



# Supporting Iowa's Women, Land, and Legacy

## What Is the Women, Land, and Legacy<sup>sm</sup> Project?

The goal of Women, Land, and Legacy (WLL)<sup>sm</sup> is to bring Iowa farm women together at the local level to empower them to act on their landscapes and in their communities. Through WLL<sup>sm</sup>, existing and aspiring women farmland owners are forming local and regional networks to gain access to resources, information, and education to assist them in making decisions about their land and farming.

Since 2004, organized WLL<sup>sm</sup> listening sessions have provided a forum for women's voices to be heard. WLL<sup>sm</sup> listening sessions have and continue to be held in counties across Iowa to provide women a chance to meet with other women to talk about common issues they face. These events help women connect with other women in agriculture, and help them plan and host learning sessions on topics they choose to expand their access to information that builds on their work, networks, and livelihoods.

## Why Does the Work of Women, Land, and Legacy<sup>sm</sup> Matter?

Women who operate their own farm directly influence what happens on their land and within their communities (by employing local residents and buying from local businesses, for example). Women farmland owners who are not operators themselves also have the power to impact the land and surrounding communities by deciding who will farm their land, and how it will be farmed. An estimated 47 percent of Iowa's farmland is either owned or co-owned by women<sup>1</sup>. Among these farmland owners are women who are primary farm operators, farm partners, or women opting to cash rent their land to someone else, whether it's a family member, friend, neighbor, or farm



Photo by Tanya Meyer-Dideriksen

management company. It is therefore important for farm service providers, businesses, and others to understand the values and goals of women landowners so providers can use that information to assess whether current farm service programs are effectively serving women. If change is warranted, information gathered through WLL<sup>sm</sup> can be used to inform the way in which farm service providers might modify existing programs or create new ones to help women landowners secure a better future for their families, conserve natural resources, and contribute to healthy farm communities.

## What Have We Learned So Far?

Over 800 women had attended listening sessions by December, 2006. These women articulated clear views about their relationship to the land, their families, and their communities. In summary, data from the listening sessions support the proposition that there is a "gendered location" within agriculture. Women see themselves situated differently or at least differently than the current, dominant, "conventional" paradigm would suggest.

For example, women associate independence (often linked to more traditional, paternalistic attitudes) not with individualism but with independent communities and therefore many reject industrialized agriculture. Women see themselves as the locus of connections to family, community, and nature; they also see themselves as central

<sup>1</sup> Duffy, Michael and Darnell Smith. 2004. *Farmland Ownership and Tenure in Iowa 1982-2002: A Twenty Year Perspective*. Iowa State University Extension PM 1983. Available online at <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1983.pdf>.

connectors between the past, present, and future. It is therefore not surprising that many women in the listening sessions think in terms of long-term potential and prospects as a deliberate strategy to protect their land, families, and communities. These and other factors result in gendered thinking and planning patterns that are consistently more complex than many management tools, agency staff advice, and programs presently realize and accommodate, providing rich opportunities for change.

The following categories summarize lessons learned from the listening sessions:

#### **Women Value Independence**

- Women view family-owned farms as an expression of financial, political, and cultural independence and want freedom from outside control.
- Women support diversification in agriculture as a means to protect their independence and improve self-reliance.
- Women support policies, programs, and initiatives that encourage new farmers and young families to occupy the land as part of their support for family-focused, independent agriculture.
- Women view the drain of human resources away from their rural communities as a threat to independent communities.

#### **Women Value and Depend on Social Networks for Information**

- Women invest in relationships with others to help them make informed decisions about their farming operations.
- Women rely on kinship and friendship networks to help them make decisions about their land and agriculture.

**“We, as women, have a big opportunity to affect change in a positive way. Women, Land, and Legacy<sup>sm</sup> helps us prepare for these opportunities.”** —Howard County



Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

- Women consult a variety of both public and private sector resources to help them make decisions about their land including the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, Iowa State University Extension, law and financial experts, Farm Bureau, experienced producers, elders, feed co-ops, agronomists, land tenants, and local business owners.

#### **Women Support Conservation and Connect Land Health to Human Health**

- Women exhibit a clear and strong consciousness about land health issues and respect nature intrinsically—not for its productive value, but because it sustains life.
- Women support farm conservation to ensure the land can sustain future generations.
- Land provides overall physical and mental health and healing benefits to women.

