

Women Caring for the Landsm: Engaging Urban Absentee Landowners to Adopt Conservation Final Report

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Overview:

Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) and its organizational partners (American Farmland Trust, Center for Rural Affairs, E Resources Group, Hoosier Heartland Resource Conservation & Development Council, Inc., Midwest Sustainable Organic Education Service, and Renewing the Countryside) hosted 64 Women Caring for the Landsm meetings for approximately 616 women non-operator landowners on the topic of soil health between 2016 and 2019 in urban areas throughout seven states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, and Wisconsin). A U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service Conservation Innovation Grant funded this programming.



Photo by Joe Dickie Photography

Background/Rationale for the Project:

During 20 years of work on women's agricultural outreach, the Women, Food and Agriculture Network has verified that women inheriting land, if they have not been actively involved with agriculture, are at an enormous disadvantage when it comes to awareness, understanding, and confidence in conservation on their land. Trends in land tenure in the Midwest show that we are in the midst of a generational turnover of land ownership and women inheriting farmland need conservation resources now more than ever. Although we have produced an effective model for women's outreach on conservation topics, we knew one demographic was still

elusive and in need of just this outreach: women non-operator landowners who live in urban areas but who own rural land. This was an innovative project as it targeted an audience that had no specialized outreach, and it would require innovative strategies to be successful. In addition to adapting our learning circle model to be appropriate for women non-operator landowners in urban areas, we also planned to use advanced methods for identifying and reaching this audience, including consumer data-driven targeting and social media ad buys.

During this project, we adapted our outreach and our Women Caring for the LandSM model to hold 64 meetings for approximately 616 women in urban areas across seven states. In year one, we ran one meeting in each state (three states held two meetings during the first year). In years two and three, there were four meetings planned for each state.

Through nearly 70 prior meetings on soil health with rural women in these seven states, we have worked with state partners to help women meet their local conservation resource experts, learn how they can gauge their own soil health, have an effective conversation with their tenant and others about soil health topics, ask for conservation improvements on their land, and, perhaps most essential for women, raise their confidence in managing conservation on their land. We built on these successes by finding and recruiting urban women to attend Women Caring for the LandSM meetings adapted to urban centers and urban audiences.

The content for the meetings was about soil health as an introduction to build relationships with conservation resource professionals at the meetings. Our attendees

PROGRAM DELIVERABLES

1

An adapted Women Caring for the Land learning circle module for an audience of women landowners in urban areas.

2

Sixty-three learning circles in urban areas across seven states.

3

Nine hundred and forty-five landowners reporting increases in knowledge and confidence with conservation practices, and increased likelihood of implementing conservation practices.

4

Annual follow-up surveys showing over half of attendees took a conservation action due to attending a learning circle.

5

A brochure for professionals, such as tax professionals, to give their women clients about conservation options for their farmland.

6

Bulletin for NRCS on best practices for reaching women non-operator landowners in urban areas, including consumer data-driven research.

7

New customers to NRCS.

8

Participation in at least one NRCS approved event during the grant period, or more if desired.



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in this program owned an average of 256 acres each, and we expected within a year at least half of the attendees would take a conservation action as a direct result of attending a Women Caring for the LandSM meeting. We estimated that approximately 100,000 acres would see increased conservation due to this project.

A Brief Summary of Methods:

A variety of methods were used to reach urban-based women landowners, which included mailed post cards and letters, flyers placed in agriculture-related offices, grocery stores, gas stations, etc., social media ads, press releases, online newsletters, website calendar and blog posts, email networks and Listservs, radio and newspaper advertisements, and word of mouth. Though it was the most expensive approach, the mailed letters and post cards offered the greatest return on women signing up to attend the events. Advertising and website announcements offered the greatest potential reach to this audience. Data

from one state, which is representative of results found in the majority of the participating states, saw 42% responding to event invitations sent by mail; 19% by word of mouth; 15% by social media ads, 12% by newspaper ads, 10% by invites from agriculture professionals, and 2% from radio ads.

Events were held in urban areas, at libraries, in museums, at Extension offices, at restaurants and recreational centers, on college campuses, and in tea shops, stores or nature preserve facilities. The majority of the two- to three-hour events were held Mondays through Thursdays, at varying times of the day, though most events took place in the mornings or early afternoons. We did not see any significant difference in meeting attendance based on location or time of day. We held both breakfast and lunch meetings and all had generally about the same attendance. Three states attempted evening events but experienced low enrollment and eventually cancelled the events. Weekends were not attempted due to difficulty in recruiting agency professionals. Events were mostly free to attend, though in an attempt to limit the number of participants who failed to show up after registering, \$10 fees were charged for meetings in two states (Iowa and Missouri). The fee did not seem to have any effect of either discouraging participation or increasing it and only somewhat lessened the no shows after registering.

