

NSS
3rd Annual
Conference

National Sustainability Society
Conference Report
August 17-19, 2026
Denver, Colorado



Our Theme: Courage, Credibility, & Collective Action



Our conference theme reflected a moment of genuine pressure on the field, one of political headwinds, anti-science sentiment, and a narrowing window for action.

The theme ran through programming deliberately. The closing plenary confronted what it means to be brave right now, with voices from climate science, corporate sustainability, and environmental justice. The Indigenous knowledge plenary modeled credibility rooted in sovereignty and non-extractive collaboration. Sessions on navigating politicized ecosystems, rising autocracy, and the "Lead, Don't Plead" communications framework gave attendees practical tools for acting under pressure.

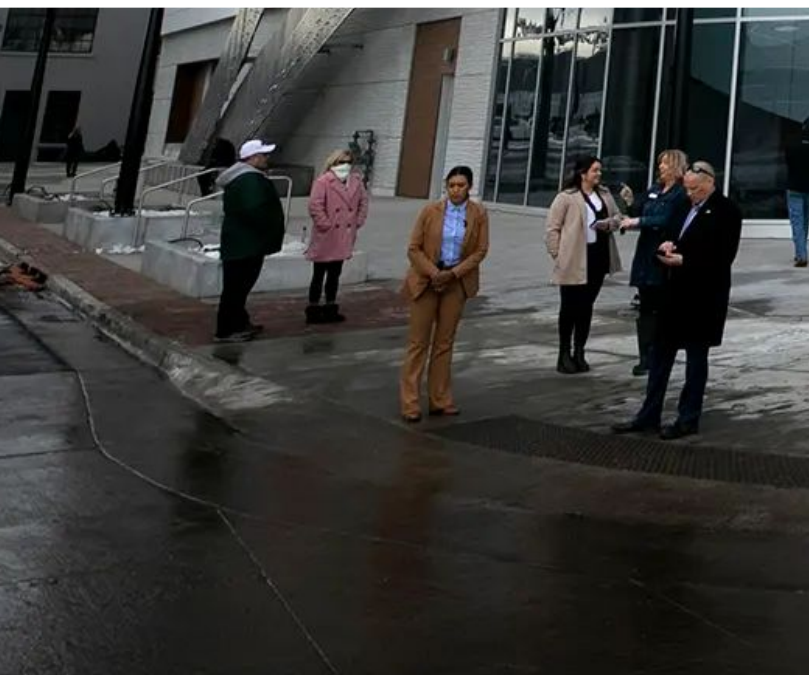
Collective action was embedded in the conference's cross-sector design. Most sessions were mixed-sector, bringing academics, practitioners, government officials, and nonprofits into the same room. Attendees consistently named these applied, cross-sector exchanges as the most valuable part of the experience, pointing to NSS's core value: building a durable professional community.

"I came to [the conference] speak around how we do sustainability science in this time of growing authoritarianism globally."

- Rob McDonald, The Nature Conservancy

Our Venue: CSU Spur Campus

The Colorado State University Spur campus, which is purpose-built around food, water, and sustainability science, was a living embodiment of the conference theme. Attendees toured a compost facility, explored agrivoltaic research, and walked through the Water TAP exhibit between sessions. One attendee called the surrounding grounds "astonishingly beautiful." The venue didn't just host the conversation about sustainability, it was a working example of it, lending the conference immediate credibility.





Impact & Reach

Our most diverse conference:

