



Season 2 Episode 5 – Down to Earth

May 12, 2022

Announcer:

The Alabama Crops Report Podcast. Your trusted information source for Alabama agriculture.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Hi, and welcome to another episode of The Alabama Crops Report Podcast. I am your co-host Katelyn Kesheimer.

Adam Rabinowitz:

And I'm your other co-host Adam Rabinowitz. I'm an Extension Economist with Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

And I am an Extension Entomologist. So we got some economics and some bugs, but I'm really excited for our topic today and our guests. Many of our listeners may have heard about the Down to Earth campaign and so we are here to talk about that with our guests, Justin Miller and Cole Sikes from the Alabama Cooperative Extension Communications and Marketing Team. Welcome Justin and Cole.

Justin Miller:

Thank you all.

Cole Sikes:

Glad to be here.

Adam Rabinowitz:

Well, we're really excited to have you here because this is a fabulous campaign, Down to Earth, but before we get into those details why don't we let our listeners hear a little bit more about just get to know you personally. Cole, why don't we start with you? Why don't you share just a fun tidbit about yourself?

Cole Sikes:

Yeah, sure. So a fun tip about me would be that I know sign language. My brother is autistic and also deaf so I had to learn time language to be able to communicate with him and I like to play guitar. Not as good as just some other folks in the office, but you know.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So you really take that communications title to heart. That's great that you've learned and can use sign language.

Cole Sikes:

Absolutely. I'm not totally fluent as much as I used to be, but it is a fun tip about me.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Great. And then we have Justin. Our other specialist.

Justin Miller:

Yeah. So I guess fun fact is I sang the national Anthem at a Buffalo Bisons baseball game in Buffalo, New York.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Oh my gosh. That's great. These are some fun facts you guys.

Justin Miller:

Yeah. That was a real fun experience. There was several thousand people there and it was just a fun trip to do all around.

Cole Sikes:

You've been holding out on me. You didn't tell me that.

Justin Miller:

Yeah. Yeah. Apparently we're going to start some communications band of some kind. You're going to play the guitar. I'll sing.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

And our fearless leader and producer, Josh, is also a musician so yeah, I think we should set something up and discuss this later.

Justin Miller:

Yeah. Apparently we're going to be playing at the Christmas party, I guess.

Adam Rabinowitz:

We might even have to have a special podcast.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So, but for today we're talking about this great campaign, Down to Earth agriculture sustains Alabama. So what is this campaign all about you guys?

Cole Sikes:

This campaign was originally created by a bunch of collaborative organizations to really bring together consumers to the farmers that give them their day to day needs, who wanted to provide some clarity on their conservation practices that not only that they have been doing as of recent, but have always been doing in the state of Alabama. So, that's really the basis and the heart of the campaign is to be able to connect those and give them the information through science, to be able to clarify that for them.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So you mentioned other organizations and this was a partnership. Can you talk about some of the other groups that you're working with?

Cole Sikes:

Absolutely. Yeah. Going down the list. It is the Alabama Agribusiness Council, the Alabama Cattleman's Association, the Alabama Department of Ag and Industries, the Alabama Farmers Federation, the Alabama Farmer's Federation, the Alabama Poultry and Egg Association, the Alabama Forestry Commission, the Sweet Grown Alabama campaign and the Alabama Association of RC&D Councils.

Cole Sikes:

So we originally got together right after... Almost after COVID hit really, in 2020. Right when everything was starting to become a little bit more safe to gather, we gathered for the first time and we brainstormed what are some ways that we can reach our respective audiences and be able to get this message across and we had multiple, multiple meetings before we even started putting anything on paper. How are we going to do it? How much money was it going to take? Where would the money come from? Who would we solicit for sponsorship? Everything. We have a pretty solid team.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah. That's a fantastic list of people involved in this.

Adam Rabinowitz:

You're really hitting every aspect of agriculture within the state of Alabama.

Cole Sikes:

Absolutely we are. And not only do we want to be able to connect the consumer to the farmer that maybe grew the tomato that they ate or the corn or whatever product that may be, we want to be able to educate them so if they know somebody who maybe has a food insecurity issue or some questions about where their food may come from, or their products, wood products for example, we'll be able to exactly tell them the source of that.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So Justin, can you talk about Extension's role in this campaign and how you all are helping?

