolstering coexistence per se, because those zones would likely limit opportunities for some farmers.

Dr. Schechtman indicated that he would circulate a compiled list of potential venue/ convener organizations/groups by COB Monday, February 8, 2016. Subgroup members could then go through the list and offer their views on how the different organizations/groups might be most useful in this process. Members agreed that rather than trying to rank the different organizations. It was noted that explanatory text would be needed about why having these different types of participants with different expertise and broad credibility would be important, and that for the process to be successful, all relevant stakeholders would need to participate.

Dr. Schechtman wondered whether in general the State Departments of Agriculture would be the deciders as to which parties would be involved in convening the discussions. This was not thought to be necessarily the case; some participants thought that in some instances Land Grant Universities or others might take that role. One participant suggested that these activities might in some cases be implemented through existing programs.

One participant suggested that the relevant conversations might be started by an entity with a high-value product (e.g., a GE corn producing a pharmaceutical) it wished farmers to grow, and with that interest relevant others (in that example, State and Federal officials as well as local interests) would get involved.

One participant noted the overlap of this subgroup's efforts with those of the Models and Incentives group, which is examining examples like watershed management plans, and considering the roles of the different participants in that process.

It was agreed that Dr. Schechtman would compile the list of potential venues/conveners and that members would sort them according to their potential role(s). A participant noted that once a skeleton for the context paragraph was created, it might be possible to identify other groups/organizations that might have a role. Participants agreed that at the next meeting work could be done on that introductory paragraph. list and capture info, and then next time work on entry paragraph.

Dr. Schechtman asked participants to think about potential criteria that “deciders” could use in identifying participants in their particular processes.

One participant suggested that a participating organization would need to be held in high regard and would need to be able to attract local growers with diverse viewpoints. Organizations perceived by some to have a particular bias might not be as successful, unless they partner with “reciprocal” organizations (One suggested example was a partnership between the Organic Trade Association with the American Farm Bureau Federation). Such partnerships would demonstrate the broad nature of the process and the support for it.

The organizations would need to be perceived as credible and trustworthy.

In terms of the types of technical expertise that would be required from at least some of the participants in these future discussions, conference call participants had a number of thoughts. They would need to be able to: explain to farmers what coexistence is and why it is relevant to them; speak about the guidance document that will come from the AC21; either be able to refer farmers to relevant technical information or else be able to describe specific practices (e.g., buffer rows, temporal differences) that need to be used to achieve specified crop purity requirements, etc.). However, the potential for losing an audience with too much information was also noted.

Others would need to be able to offer mediation services if and when necessary.

Dr. Schechtman wondered whether initiating discussions based on a future new product was creating a process reacting to potential threats, but one participant suggested that it should be framed as reacting to new opportunities. He noted that the current commodity price situation has made farmers increasingly interested in seeking new opportunities, especially in the value-added area.

One participant noted that without all participants having some economic incentive for these conversations, they may likely end with no conclusion or resolution. One-way conversations will likely be unproductive. Another participant noted that the introductory paragraph would need to explain why such conversations are relevant and necessary.

It was suggested that Dr. Schechtman identify some quotes from Secretary Vilsack’s remarks to the committee that might help frame the introductory remarks, and he agreed to do so.

Another participant noted that the venue/convener(s) would need to be able to have follow-up and ongoing discussions to get feedback for continual process improvement. There was discussion of how often such follow-up might need to occur, but there was no clear agreement on how often that should occur. One member thought that guidance on follow-up might be helpful as well.

Tasks:

- Dr. Schechtman to compile the list of potential venues and distribute it to members by COB February 8, 2016.
- Subgroup members and other interested AC21 members to categorize potential venues/conveners according to their likely roles.
- Dr. Schechtman to identify potential quotes from Secretary Vilsack for inclusion in introductory paragraph.