- **The average age of the event participant was 62 years old.**
- **The average acres owned by each participant was 256 acres.**
- **Sixty-seven percent of participants told us more than half or all of the material was new to them.**
- **Fifty-five percent of the participants told us most or all of the conservation agency resources were new to them.**

A variety of professionals attended and participated as educators at the events, including experts from Department of Natural Resources offices, Farm Service Agencies, Natural Resources Conservation Service offices, Soil & Water Conservation District offices, Extension offices, law offices, and outside organizations, like The Nature Conservancy, Land Stewardship Project, Midwest Organic Sustainable Education Service, Renewing the Countryside, and Sustainable Farming Association.

We used developmental evaluation methods as we adapted the model and recruited women landowners so we could capture differences in various urban centers and make our findings available to NRCS and others. We followed our successful evaluation protocol for the meetings and used follow-up surveys and interviews under the direction of our program evaluator, which helped us capture acres and impacts. Our state partner groups and our advisors worked with us on every step of the project to ensure we identified best practices to reach participants and promote conservation methods.

We have produced a bulletin outlining the best practices we discovered for finding and recruiting urban women landowners and the features of the meetings that worked best. We will promote this bulletin to other conservation groups, which are trying to reach more landowners and present this bulletin as a part of this NRCS CIG project.

PROGRAM RESULTS



Approximately 536 evaluation forms were completed and returned.

LIKELIHOOD TO ACT

Ninety-two percent of participants reported they were very likely to look more closely at the soil on their land.



NEW NRCS CUSTOMERS

Sixty-three percent of participants said they were very likely to contact the offices or staff members that they met at the event.

ATTENDING ANOTHER EVENT

Eighty-four percent said they were very likely to attend another women's conservation event.



INTEREST IN LEARNING

Seventy-four percent of participants said they were very likely to seek out more information on how to do a conservation practice.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE

Seventy-two percent of the participants said they were very likely to visit with their farmer to discuss what they learned at the event.



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Results:

We continue to expand our work with NRCS staff across the country in providing effective conservation outreach appropriate to women. We now add outreach to women non-operator landowners in urban areas to our work with NRCS. Participant evaluations showed that we provided high-quality information about soil health and conservation practices in a supportive environment conducive to our target audience. Women, Food and Agriculture Network contractor Jean Eells also participated in the International SWCS Conference in Pennsylvania in 2016 and 2019, providing good outreach for the program.

In order to make these learning circles more attractive and convenient for urban dwellers, we shortened the Women Caring for the LandSM meeting time to two to three hours at most, by keeping the circle of introductions, shortening the content/discussion time and eliminating the field tour component of our normal learning circles. In total,

107,492 acres were owned by 616 participants. Forty-nine percent of those participants identified themselves as sole decision-makers for their land.

This is an audience that is so left out of conservation outreach information and methods that we knew it would be difficult to reach them and to entice them to attend.

There is no easily identifiable information for use in outreach; women non-operating landowners do not share common backgrounds, ages or social strata, memberships, or information sources. Yet, when we did find them and they attended the events, many of them expressed their surprise at how we found them, and they showed delight that there was something available for women with easy-to-understand information and networking opportunities.

All states had meetings that had to be cancelled due to lack of registrations (incurring significant costs and leading to our efforts to hold meetings even with a small number attending), which we find is common among all partners holding educational meetings.

The data show we did find women who were not at all aware of the resources – they’ve been that left out of historic outreach methods – and we had women who came from out of state to attend meetings where their land is located, or women attending who had land in other states. One meeting had women with land in five other states and, in another, women owned land in 22 counties other than our meeting location. [Effort](#) was made to provide NRCS contact information for those women to connect with their agency personnel in the appropriate county for on-going help. Another meeting had two women who drove eight hours one way to attend a meeting to learn about resources in the state where their land is located. And one woman flew from Dallas, Texas, in the morning to a meeting over lunch (approximately two hours) and flew back the same day. She was grateful for the chance to learn.

