



# SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY WITH HYBRID CONFERENCES

## Case Study: United States Forest Service (USFS)

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### This case study covers:

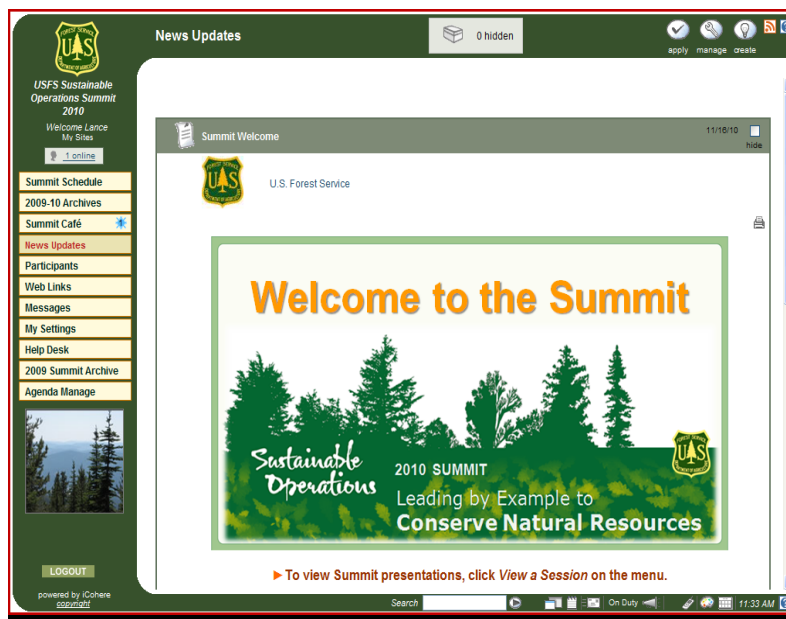
- ✓ Government Meetings
- ✓ Hybrid Online Conferences
- ✓ Highly Accessible Events

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This paper is produced and funded by iCoHERE, Inc. The "Sustainable Operations Summit" program is funded by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). The views expressed in this paper do not represent any official views or positions of the Forest Service or other agencies in the U.S. Government.

## Introduction

Established in 1905, the United States Forest Service (USFS) is the lead federal agency in natural resource conservation. Managing 155 national forests and 20 national grasslands encompassing 193 million acres, the U.S. Forest Service advocates a conservation ethic of ecological sustainability and diversity for present and future generations.



For the past several years, the U.S. Forest Service has held an annual Sustainable Operations Summit intended to highlight innovative sustainable projects and new technologies used across the country to promote green practices. Leading by example, these Sustainable Operations Summits are not typical face-to-face conferences; rather, they consciously employ collaborative technology in an effort to reduce their overall environmental impact.

The 2010 Sustainable Operations Summit, for example, integrated the Forest Service's internal teleconferencing systems with iCoHere's online collaboration platform to create a hybrid conference experience. An actual physical conference was held over 3 days in Atlanta, but this event was supplemented by a remotely accessible online website for those unable to attend in person. This approach not only allowed for a more inclusive summit, but also cut travel costs, thereby dramatically reducing carbon dioxide emissions associated with the Summit.

## Key Challenges

Many of the challenges associated with a hybrid conference have to do with its technological demands. The U.S. Forest Service already had a video teleconferencing system in place, but this system was unlikely to be able to meet the needs of a large-scale hybrid conference. According to Jim McGinnis, USFS Sustainability Conference Coordinator, "We were limited in our video teleconferencing sites to just 25 sites without crashing our internal network systems."

With the remote audience size they were anticipating, it would have been risky for the U.S. Forest Service to rely solely on their internal systems. On the other hand, hiring an outside company to build them a new system from scratch would have been both costly and time-consuming.

Additionally, the U.S. Forest Service had to accommodate a large number of non-local presenters; their 2010 summit had scheduled 25 presenters in locations scattered across the United States. To successfully put on the conference, they would have to connect multiple remote and local presenters to both an online audience and a physical audience in Atlanta. Aside from the intricacies of coordinating between multiple locations, the U.S. Forest Service presentations also had to meet complex audio and video requirements for their broadcasts.