400
Attendees

53% Academic

17% Students

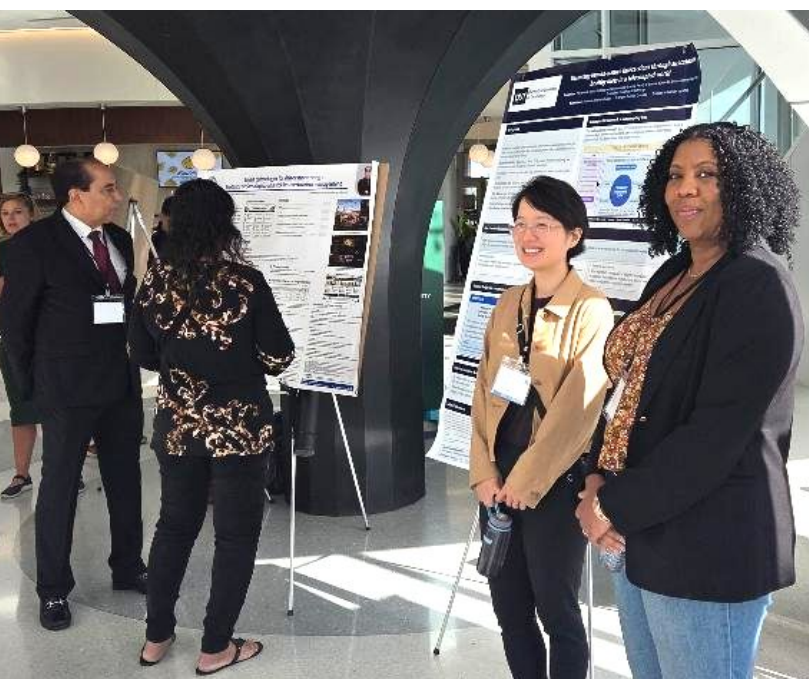
14% Nonprofit

9% Private Sector

7% Public Sector

40% Colorado-based

72% Presenting





Plenaries & Roundtables

PLENARIES

Indigenous Knowledges in the Age of Climate Action centered Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge systems in climate action, offering pathways to engage across knowledge systems that honor community priorities and resist extractive approaches to climate solutions.

Courage, Credibility, and Collective Action: Cross-sectoral Perspectives confronted the "storm" of anti-science sentiment, political headwinds, and misinformation head-on, asking what it means to be brave right now.

ROUNDTABLES

Twenty-four panels bridged academic theory with real-world practice across six domains: higher education leadership and workforce development; governance, policy, and navigating political headwinds; local and regional community resilience; technological innovation and data systems; resource and ecological management; and transdisciplinary cross-sector collaboration. A strong intermountain west focus on water, fire, municipal adaptation, and rural climate transitions reflected the Colorado host community and its most pressing challenges.





Sessions & Symposia

152 Oral presentations

34 Symposia

7 Themes

- Futures, Strategic Foresight & Systems Thinking
- Sustainability Education & Workforce Alignment
- Urban Resilience, Decarbonization & Infrastructure
- Circular Economy, Agriculture & Value Chains
- Water Security & Watershed Governance
- Governance, Environmental Justice & Political Dynamics
- Public Health, Storytelling & Behavioral Change

“One of the few conferences in the US that speaks broadly to the sustainability field that touches on a broad range of topics” - Yann Benetreau, Nature Portfolio



Workshops & Professional Development



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This was our first year offering three professional development courses in the days before the conference:

- Institute on Teaching Social Action, two-day course
- Carbon Finance Bootcamp, one-day course
- Creating Sustainability Content that Inspires Action, three-hour course



WORKSHOPS

Six 2-hour workshops were offered during the half-day prior to the start of the main conference program. Workshop topics included: Leadership Frameworks & Purpose-Driven Action; AI, Data & Systems Governance Tools; Academic & Curriculum Integration; Long-Term Thinking & Strategic Foresight.





FRONTIERS PLANET PRIZE

NSS partnered with the Frontiers Planet Prize to showcase and elevate the work of Dr. Amir AghaKouchak, the United States National Champion for the 2026 Frontiers Planet Prize.



frontiers
research foundation



POSTER SESSIONS

37

Attendees presented their work in poster format, including NSS's first high school presenter.

"I came to meet other students and early career folks and learn about all the different kinds of sustainability research" - Manavi Jaluka, ASU Graduate Student

In recognition of the importance of building a community and networks, the conference program held space for informal conversations and gatherings.

Pre-Conference Field Trips

- Denver Botanical Garden & Chatfield Farms, including a tour of the agrivoltaic farm project
- Guided hike through Boulder's open space system, led by Dr. Sharon Collinge

Campus Tours

- Central Utility Plant
- Colorado Compost plant

Conference Socials

- Welcome reception with hors d'oeuvres, country line dancing, and a local band
- Mid-conference social with food trucks and hands-on Spur campus activities: Furoshiki making with upcycled fabric, plant-based ink stationery making, a tour of "The Grove" research project, and a tour of the Water TAP exhibit
- Daily coffee socials and lunches

Lunchtime Sessions

- Ask Me Anything with journal editors
- "Communicating Sustainability Without (Accidentally) Politicizing" with Kim Grob

Student & Early Career Breakfast

A popular intimate event pairing students and early-career professionals with roughly a dozen senior practitioners for networking.

