Value of Introductions for Outreach Surveys

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As CenUSA partner institutions begin to evaluate their outreach educational activities and events, we need to observe several requirements regarding informed consent with human subjects who we survey. Because Iowa State University is the project's lead institution and I serve as the project's Extension evaluator, outreach evaluations follow Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for exemption eligibility.

Extension evaluations of bioenergy outreach efforts are conducted to assess educational objectives or program improvement, not for research studies, and do not manipulate human subjects, thus they are exempt from review. Because results are not submitted as peer-reviewed journal articles, outreach evaluations do not require the rigor that a peer-reviewed journal submission demands.

To satisfy IRB exemption requirements regarding human subjects, a short introduction providing informed consent to participants that specifies criteria IRB requires for exemption must be included with all surveys. Those criteria are as follows:

- Participation is voluntary.
- Participants may skip any questions.
- Survey results will be used only for reporting and program improvement.
- Personally identifiable information will be treated confidentially throughout the evaluation process.
- No risk is associated with responding to the survey.

An example introduction is provided below.

Another valuable aspect of a survey introduction is that it succinctly tells participants the purpose of the survey and how they (not you) can benefit from responding. Keeping participants informed encourages them to provide candid responses.

We also want to survey participants as efficiently and economically as possible. Using electronic survey tools will allow us to do that. Thus, CenUSA event organizers are asked to collect email addresses from participants when feasible and send them to me within 48 hours of an event so we can be timely in sending out surveys to measure increased awareness or knowledge. I will also need a detailed list of the topics covered at the event so that I can customize survey questions to that event. When a survey is ready to be implemented, I will draft an email message with a link to the survey that the event organizer(s) can personalize and email to event participants. That way, participants will recognize the person sending the email and be more likely to complete it. For that same reason, the name that should appear at the closing of the survey introduction (see example below) is the event organizer(s) and affiliation.

EXAMPLE

Date survey is implemented

Dear [name of event] participant,

You are being invited to respond to this survey because you participated in [name of event] on [date of event]. The goal of that program was for you, the participant, to increase your [knowledge or awareness, depending on objectives of event] of the following:

- Biochar as a soil amendment
- Conservation practices
- Perennial grass production

Please take 5 minutes to complete this survey. It is completely voluntary and anonymous. You may skip questions you are not comfortable answering and withdraw from participating at any time. Your responses will not be linked directly to you by name as all data will be combined. All responses will be used in summary form only. Results of the survey will be used to improve bioenergy Extension and outreach programs. There is no risk involved in responding to this survey. Thank you for your input.

Event organizer name(s), title, institution

At end of survey:

Thank you for your feedback.
The information from this survey will provide valuable input for improving Extension's educational efforts. We appreciate your taking the time to respond.

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