

PRESS RELEASE

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Farmer Focus Conference makes its way to Pohnpei

In June 2023, a national effort to help agricultural producers manage stress made its way to one of the Western-most areas of U.S.-affiliated farming soil: the state of Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia. Some 25 agricultural producers, workers, and professionals took part in the Farmer Focus Conference on mental health on June 28 at the College of Micronesia-FSM campus in Palikir.

“Farming is really high-risk work, and farmers do not really talk about their spirits too much, especially their stress level, so we really want to bring this awareness to our region,” said Dr. Kuan-Ju Chen, an agricultural economist and lead of the Farmer Focus Project at the University of Guam.

The Farmer Focus Project, part of UOG’s Cooperative Extension & Outreach service, is a sub-grantee of the USDA-funded Western Region Agricultural Stress Assistance Program (WRASAP) at Washington State University and co-hosted the conference along with the extension service of COM-FSM.

The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded the issue, said COM-FSM President Theresa Koroivulaono. “There have been growing concerns, particularly about mental and behavioral health in our communities, and these concerns continue to persist,” she said.

Top stressors for FSM farm workers

The conference featured customized content based on data [released earlier this year](#) by WRASAP on the top stressors in the agriculture profession in the four Micronesian island states.

The reports revealed that 73% of the ag workers surveyed and 80% of farmers/producers surveyed throughout Micronesia felt a medium level of stress on the Perceived Stress Scale, a commonly used psychological questionnaire, while 9% of workers and 15% of farmers reported a high stress level. Even at the medium level, those individuals would benefit from counseling and other positive coping mechanisms, said Dr. Michelle U. Grocke-Dewey, a health and wellness specialist with Montana State University Extension who led the data collection and reports for WRASAP.

The farm workers surveyed reported their top stressors as grief over the death of a loved one or friend, crop and plant diseases, and financial worries. For farmers/producers, the top stressors were crop and plant diseases, COVID-19, and family-related stress. The respondents also shared that they would find value in education related to financial management, nutrition/cooking, and physical activity.

Customized to Pohnpei farmers' needs and interests

The Farmer Focus Conference in Pohnpei was curated to address some of these topics of interest and to share local and online resources regarding stress and mental health in the agricultural community.

Attendees learned about indigenous ways of coping with stress from UOG's I'Pinangon Campus Suicide Prevention Program, using writing and stretching for stress relief, how to communicate their feelings to others, and how to make healthy recipes using locally available foods.

“When I heard about the Farmer Focus Conference, I felt so excited [...],” said Johsper Nedlick Jr., an agricultural technician at the COM-FSM who works in hydroponics. “The best parts of the conference were the workout, the presentations, and the cooking — it was a good opportunity to learn how to cook fresh veggies with fresh meat.”

Additionally, they received take-home materials, including breathing tips, and websites with resources and hotlines for farm and rural stress emergencies, such as the [AgWell](#), [Ag Wellness](#) of Utah State University Extension, [WRASAP](#), and [UOG Farmer Focus](#) websites.

“The perception is that farmers stay really calm and cool, but in actuality, our farmers are more stressed than that,” said Don McMoran, who first envisioned and now leads WRASAP as the Skagit County extension director at WSU.

In fact, the National Violent Death Reporting System of the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention reported in 2016 that farmers are one of five industry groups with the highest suicide rates, with [36 suicides per 100,000 workers](#).

“I’ve seen it in my own community, and we want to be proactive in making sure that agriculture-related suicides do not happen anywhere,” McMoran said.

15 certified in Mental Health First Aid

One day of the conference was a Mental Health First Aid certification course for extension and other professionals in the community who work directly with farmers. In the training, certified instructors taught 15 participants about risk factors and warning signs of mental health problems, crisis and suicide intervention skills, and self-care and referral resources.

“It’s really helpful for us so we can identify if our clients are having stress in the field,” said Rickyes Ikin, who works directly with Pohnpei farmers as an assistant of the College of Micronesia-FSM extension program. “[Now], when we see the symptoms, we can ask what’s wrong and how we can help.”

Farmer Focus moving forward

The Pohnpei conference was the second regional conference held by the Farmer Focus Project at UOG, following the first one held in 2022 in Guam with 100 attendees. WRASAP and UOG will continue to partner, bringing the conference to a different island in Micronesia every year with content specific to their interests.

“We can’t break down stigma without having these conversations,” McMoran said.

Stay informed on future Farmer Focus events and resources by visiting url.uog.edu/uogfarmerfocus and following @uogfarmerfocus on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#).

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Photo captions:



2023-uog-ceo-farmer-focus-conference-pohnpei-4

Bryan Wichep, agriculture agent for the College of Micronesia-FSM, takes notes during the Farmer Focus Conference on July 28, 2023, on the COM-FSM campus in Pohnpei.



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Elaine De Leon, a UOG extension associate, leads Pohnpei farmers in a cooking activity at the Pohnpei Farmer Focus Conference on July 28, 2023, on the College of Micronesia-FSM campus.



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Dr. Tabitha Espina, director of writing at University of Washington Tacoma, guides an exercise in communication at the Pohnpei Farmer Focus Conference on July 28, 2023. The conference participants were tasked to draw a geometric image that was only verbally described to them.



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Mary Catherine Wiley, a UOG extension assistant who is certified in Mental Health First Aid and QPR for suicide prevention, shares mental health resources with two attendees of the Pohnpei Farmer Focus Conference on June 28, 2023.



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Presenters and attendees of the Farmer Focus Conference held on July 28 on the College of Micronesia-FSM campus in Pohnpei in partnership with the University of Guam.

Photos courtesy of University of Guam