Eighty percent of the participants had owned their land for four or more years. Seventy-four percent of participants said they visit their land many times each year. These two facts were somewhat unexpected. We thought there might be more new inheritors attending the meetings if the events were held close to where the women still worked. We also expected they might have lived much further from their land, making frequent visits more difficult. The latter makes us wonder just how “urban” the participants were, and yet when they introduced themselves, it was apparent that there were more urban than rural in attendance. Seventy-one percent of the participants leased their land to an operator. Sixty-four percent said they have a written lease with a farmer tenant. Of concern is the number of acres and women who do not have written leases. Although it is not a goal for this grant to promote the importance of written leases, we were able to collect data that might be helpful.

“I’ve sat down with my brother that has worked the land and went over tiling maps. I’ve met with my tenant farmer working the land and have had good discussions including adding cover crops and conservation efforts in relation to placement of the tiling. I’ve been doing a lot of new things that I would have not had the courage to do before. ... I’ve confirmed with my tenant farmer that he’s using no-till and continuing use of cover crops in order to use less chemicals.”

Evaluations and follow-up communications brought in a great deal of positive feedback from participants. “I attended three (events), and I don’t want to exaggerate, but I say it was life-changing,” said one participant. “I am new to being more responsible for land that my parents left me. I haven’t done much on the farm, and I felt intimidated, but if it hadn’t been for the meetings I would have not had the confidence to raise concerns with other more experienced family members and men

that have been farming all their life like taking steps such as cover crops, soil restoration, not using glyphosate, becoming members of Practical Farmers of Iowa and other conservation concerns. It has been a healing thing with some family members that have had disagreements involving the land.”

The learning circle was described as an “eye-opener” by one participant. “I hadn’t been out in the field for a few years and didn’t realize the erosion problem that the waterways had eroded over these last several years. So, I consider myself such a lucky person to have had the perfect timing for me to go to that meeting I really appreciate what the seminars have to offer. Otherwise, I’d never know.”

Another participant said she was scheduled to have an NRCS representative out to her farm after her attendance: “The NRCS Office in Nevada will be having someone come out after harvest and get set up for a time we can begin work on it.”

Overall, the feedback in these urban learning circles has been very positive—much like the feedback we receive from our rural learning circles. The women who attend are fascinated by the material and by learning more about soil, and they enjoy spending time talking to other women about farming and land stewardship.

Notes on Evaluations/Demographics:

We have attached [a summary document](#) comparing the states on each evaluation and demographic parameter that we could differentiate, as well as a written evaluation summary analysis, which can be found [here](#). Having worked with each state for six or more years, we can see differences in programmatic approaches, as well as unique state demographics.

Of note is where Wisconsin falls in the data. They have very different landownership numbers (lower) and pattern (more farmers), and yet for this program organizers hit it out of the ballpark for reaching the focus audience: They found many women who didn't know about the agency resources, but who wanted to attend. Their data was probably fuzziest when it came to interpreting ownership and leasing, due to their normally higher number of women farmer/owners in the state. And, as usual, they have the youngest average audiences.

Iowa and Missouri's numbers are high due to our program coordinator's tenacity to recruit women who had more than 40 acres of farmland. We ended up covering all nine Missouri meetings on a shoestring budget and volunteer basis. Fortunately, some leaders within NRCS swung in to help us find staffing and promote through their channels. Illinois was a surprise only in the extreme difficulty of recruiting women; the Illinois team was experienced and very determined to face these challenges. Minnesota paired meetings with a program afterward on legal matters, which helped get more women to attend. Both Indiana and Nebraska showed solid numbers of participation translating to conservation knowledge.

Last, we want to draw attention to how evaluation results changed when we explicitly told women that they needed to be the ones to bring up soil health to their tenants because their tenant farmers might be interested but wouldn't bring it up. We saw the evaluation measure on that point go from lower 70s to 80%. This is important because we know from our own annual surveys that are consistent across more than 10 years and follow-up telephone interviews conducted and published by American Farmland Trust that 60% of the women who have attended a meeting carry out some activity to improve conservation on their land. So, the higher we can push that percentage saying they are "very likely" to bring up a topic, the more activity on the land that is likely to happen.

Challenges:

Key insights from the program include:

- We used Farm Market ID (<https://www.farmmarketid.com>) to gain address and contact data on women landowners in and surrounding our planned event areas. Farm Market ID service did help us drill down to our target audience, although it became a cost issue on mailings. Perhaps more/multiple mailings might have been more effective with larger budgets. That said, the women we did engage from the mailing were very on-target and super appreciative of this program.