Justin Miller:

One of the great things about Extension is we have our specialists and regional agents and researchers who are out there doing this science based research that's the educational side of a lot of the things we do. And so, that was our role in this. We knew that we could highlight some of our people here within Extension that are doing some of this fantastic work and really putting it out there to the people. And so we're working with our specialists and regional agents and highlighting that research they do, and showing that there's a human behind that science based type of information. That's really what we're wanting to do from our aspect of this campaign.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Also sounds like there's the idea to put a human and agricultural practices behind the produce that everyone's buying. What went into making that tomato that you mentioned and what did the farmer do to make sure that we're still giving back to the environment as much as we're getting out of it in the form of produce.

Justin Miller:

Yeah. I think that there there's a misconception. I'd say that sustainability has been the keyword over the last few years, but what a lot of people don't understand is farmers have been doing these practices for decades and

it's not even just the same ones. They're always coming up with new ways to be more sustainable and I think that's the whole point from our perspective is showing that our researchers are working on this every single day to make sure that tomorrow is a little better. That's the whole point and we're really excited about that aspect.

Adam Rabinowitz:

I think that's a really great point, Justin, just in terms of the word sustainability and what that means and the fact that agricultural producers are involved in sustainable production and have been for generations. When we think about sustainability, from my perspective, I go with the school of thought of that three legged stool. The environmental, the social, and the economic. Especially being an economist I always like to make sure everybody throws in that economic side.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

The last and most important leg of the stool.

Adam Rabinowitz:

That's it. But when we think about... A lot of times, what we find though is that the environmental aspect is the biggest piece of sustainability that's talked about and while... That's equally important; all three legs are needed, and so when we think about the fact that farmers... A lot of these farms that we see in Alabama have been around for generations. That really is that social aspect to that and it's because they are able to sustain their operations financially, the economic side, that they can do that and then adopt some of these practices.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah. Speaking of the economics too, we're in a time where prices are higher, both in the grocery store and on farm and so, educating people on why that's happening and what leads to that I imagine can really play a role in this campaign as well.

Justin Miller:

Yeah. There's a lot of, I think, the middle part of the industry that a lot of people don't see. They think that it's directly just the farmer and the consumer, but there's a lot of things in between that people are not seeing and these practices and the economics behind them... I always say that it pays farmers to be sustainable. They're going to have a better result if they are more sustainable. So all those things working together, I think that's going to be a big part of this campaign for the next year.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

What's the reception been so far. You all launched the campaign and so have you gotten a good response from the folks you're targeting?

Cole Sikes:

Yeah. It all really started with a kickoff event that we held in Pike Road. It was held on March 31st and it all started with a field trip from the local Montgomery county schools. Mainly Pike Road Elementary. We probably had over 200 kids there and it was awesome. It was at the Pike Road Ag Center over off of Troy highway in south Montgomery county.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah, that's a great facility.

Cole Sikes:

Yes. Awesome venue. We dodged a little bit of weather. The weather came in that morning, so things were a little bit soggy, but the kids, they didn't care. They loved being able to go around station to station. We probably had 20 plus stations for educational opportunities. Hands on activities to really get their hands dirty and explore what's out there and they had an amazing time. So once that was wrapped up, that was the initial launch or first event. We even had some politicians come in the afternoon to make proclamations and speeches and our two spearheaded leaders, Kayla Greer and Caleb Hicks. Kayla is with the Alabama Poultry and Egg Association, Caleb is with the Alabama Cattleman's Association. They are kind of our leadership in the group. We have really, really enjoyed being able to have the opportunity to impact young minds and older people as well. Education knows no age.

Adam Rabinowitz:

All right. When we talk about consumers and the importance of educating the consumers, starting young is certainly the way to go and those young children, they are going to influence their parents, but then also they'll be that influence in the future as they grow up. So what other events are being planned for the Down to Earth campaign?

Justin Miller:

Really the beauty of this between all the partners is we took the fundamentals of the campaign and you get to adapt it in your own way. What each organization can do for it. So here within Alabama Extension, we're doing a large social media push, a large news outlook push. That's something that's going to be a big sector of the campaign from our perspective and that's really worked out really, really well for us. Just halfway through the first topic area, which is carbon emissions, and we've already been picked up by RFD TV with the videos that we've done, which is huge access for us, and so that's... We're going to be building off of that. We're going to be doing those videos and news articles and social media graphics to just continue this throughout the next year.