"I like that this conference is trying to bring together the mind and the body of what makes sustainability happen" - Eric Mathis, AI+Ethics Project



Social Events



ANNUAL AWARDS

The NSS Awards recognize individuals and teams whose work, service, and leadership makes real impact. Awards were presented for:

- Annual Achievement
- Innovations in Sustainability Education
- Innovations in Sustainability Practice
- Emerging Scholar

Find out more at www.thenss.org/2026awards



COMMUNITY BUILDING

"Great network of sustainability professionals, looking forward to building new connections and nurturing relationships as well as returning again next year."

"I appreciate the culture of the NSS conferences - folks are friendly, welcoming, and collaborative."

"I appreciated the conversation about world-building and taking risks to be creative, it took away some of the doom narrative that can often feel paralyzing in this line of work."

"Genuinely one of the most rewarding I have attended in years!"

"A highlight of this conference is how friendly and accessible it is! There are few places like this where early-career people can interact directly with field leaders in such informal ways. This is a special and wonderful community!"

"I truly enjoyed this as someone trying to break into the industry and trying to learn."

Conference Sustainability



The conference walked its talk on sustainability:

- Most meals were fully vegetarian, sourced from local, minority and women-owned caterers, and served on compostable servingware
- Surplus food was redirected to community organizations
- Hotel shuttles and ride-sharing reduced transportation emissions
- Attendees were encouraged to bring reusable water bottles, with water stations throughout the venue
- Badges were reused from our inaugural conference



CONFERENCE COMMITTEE

Co-Chairs

Dan Brown, The University of Washington
Veera Mitzner, Colorado State University
Courtney Shultz, Colorado State University
Cristy Watkins, NSS / University of Notre Dame

Committee

Saleem Ali, University of Delaware
Nicole Ardoin, Stanford University
Krista Bailey, Penn State University
Joie Carter, NSS / BBT
Omar Gadalla, Axel Johnson Inc
Alicia Harley, Harvard Kennedy School
Garrick Louis, University of Virginia
Allie Mazurek, Colorado State University
Kayla McGuire, Fort Wayne Metals
Pavithra Priyadarshini, Columbia University
Amanda Sardonis, University of Vermont
Meghna Tare, The University of Texas at Arlington
Jaron Rothkop, NSS / The Last Kilometer
Jane Zelikova, University of Colorado Boulder

CSU Team

Gwen Corner, Linds Evens, Thomas Meiers, Jeremy Davis, Allison Sylte, Kevin Samuelson, Jocelyn Hittle, Michelle Stanley

VOLUNTEERS

Keri Edlund, Lucy Derrick, Mamelang Memela, Susan Weckler, Cassi Mason, Naomi Michael, Abrar Alzayer, Kunjal Parnami, Marsha King, Yanyun Yan, Ojo Abraham, Sonia Alornyo, Vedika Bhat, Abner-Obed Cardona, Kathryn Wrigley, Suleiman Okoth, Nana Sakyiwa Brown-Wood, Courtney Deviney, Zhen Li, Lyn Flores, Florence Dadzoe, Salvador Meneses Requena, Anna Kulikova, Anna Maassel, Nayomi Cawthorne, Isaac Mpanga, Morgan Carnes, Saeed Fayyaz, Genhong Gao, Nishok G U, Jon Martin, Zeinab, Harold Dutton

Committees & Volunteers

LOCAL HOST COMMITTEE

Cindy Chang, Cindy Chang Consulting LLC
Sharon Collinge, University of Arizona
Gwen Corner, Colorado State University
Lisa Dilling, Environmental Defense Fund
Harold Eyster, The Nature Conservancy
Dan Goldhamer, Colorado State University
Leslie Harroun, Colorado State University
Mindy Hill, Colorado State University
Hilary Klein, Colorado State University
Paige Lewis, The Nature Conservancy
Anne Miller, Colorado Resiliency Office
Marguerite Harden, Colorado Resiliency Office
Veera Mitzner, Colorado State University
David Nebel, Ball Corporation
Max Niemayer, Denver Museum of Nature & Science
Alice Reznickova, University of Colorado Boulder
Anja Richmond, Independent
Shelby Sack, Colorado State University
Mary Seawell, Lyra Colorado
Amanda Shores, American Geophysical Union
Suzanne Tegen, Colorado State University

"Thank you all so much for your work in coordinating this wonderful conference. I am leaving completely restored in my ability to make the kind of change that I want to see in the world."

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