

Alicia Boor – virtual Great Bend farm show

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Let's go to a farm show. We'll see lots of vendors, hear speakers with the latest information, and learn about various products. But wait, we can't do that. There's a pandemic and a stay-at-home order in place.

What if we could participate in a farm show and do so virtually and safely, from the comfort of our homes? Today we'll learn about a community which accomplished exactly that. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Alicia Boor is one of the agriculture and natural resources agents for the Cottonwood K-State Research and Extension district, serving Barton and Ellis counties. She grew up in Dodge City, earned an animal science degree, and got a job as a zookeeper for rare breeds of livestock at the Sedgwick County Zoo before joining extension. Her extension position enabled Alicia and her husband to move to her husband's hometown of Hoisington in Barton County. Hoisington is a rural community of 2,706 people. Now, that's rural.

Alicia's duties included lining up speakers for the annual Great Bend farm and ranch show which attracts thousands of people to Great Bend each spring. She was assisted by Jared Petersilie, the agriculture extension agent in the neighboring Walnut Creek District. Because of the interest in growing industrial hemp, the name of the 2020 show was changed to the Great Bend Farm, Ranch, and Hemp Expo.

Then came the coronavirus, followed by stay-at-home orders. Alicia and Jared had already lined up the speakers but reluctantly notified the planners that they could no longer participate.

In March, two weeks before the scheduled beginning of the expo in early April, Alicia got another request. The expo organizers wanted to make this a virtual expo. Could the speakers present their programs after all? Alicia decided to give it a try.

How in the world does someone conduct a virtual expo? The planners in Great Bend worked with a company with the domain name, www.virtualfarmexpo.com. In a matter of a couple of weeks, they managed to organize the event so that it could function online.

Alicia contacted her K-State speakers and found that they were willing. The original idea was that they would pre-record presentations to be presented during the expo, but it turned out that live Zoom presentations worked even better. This allowed for real-time interaction with the participants.

On April 8, 9, and 10 – the originally scheduled dates – the Great Bend Farm, Ranch, and Hemp Expo was conducted virtually. Participants went online, viewed the exhibits, and interacted with the speakers through their electronic devices.

The K-State speakers included Jason Griffin, an industrial hemp researcher at the John C. Pair Horticulture Center near Haysville; wheat specialist Romulo Lollato in Manhattan; and grain marketing economist Dan

O'Brien in Colby. All were able to present their research results, share their screens with viewers, and respond to questions.

The presentations were live and also recorded. "We broke these into segments by crop," Alicia said. "That way if a producer was interested specifically in grain sorghum, for example, they didn't have to listen to an hour on other crops to get the ten minutes that they wanted," she said.

What about the exhibits? The organizers created a screen image which looked like a booth one would see at the farm show. Exhibitors were able to populate that screen with their own pictures, information, and videos, which rotated online during the show. It was an ingenious way to share the information while doing so safely and remotely. The K-State booth, for example, included links to extension publications and generated more than a thousand views.

This was accomplished in a remarkably short time frame. "It was stressful, but it was fun," Alicia said. "At last year's state extension conference, we were asked to innovate. I didn't realize we would be forced to do it so quickly," she said with a smile. "We do have to find new ways to reach the public," Alicia said.

It's time to leave this virtual farm show. We commend Alicia Boor and all those who made a difference by using technology in this way. They were able to make "virtual" a reality.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.