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STANDING PROUD

BY BETSY WARD

ARLINGTON, VA — Recently I was asked an interesting question on a podcast – okay, it was our own podcast, *The Rice Stuff*, but the question is still relevant. Michael asked me what I find to be the rice industry’s most important asset when it comes to advocating on behalf of our men and women. The answer to the question is the focus of most of this issue – our commitment to sustainability.

The rice industry, like no other industry I know or have worked for, places a supreme importance on sustaining our crop, our industry, our planet into the future. And that makes it easy, especially now, to stand proud with you.

Look at the cover of this newspaper. That young man inspires his dad, a Missouri rice farmer, to not only do right by some unseen consumer, but to do right by him – so that someday, if he wants to, he can farm the same land his father does now. And I’m confident that, no offense, he’ll do it even more efficiently.

Why am I so confident? Look at pages 8-9 where we highlight the new 2030 industry sustainability goals. These impressive goals come on top of the already laudable achievements our industry has posted in each of these metrics.

While goals like these can be established by us, and we can meet or exceed them, there are also external factors that will impact our environmental record and our profit and loss statements. Things like carbon banks, renewable energy, and government policies that will accompany them.




Betsy Ward and Tom Vilsack at a meeting in 2015 (during his first tour as the secretary of agriculture in the Obama Administration) to discuss the U.S. rice industry’s pioneering sustainability and conservation stewardship programs.

It was wonderful that Senator John Boozman asked our common constituent, Mark Isbell, an Arkansas rice farmer, to testify about climate change before the Senate Ag Committee in March. Mark’s insightful comments, and willingness to share his experiences did our whole industry proud. And you can read about it in Mark’s own words on page 10.

Alongside that article is the inspiring story of some of our members who are harnessing the power of the sun to improve their efficiency, their bottom lines, and my ability to stand tall with them and our whole industry to say, “we care about the future, it’s changing the way we act today, and you should help us meet our goals.”

In addition, I’m happy you’ll also find articles about regulatory issues, shipping challenges, a Who’s Who of the Biden Administration so far, our new consumer website, and more.

And to bring it full circle, please listen to our podcast. A podcast that dives into sustainability issues at least half the time. Even if you don’t “do” podcasts, you can listen online at www.thericestuffpodcast.com. Thank you! 

YOU’RE ON MUTE

BY MICHAEL KLEIN

ARLINGTON, VA — “You’re on mute,” was The Phrase of 2020. And as with other catchphrases, like “Cowabunga, dude,” “I’ll be back,” or “Kiss my grits,” it captures a specific moment in time.

2020 was the year most of the world went virtual and “Zoom” with a capital Z became a verb. In February 2020, if someone said to you, “Let’s Zoom tomorrow,” or “I heard it the other day when we were Zooming,” you might think a wellness check was in order. But one month later, these phrases were part of everyone’s vocabulary as in the name of public health and safety, people began working remotely if possible. Corporate travel policies were revisited, and in many cases, COVID-19, not Daddy, took the proverbial T-Bird away.

The offices of USA Rice, just outside Washington, DC, never actually closed, but staff were instructed to work from home as the severity of the pandemic became apparent. In-person meetings, whether small in our conference room, or with hundreds of people set to gather in Dallas in July 2020, were going away for the time being.

The list of events and meetings that were postponed, canceled, or moved online is nearly endless – from small regional gatherings in rice country to large national events like Commodity Classic, and massive international shows such as the National Restaurant Association Show, SIAL Paris, Fancy Foods, and others.

But now, in 2021, as it appears the corner is being turned on the pandemic with multiple effective vaccines available and Americans signing up for them in droves, the \$64,000 question is, “what now for meetings and events?”

Though we were all forced out of conference rooms and on to Zoom against our will, there are distinct advantages to the virtual platforms and they may be here to stay. Top of the list is time management.

USA RICE AND ZOOM By the Numbers*



328
Meetings

5,291
TOTAL MEETING
PARTICIPANTS

23
WEBINARS

805
Participants

262,148 Participant Meeting
MINUTES

(that’s 182 days!)

