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## *Student Voice Report*

GRACE RICHARDSON<sup>2</sup>  
*University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas*

MELISSA ARKAND  
*University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan*

JON BOOKER  
*Texas Tech University  
Lubbock, Texas*

ZHENYI DU  
*University of Minnesota  
St. Paul, Minnesota*

KELLY FOLEY  
*Oregon State University  
Corvallis, Oregon*

NATHAN HOLEMAN  
*University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas*

WILLIAM McDougall  
*University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas*

ANH NGUYEN  
*University of Missouri  
Columbia, Missouri*

RYAN VAN ROEKEL  
*University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas*

TEREA STETINA  
*University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas*

LAUREN VITKO  
*The Pennsylvania State University  
State College, Pennsylvania*

HONGSHUN YANG  
*University of Minnesota  
St. Paul, Minnesota*

We, the *Student Voice* representatives of NABC's 24<sup>th</sup> annual conference, heartily thank those behind the *Student Voice* program for making our participation possible and welcome. The discussion at this meeting has been provocative and stimulating, and we came away from it with something more to consider which will broaden our research in the area of water sustainability in agriculture.

Many issues in the area of water sustainability could drive discussion for weeks, but throughout the conference, a couple of major themes emerged repeatedly. Below we mention in brief a few of our thoughts on those major themes as well as a few comments on the conference in general in hopes that future meetings can be even more productive.

The major themes are education, communication and collaboration, and policy changes. As technology continues to advance through the efforts of many like those at this meeting, there are issues that arise with a stronger focus on social and economic problems that we, as the upcoming research generation, feel deserve more discussion and action.

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<sup>2</sup>Verbal reporter at the conference and author with contributions from the other students.

## MAJOR THEMES

### *Education*

- A disconnect exists between the source and the shelf for products in the United States, perpetuating the idea that consumer decisions have little impact on the environment and local and global economies. This can be remedied through consumer education, possibly through:
  - Branding (*e.g.* animal friendly, rainforest friendly, fair-trade)—a mark for sustainable agricultural practices.
  - A recognizable symbol (Smoky the Bear for conservation!) that people will associate with good and healthy conservation practices to encourage smart consumer choices.
- Changing societal values and human behavior will come only through education and involvement at a community level.
  - More involvement with extension and other organizations (*e.g.* SWCD<sup>3</sup>) is important.
- As was mentioned in the conference, changes may only come generationally.
  - Can we change curricula across the country such that we emphasize the importance of conservation for a new generation?
  - Even current curricula that stress conservation are behind on current issues; updating is needed without underestimating the intelligence and resilience of children.
- Children are unaware of current science.
  - They need more encouragement to join STEM<sup>4</sup> (and add water education to current STEM programs).
  - Start STEM initiatives at an earlier age.
- If children (and adults) had accurate information, they might be more concerned and make better decisions.

### *Communication and Collaboration*

- There seems to be a lack of knowledge/wisdom about connecting the science to the ground level.
- If a lead area farmer learns about new technologies, but doesn't take those back to the farm, it's not going to be implemented.
- There needs to be better communication among all parties involved in producing, supplying, and consuming products.

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<sup>3</sup>Soil and water conservation districts.

<sup>4</sup>Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

- We have blinders on—everyone here is approaching the problem from their perspective, which is fine to a degree, but until we have a more multi- and interdisciplinary approach as well as better communication along the entire supply chain (farmers, suppliers, consumers, tech, research, policy), things are not going to change very fast.
- Combining disciplines could improve management practices more efficiently.

### *Policy Changes*

- Groundwater is being depleted and other current practices are not sustainable, so the question is how do we change?
- Our system is basically agricultural survival of the fittest without capital.
- Is it possible to incentivize change through policymaking or through changing current subsidy practices?
- Some current policies/regulations are outdated and limiting, sometimes too stifling for efficient operations.
- Regulations that resulted from lawsuits, and were then applied broadly, may not always work well.
- Can we move subsidies to try cost-share programs with smaller-scale farmers in order to encourage application of more efficient technologies?

### *General Comments on NABC 24*

- There was not much give and take.
- We would like to see more representation from all groups involved: farmers, suppliers, policymakers in equal representation with the researchers.
- If we want to encourage grassroots participation, then we'd like to see more representation of grassroots-level groups at this kind of discussion.
- We would also like to see more discussion and research around the human dimensions of applying new biotechnology.
- Finally, we would like to see and hear more about interdisciplinary work and solutions than about problems with only a few varied solutions.