

Status of Online Training for Pesticide Applicators

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Abstract

Online training for pesticide applicators is becoming more widely available. Acceptance by trainers and regulators, however, varies. In 2017, the University of Maryland Extension Pesticide Safety Education Program conducted a survey to determine how many states and provinces allow online training to satisfy pesticide applicator training requirements. The survey results provide a snapshot of the current acceptance of online training options throughout North America.

Keywords: certification and training, distance learning, online training, pesticide applicators

Introduction

Online training for pesticide applicators is becoming more widely available as Extension educators, regulatory agencies, professional organizations, private trainers, and industry sources seek to meet the demand for additional training options. New online training courses are being developed with increasing frequency, and states and provinces are constantly reevaluating their options. In North America, acceptance of online training by regulatory agencies, educators, and the applicators themselves varies considerably.

In addition to more traditional types of pesticide applicator training, online training delivery is an option for certification and/or recertification training in many subject areas. In particular, many state lead agencies (SLAs) and Extension Pesticide Safety Education Programs (PSEPs) agree that online training to help applicators prepare to take and pass the initial certification exams can be very helpful. With regard to online training for recertification, the picture is perhaps less clear. Many educators consider online training less desirable than face-to-face training. Ensuring that recertification training delivers information on new technologies, approaches, and policies can be difficult unless the training units are updated in a time frame in line with the state's recertification cycle. Such updating can be expensive and time-consuming. It can also make sharing online programming between states difficult, as different states have different recertification period cycles.

Some of the common concerns surrounding online training include the following:

- How does the outcome regarding adoption of improved or recommended practices for pesticide handling compare between online training and more traditional (face-to-face) training?
- Is the person accessing the training module the actual holder of the certificate?

- Can an individual access the same training module over two or more cycles to satisfy credit requirements? If so, how is he or she continuing to learn new skills and practices?

Sometimes, however, online training can be a valuable solution – as when someone misses a traditional meeting due to illness or other problem, when a meeting must be canceled, or when there is simply no appropriate expertise within the state for a particular category. As one state recently noted, “On-line is a cost-effective way for us to provide training as budgets and the number of extension faculty shrinks. There is a place for on-line, but it has its limits. We should use it to help us deliver the parts of PSEP that can be accomplished in this way” (Brown, 2017).

Distance learning course types range from nonproctored, asynchronous, self-directed modules to proctored, synchronous, instructor-led webinars. Developing good distance learning takes time, money, and expertise. Successful, high-quality modules that are likely to improve actual learning and promote adoption of recommended practices involve a very significant amount of lead time devoted to planning and developing the training tool. Subject matter expertise must be combined with knowledge of distance learning tools appropriate to the various audiences targeted.

An additional consideration is the constant need for new training materials for each category in which online options are offered. Just as attending a face-to-face meeting where the same presentation is given for every recertification cycle would not be acceptable, accessing the same online training more than once will not provide any new information and is not likely to improve the applicators’ knowledge, attitude, or adoption of recommended practices.

Methods

In February 2017, Maryland PSEP conducted a survey via the Listserv of the American Association of Pesticide Safety Educators (AAPSE) – the professional society of those involved in certification and training programs. The purpose was described as “to gather a quick estimate of how many states offer and/or accept on-line training as an option” (Brown, 2017). The survey questionnaire comprised five questions on use of online training for private and commercial applicators to satisfy certification and recertification training requirements. The questions directed that the source of online training could be “the SLA, the state Extension PSEP, or private / professional association(s)” (Brown, 2017).

The survey was issued by Dr. Amy Brown, coordinator of Maryland PSEP, with assistance from Dr. Kerry Richards, AAPSE president-elect. Respondents were asked to return the completed questionnaires by email directly to Dr. Brown. Respondents were encouraged to offer additional thoughts or comments within their return email. A single reminder email was sent through the Listserv. The survey was not anonymous, and many respondents expressed an interest in learning the results.