*March 2020 – December 2020

“I miss seeing folks in person and visiting, but I have to tell you, now a two-hour meeting takes two hours. Before it could take four days with all the travel. And that’s time away from my farm and family, it can be hard to justify,” said David Gairhan, an Arkansas rice farmer from Trumann and chair of Arkansas Rice Farmers.

Virtual meetings tend to run more efficiently than in-person versions as well. They start at the appointed time and there are few stragglers topping off their coffee or having a side conversation with another attendee.

Participation, which is so important for member-driven organizations like USA Rice, can improve online.

Quorums are usually easily achieved since every meeting takes place exactly where every individual is located. And with open virtual meetings, members and staff who wouldn’t typically attend meetings are now able to, keeping them abreast of important industry developments.

For anyone who has ever sat in a tight meeting room and had to jockey their seat with neighbors to get a clear view of the slides and presenters, problem solved: everyone has a front row seat now.

Getting the toothpaste back in the tube is going to be challenging.

While it’s easy to see how committee and board meetings can make a seamless transition to effective virtual meetings, what of networking events? Can they go virtual?

There’s no substitute for looking someone in the eye and knowing they’re actually looking back at you. Physically sharing a meal with another person remains one of the most intimate and meaningful things we do as a species. And if the meal is taking place at an auction or fundraiser, goading a friend to bid higher is important too.

In 2019 the USA Rice Political Action Committee (PAC) held three events, all were in-person. 2020 forced the organizers online and they were nervous about it. But the five or six virtual happy hours and online auction were exceedingly popular and the annual fundraising goal was surpassed. Participation was up because the events were taking place in every attendee’s home or office.

“Even when PAC events return to in-person, hopefully later this year, I think we’ll find a way to have a virtual component because people really liked it and took advantage of it, and in the end, the PAC benefitted,” said PAC Coordinator Josie McLaurin.

Conventions and trade shows are much harder to replicate online, but there are ways.

USA Rice experimented in 2020, turning typically in-person state rice research and outlook reports into a series of webinars. Sessions that usually draw 50-100 people in person had 376 people watching them live. And at least another 179 accessed the recordings from our video archive on YouTube.

We are also sometimes on the other side of the coin, exhibiting at trade shows. USA Rice set up a virtual booth at the annual Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo




when that trade show went virtual. Again, our staff was nervous about the outcome, but the event was a huge success and we directly reached many more people than we did at previous in-person iterations. Are you sensing a theme?

As this issue is going to press, the USA Rice Millers’ Association, which canceled its 2020 annual convention, is planning on a safe in-person event in June 2021 in Idaho. Attendees will need to follow state, hotel property, and USA Rice safety guidelines that will be informed by CDC recommendations, but organizers are confident it can be done.

It’s too early to say what will come of USA Rice’s July business meetings, scheduled for Dallas in July. The meetings went virtual in 2020 and participation and efficiency were high.

USA Rice’s flagship event, the USA Rice Outlook Conference, that ended up being canceled in 2020, looks to be on track for a December 2021 in-person return for New Orleans.

Will there still be virtual components of these and other events? Almost certainly. Why wouldn’t there be? We’d no sooner return to meetings that were only in-person or via telephone than we would give up our wide screen, high-definition color televisions to return to 4:3 black & white TVs.

We may have been forced into adopting this technology, but now that people see how easy, effective, and efficient it is, it’s going to be pretty hard to go back completely. Who wouldn’t want to have breakfast at home, participate in a far-flung meeting in the morning, make it to their child’s basketball game in the afternoon, and go to a fundraiser happy hour in the evening? Just remember to take yourself off mute. 

Michael Klein has a Zoom background for any occasion, from the control room in the movie “WarGames” to the Waffle House in Jennings, Louisiana, that he looks forward to frequenting again in person.

“... I have to tell you, now a two-hour meeting takes two hours. Before it could take four days with all the travel. And that’s time away from my farm and family, it can be hard to justify.”

— DAVID GAIRHAN, AN ARKANSAS RICE FARMER FROM TRUMANN AND CHAIR OF THE ARKANSAS RICE FARMERS
