

Video Conferencing at MSU COA

The College of Agriculture has, along with the College of Nursing, the most sophisticated video conferencing infrastructure at Montana State University. Each of the seven Montana Agricultural Research Centers has a dedicated Cisco Video Conference System (VCS). There are also dedicated Video Conference Systems in Linfield Hall (3), the Animal Bioscience Building (6), the Plant Bioscience Building (3), and Lewis Hall (1).

These systems can be used two ways. One method is to directly connect between dedicated Video Conference Systems. An example of this would be using the VCS in PBB108 to connect with the VCS at the Western Ag Research Center in Corvallis, MT. One of the systems simply calls the other system using its unique Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) code. (The SIP code acts like the phone number of a video conference system.) Several of these systems are able to call into one system to produce a meeting with many participants. The advantage of this type of video conference is ease of use with very high-quality audio and video for all participants. The major disadvantage is every participant requires a dedicated VCS capable of handling either the H.323 or SIP video conference protocol. This typically restricts who may participate in this type of meeting as these systems are expensive to purchase and administer.

The second method to use a third-party video conference capable software package, such as WebEx, to act as the meeting coordinator. In this situation, WebEx acts as a technical bridge between disparate hardware configurations, thus allowing a wider range of participants to connect. WebEx facilitates a video conference system to connect to a web camera on a laptop, a tablet with a wireless internet connection, or a cell phone over a cellular data connection. Any or all of these different hardware configurations can participate in a single meeting. Even a traditional phone can be used for audio only participation in the meeting. The advantage of this type of connection is the flexibility to use any available hardware configuration to participate. The disadvantage is the potential for some of the connections to be less than ideal, depending on the robustness of the data connection available to each participant. An example of this type of connection is an individual with a MSU WebEx CMR* account schedules a meeting. When scheduling the meeting, the email addresses of all the participants are entered into the WebEx meeting schedule screen. Once the scheduling is complete, an email will be sent to the attendees. That email will include the information required to attend the meeting and a web link to join the meeting. Clicking the link will initiate the installation of a browser add-in on non-VCS hardware to join the meeting, followed by a connection to the meeting. The add-in installed will be based on the hardware and software platform of the end user. In this situation, it is best to click the 'Join' link 10-15 minutes early to allow for download and installation of the required browser add-in.

We have a robust infrastructure to support video conferencing at the College of Agriculture. Members of the COA community are encouraged to use this infrastructure to reduce travel costs and risks, increase productivity, and improve communication between individuals, teams, and outside individuals and organizations.

* All faculty and staff have WebEx accounts available for their use. Faculty or staff who regularly schedule or host video conferences requiring the use of a VCS may apply for a WebEx CMR account to facilitate those activities. Only WebEx CMR account hosted meetings may connect to Video Conference Systems. To schedule a video conference using a room with a VCS, send a request to agithelp@montana.edu.