Finally, the U.S. Forest Service had the difficulty of approximating the in-person conference experience for the virtual attendee. Because virtual attendees would not be able to physically connect with the conference, it was important that the virtual conference was interactive enough for them to still feel involved in the event. Especially because the conference aimed to encourage an open dialogue on sustainable operations policy issues, the U.S. Forest Service had to ensure that their hybrid conference model would maximize attendee participation whether the attendees were local or remote.

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*“We wanted to walk our talk even more, and not just have everybody that was speaking show up in Atlanta—there’s a lot of greenhouse gas and cost involved in that.” — Jim McGinnis*

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## Solutions and Results

As a result of its hybrid conference approach, the 2010 Sustainable Operations Summit saved approximately \$300,000 in travel costs, \$100,000 in conference facilities cost, and 300 metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions. Over 500 U.S. Forest Service personnel were able to take part in the event, whereas in a conventional summit, many would have been hindered from participating by travel and work restrictions. Moreover, the U.S. Forest Service was able to assemble an extensive set of world-class presenters for 38 conference sessions totaling over 900 hours of content. In fact, the number of remote presenters actually surpassed the number of those who were locally present in Atlanta.

To implement the conference, the U.S. Forest Service kept in place their internal video conferencing system, but enhanced it with secure Internet-based broadcasting provided by iCohere. iCohere linked to the U.S. Forest Service’s secure video system, and provided both Internet connectivity and an actual website for real time and on-demand viewing, as well as on-site coordination between U.S. Forest Service’s internal video conferencing systems and iCohere’s systems. This collaborative effort saved the U.S. Forest Service thousands of dollars, while also enabling hundreds more people to be involved.

*“The sweet spot was being able to use our internal systems to their optimal and augment what we didn’t have with these virtual conference services.”*

— Jim McGinnis

For remote participants, the online conference experience was both interactive and easy to follow. Participants could log onto a website and view the presentations live from the Atlanta meeting, either by themselves or in office groups. If needed, captions provided by Fed Relay were embedded into their real-time viewing. If a participant missed any of the presentations, they were able to view the archived recording 1 hour after the end of each session. Participants could also download the slides for future use.

The screenshot shows a web browser interface for the USFS Sustainable Operations Summit 2010. On the left is a dark sidebar with the USFS logo and navigation menu items: 'News Updates', 'Summit Schedule', '2009-10 Archives', 'Summit Café', 'Participants', 'Web Links', 'Messages', 'My Settings', 'Help Desk', and '2009 Summit Archive'. The main content area is titled 'Web Links General' and contains three entries:

- Call 2 Recycle**: Accompanied by an image of a battery recycling box. The text describes it as the only free rechargeable battery and cell phone collection program in North America, established since 1994.
- Eco Driving Tips website**: Accompanied by a circular logo with 'ECO DRIVING' text. The text is a podcast introduction by the US Forest Service Northern Region, hosted by Cody Johnson.
- Environmental Footprint/Climate Change Connection**: Accompanied by a recycling symbol and USFS logo. The text is a video presentation by Anna Jones Crabtree from 2008.

At the bottom of the sidebar is a 'LOGOUT' button and a note 'powered by iCohere copyright'. At the bottom right of the main content area is a search bar.

Participants could participate fully in the conference by joining in on discussions on conference topics of interest and posting questions and comments via text chat and over the phone after each presentation. This post-session activity helped build a greater sense of community among remote and in-person participants, while also reinforcing what they learned.

Participants also contributed to the conference by uploading their own videos and presentations directly to the site, thereby adding to the overall learning experience. At the conclusion of the conference, participants filled out a satisfaction survey to help the U.S. Forest Service evaluate the success of the hybrid conference format and make improvements for next year. Thus all participants were able to take an active role in the summit, even though many were not physically present.

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### Site Statistics

The 2009 summit had over 200 virtual site log-ins and an overall satisfaction rating of 8.5 out of 10. By the 2010 summit, the number of site log-ins had increased to 300. However, the actual number of virtual attendees of both summits was much larger, because participants were encouraged to log in as groups.

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### Summary

The U.S. Forest Service's Sustainable Operations Summits have been a valuable opportunity to educate participants about sustainable operations not just through presentations and workshops, but through the practical example afforded by the design of the summits themselves. The hybrid conference model offered a chance for participants to see a real-world application of how technology can support green initiatives. By reducing greenhouse emissions while promoting engagement and collaboration on sustainability projects in their summits, the U.S. Forest Service is an example of an organization that has leveraged the hybrid conference model to great success.



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