Results

- Thirty-five U.S. states and one Canadian province responded to the survey.
- Questions were structured to query about training offered through a variety of sources, including the state Extension PSEP, the SLA, and private/professional association(s).
- This survey did not query whether states have equal options for all categories, and in fact, it is likely they do not. Therefore, a “YES” response could indicate anything from a single module for a single category to multiple options for all categories.
- Some states do not use online training yet but plan to do so by the end of 2017. These states are included as a “YES” under the applicable question(s).
- Some states do not currently allow online recertification options but expect to do so in the future (date unspecified). Because these states could not provide specific information (whether they plan to offer options for both private and commercial applicators or for both initial and recertification training), they are listed as a “NO” under the applicable question(s).
- One state limits the number of times the online training option may be used for private applicators but not for commercial applicators. This state is listed as both “YES” and “NO” under the applicable question.

Part 1: Initial Certification Training

1a) States and provinces offering online training designed to help **private** applicators study for the exam:

YES: Nine U.S. states, one Canadian province
(DE, GA, IL, NE, NY, TN*, VA, WA, WY, Ontario); *Tennessee does not have an exam for private applicators. The state confers initial certification to private applicators who complete a training program, which may be either in person or online.

NO: 26 U.S. states
(AR, AZ, CA, CO, CT, FL, IA, ID, IN, MA, MD, MI, MN, MO, MT, NC, ND, NJ, NM, OH, OK, OR, PA, SD, WI, WV)

1b) States and provinces offering online training designed to help **commercial** applicators study for the exam(s):

YES: 10 U.S. states, one Canadian province
(DE, GA, IL, MA, MD, ND, NY, VA, WA, WI, Ontario)

NO: 25 U.S. states
(AR, AZ, CA, CO, CT, FL, IA, ID, IN, MI, MN, MO, MT, NC, NE, NJ, NM, OH, OK, OR, PA, SD, TN, WV, WY)

Part 2: Recertification Training

2a) States and provinces offering online training that allows **private** applicators to earn credit toward recertification:

YES: 23 U.S. states, one Canadian province
(AZ, CA, CT, DE, FL, GA, ID, IN, MA, MD, MI, MT, NE, NJ, NM, NY, OR, PA, SD, TN, VA, WA, WV, Ontario)

NO: 10 U.S. states
(AR, CO, IA, MN, MO, NC, ND, OH, WI, WY)

NOT APPLICABLE: Two U.S. states
(IL, OK)

2b) States and provinces offering online training that allows **commercial** applicators to earn credit toward recertification:

YES: 24 U.S. states, one Canadian province
(AZ, CA, CO, CT, DE, FL, GA, ID, IN, MA, MD, MI, MT, NC, NJ, NM, NY, OK, OR, PA, TN, VA, WA, WV, Ontario)

NO: 10 U.S. states
(AR, IA, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI, WY)

NOT APPLICABLE: 1 U.S. state
(IL)

3) States and provinces limiting the number of times the online training option may be used (i.e., an applicator cannot recertify entirely with credits or courses taken online for every cycle):

YES: 10 U.S. states
(CT, GA, ID, MA, MD, MT*, NC, NY, OR, SD); *Montana has limits for private applicators but not for commercial applicators.

NO: 17 U.S. states, one Canadian province
(AR, AZ, CA, CO, DE, FL, IN, MT*, NE, NJ, NM, OK, PA, TN, VA, WA, WV, Ontario); *Montana has limits for private applicators but not for commercial applicators.

NOT APPLICABLE: Nine U.S. states
(IA, IL, MI, MN, MO, ND, OH, WI, WY)

Discussion and Conclusions

When this survey was conducted, more than twice as many states responding offered online training options for recertification as for initial certification. That finding was true for both private and commercial applicators. With a few exceptions, most states reported a consistent policy for both private and commercial applicator training (i.e., states with online options for private applicators tended to have online options for their commercial applicators).

Some states reported they allow applicators to use the online option an unlimited number of times only because of the limited number of online courses they find acceptable. When additional training modules become available, however, these states plan to limit the number of times an applicator can reuse the same training module for a given purpose. One state that currently does not have the authority to limit online training hopes to change that as part of reworking its state plan to comply with the federal changes planned for certification and training.

The current survey results provide a snapshot of the current acceptance of online training options throughout North America. This survey incorporated a different set of questions than a 2015 Certification and Training Assessment Group survey of online training options (CTAG, 2015). Taken together, the two surveys provide very useful information for those considering developing online courses, accepting online credits, and developing future education outreach and policy.

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