Cole Sikes:

Yeah. Yeah, and I think it's also important that we talk about the topics that we actually narrow down. So in those meetings back two years ago, we took a lot of polls and solicited a lot of information from some different audiences. So we narrowed it down to six topics and this is a one year long campaign as of right now. We may, in the future, look to go it for another year. We're just going to take a minute after the first year is over and see if

we want to expand upon it some more, but those six topics are carbon emissions like Justin just said, and then we'll move to animal and plant efficiency, and then data and technology, conserving national resources, smart land use, and sustaining for the future, and each one of those topics is going to be pushed for two months through the different ways of video, graphics, scholarly news articles, through Extension's website.

Cole Sikes:

Then everyone else in that partnership list that we discussed earlier is going to adapt it for their own audience as well. So some may have more print journalism, like magazines, newsletters, that sort of thing. So for us, it is definitely digital marketing and we're making it available for everyone. For whoever wants to get their information from a social media graphic, something as easy as the one quote testimonies that you've seen on the Facebook page and Twitter and Instagram, or the one minute-ish videos that actually show the actual work being done by our Extension specialists, and then also the articles. So if you like a good read, if you like to sit down and read a good web article, we've got those for you too. So we're really making the variety of wealth there.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Well, I would dare to say too, we can have some of those topics on the pod if you all want. We can have... Yeah.

Cole Sikes:

Absolutely.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Have you back every two months to talk about the different topics and with all the different organizations that are involved too, each participant can have the information tailor made to what they need. So there's really a lot of flexibility and diversity in those topics. So if I was a landowner or a producer, how would I get involved with this campaign if I wanted to learn some more or be a part of it?

Cole Sikes:

So the easiest way you can learn more about the down to earth campaign is to visit the splash page on the Alabama Extension website. It is aces.edu/go/downtoearth, or you can actually visit the Down to Earth website at downtoearthal.com, and on our website, on that slash page, you'll be able to find all the graphics that we've posted in a concise area that Justin so masterfully created. He is the webmaster. Also our news articles, our videos and our Down to Earth social media page links.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

And you mentioned Facebook and there's a Twitter handle as well, right?

Cole Sikes:

Yes, it is @downtoearthal

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Fantastic. So lots of ways to get information.

Adam Rabinowitz:

And lots of ways to share that information out with others that you know.

Justin Miller:

Yeah. I think the biggest part about this is we want all the crop producers out here listening to this podcast, we want you all to be partners with us in this campaign. We want you to share these messages and testimonials coming from not only just Extension, but some of our other partners out there following on social media. The whole idea of this campaign is to really reach people who are outside of the agricultural realm and to do that, we're going to need a statewide effort. So anybody who can keep sharing these messages, that's going to be great for us.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah. I think that's a fantastic idea and I'd encourage anyone who's listening who wants to get involved to get in touch with us and as someone myself who did not come from agriculture but ended up here, I love the idea of bringing all this education and awareness and insider information to schools and people across the state. So I think this is going to be a great campaign.

Cole Sikes:

Absolutely. And with my background, I did not have a big agricultural upbringing. I went to a very rural school in high school and just enjoyed the setting and my academic advisor said, "Hey, if you want to learn more, go to the College of Ag at Auburn", and that was-

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Good advice.

Cole Sikes:

Yeah, that's right. That's right. So, and then all the things that I learned throughout all my classes, and I just gained more and more love for agriculture. That's what I think this campaign is actually going to, put in a box basically, for anyone to open and learn more about all the different facets of agriculture.

Adam Rabinowitz:

And we know that is important for agriculture to tell the story. The story of what's happening in the field and for folks to really understand that, like we talked about at the beginning, that these different practices, the practices that are so fundamental to conservation, are things that farmers are doing on a regular basis.

Justin Miller:

I think that farmers, because they've been doing them for so long, they think that everybody should know that they do them. It's not, to people who are not around this industry like I was... I had the privilege to grow up in this industry. This is just second knowledge to us, but it's not to everybody and so that's the target for this campaign.

Cole Sikes:

Conservation education is definitely the way moving forward for future generations. It's going to become a bigger and bigger topic as the years go by.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Well, I look forward to talking with you guys some more as your campaign progresses, best of luck, and thanks for joining us and huge thanks to all the sponsors and organizations that are part of this campaign and Justin and Cole. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Justin Miller:

Thank you for having us.

Cole Sikes:

Thank you. Absolutely.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

And as always, please reach out to us if you have any questions.

Adam Rabinowitz:

So, that wraps up another episode of the Alabama Crops Report Podcast

Announcer:

The Alabama Crops Report Podcast is a production of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and is sponsored by Alabama Ag Credit.