- We tried everything we could to reach women non-operator landowners living in urban areas. Local papers and radio shows have historically helped us reach women in rural areas, but this wouldn't work so well for outreach to women in urban settings. Collectively, we had luck using Farm Market ID and sending direct mail post cards and letters, as well as using social media ads, placing flyers in area offices, stores, and senior centers, sending press releases and online newsletters, putting up website calendar events and blog posts, emailing networks and Listservs, buying radio and newspaper advertisements, and encouraging word of mouth promotion.
- There is a diversity of non-operator landowners and not a "one size fits all" target. Some non-operator women landowners co-own family land with siblings with a range of plans/visions on next steps. Some purchased land they hope to retire to someday. Some bought land as an investment and conservation project. It was difficult to cover soil health from all the angles of interest to them.
- Women in urban areas may be less likely than rural women to self-identify as having a voice in farm management, despite the fact that they own the land. Some state partners were continuously wordsmithing invitations to try to be sure the women would see themselves as the intended audience. All publicity used pictures of women in fields and at meetings – even on the envelopes, in some cases – to help ensure that a woman felt it was meant for her.
- Many of the women who attended in Wisconsin both owned woodlands and were passionate about forestry. We did include resources and support for them in this arena, but realize it was beyond the targeted scope of this project.
- We did attempt to attract women who owned higher acreage by stating in most invitations "if you own more than 40 acres, with some in cropland, you will find the meeting most helpful." We knew our message about cover crops and no-till would not be as helpful to the hobby farmer or backyard gardener owners, and we also wanted to impact the highest acreage possible with our content delivered in a short period of time.
- Weather had a negative impact on the number of events we could hold in some states. Major rains and flooding occurred the days before and the day of a workshop in Nebraska, for example, and so two events were cancelled.
- Each state had at least one program that needed to be cancelled for lack of registration.
- Our key to success in reaching this new audience was recognizing that we were competing with a lot of noise in the urban space (other events, marketing, social, community and media chatter) that we don't usually encounter when we're working with a rural audience. This caused some of our partners to regroup to find unique ways

to reach these women and interesting or unique urban spaces for meetings to be held, which helped to bring more participants to the meetings.

Summary of Outputs:

As part of our grant agreement, we created a best practices [bulletin](#) to share with others hoping to provide these learning opportunities to non-operator women landowners, as well as a [brochure](#) to print and share with service professionals, tax preparers, etc., who may have the intended audience for this project as clients or customers. We also include here a link to a [letter](#) that was sent to tax preparers, informing them about our work, as well as a [folder](#) that contains several examples of invitations and letters sent to non-operator women landowners.

Media Attention:

Women Caring for the LandSM events received media attention throughout the duration of the grant program, including (but not limited to) a [Farm News article](#), a [story by KTTN](#), and coverage by [Iowa Farmer Today](#).

Potential Next Steps:

During the past three years, we have learned more about women who reside in urban areas and also own farmland, one of the most challenging groups to reach, and found out that 36% “barely knew anything” about those conservation resources prior to the meeting. These urban women are just learning about the available conservation options.

We now understand that the gap in women’s experience with government conservation programs is big enough to account for why they continue to be an underserved audience. That gap is in their knowledge of exactly what signing up for “government conservation programs” entails. Through systematic observations and debriefing after meetings, facilitators for our Women Caring for the Land program have noted that when we slow down the discussion about the cost assistance programs available and talk about the steps in detail, the women are very attentive and take a lot of notes. Many women lack even the most rudimentary understanding of the following questions: what conservation practices are available, when would the work occur, how would it get paid, who would do the work, does their tenant sign up or do they, what paperwork is needed, do they have to pay funds back, what if they don’t have a conservation plan, and more.

A woman farmer said at a recent meeting, “We’ve lived here for 35 years and I never knew any of these resources existed. I had no idea we could have gotten a bulldozer to help us solve the erosion and drainage problem that we’ve struggled to fix on our own every year it washes out. I wonder how things would be different now that we’re looking to transition out and pass things on.”

As described above, our experience with trying various outreach methods will impact future activities. Moving forward, we also feel it is important to make time to deliver background information to women who are coming to the table as novices when it comes to doing conservation work. It is important to make sure we reach both women who have some bit of conservation resource knowledge, as well as those who don't, and build out programming that delivers what each group of participants needs.

Also, as we continue to investigate how to reach out to tax advisors and other financial professionals, we are discovering various associations, Listservs and newsletters that could help us keep in contact with women farmland owners and could further help us spread our message. We are looking into using these avenues in future activities.

Special thanks to U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service Conservation Innovation Grant for its continued support of Women, Food and Agriculture Network's Women Caring for the LandSM programming.

For more information about Women Caring for the LandSM, visit the WFAN [website](https://wfan.org/women-caring-for-the-land) at <https://wfan.org/women-caring-for-the-land>.