#### **Women Value Land as a Financial Resource to Achieve Non Financial Goals**

- Women understand the importance of land ownership more broadly than the traditional regard for land as a source of wealth and individual income to cover living expenses.
- Women view land as an asset and source of investment to support multiple short- and long-term goals, only some of which are financial.
- Women landowners act not only on behalf of their current personal financial situation but also the future financial situation for their immediate and extended families.

## How Can I Use This Information to Support Women, Land, and Legacy<sup>sm</sup>?

There are several ways to become involved in WLL<sup>sm</sup> and support its goals.

- First, find out if WLL<sup>sm</sup> is in your county. Do this by contacting your local District Conservationist from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), your area Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Coordinator, your local County Extension Director, or your Farm Service Agency (FSA) County Executive Director (each of whom serves as anchor partners for local WLL<sup>sm</sup> efforts). If your county already participates in WLL<sup>sm</sup>, ask your area or local NRCS, RC&D, FSA, and Extension representatives how you might join the network and/or provide support. If your county is not part of WLL<sup>sm</sup>, ask them if they know about WLL<sup>sm</sup>. Express your interest in participating in WLL<sup>sm</sup>.
- Ask your area and local NRCS, RC&D, FSA, and Extension representatives if and how they plan to use what's been learned from WLL<sup>sm</sup> to design and deliver more effective farm programs for women.
- Find ways to connect women with sources of information and resources related to land ownership, management, and decision-making.
- Encourage women landowners to become involved in policy decisions that mirror their values to make an impact. Find ways to get involved yourself to support this goal.
- Call local groups who are involved in natural resources and farm management and find ways you might make connections to further your knowledge and work.
- Create groups in your local community that support women, new farmers, young farmers, and landowners seeking networks of support.
- Seek out farming conferences in your area that you can attend, and encourage others to attend as well. Consider requesting to be part of the program and speak to women's issues in agriculture.
- Educate others about your own work and include them in your efforts to support women landowners.

### Women Link Land Connections to Familial and Spiritual Well-Being

- Women connect land to spiritual and/or religious issues, valuing the land in ways beyond its production potential.
- Farm life embodies a set of unique values for women farmland owners, serving as a foundation for meaningful social interaction within their families and communities.
- Women cite the quality, beauty, and essence of rural life as the positive core of their communities.

- Women say land ownership solidifies and stabilizes relationships women have with lenders and businesses.

### Women Feel Excluded from Formal Decision-making Processes but Land Provides Some Leverage

- Women recognize political involvement as a way to change policy but have difficulty gaining access via structures and environments in which they traditionally have not been involved.
- Women landowners agree they are not always treated fairly and with respect.



Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

## Women in the listening sessions expressed clear interest in learning more about:

- Government farm programs
- Conservation practices
- Estate planning
- Marketing & market alternatives
- Financial planning
- Financing
- Land value
- Lease options
- Options for marginal land
- Agricultural policy
- Diversification
- Crop management
- Animal husbandry
- Human health impacts of chemical use
- Farm safety
- Health insurance
- Pest control
- Zoning regulations
- Risk management
- Alternative energy and biorenewables
- Eminent domain
- Technology

### Women Prefer Comfortable, Informal Learning Environments

WLL<sup>sm</sup> women suggested education and outreach efforts for women would be more effective if meetings and workshops included the following features:

- Regular, single, special topic meetings relevant to local women
- Small groups
- Women attendees
- Women presenters
- Active, informal learning
- Emphasis on storytelling
- Meeting in peaceful, neutral spaces
- Child care support
- Mentoring programs
- Respect for women's farm schedules
- Face-to-face meeting alternatives

For a complete analysis and discussion of lessons learned from women attending WLL<sup>sm</sup> listening sessions, access the full report online at <http://www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu/wll.html>.

This report was prepared by:

Corry Bregendahl  
*North Central Regional Center for Rural Development*

Carol R. Smith  
*National Catholic Rural Life Conference*

Tanya Meyer-Dideriksen  
*Natural Resources Conservation Service*

Beth Grabau  
*Farm Service Agency*

Cornelia Flora  
*North Central Regional Center for Rural Development*

© 2007 North Central Regional Center for Rural Development

North Central Regional Center for Rural Development  
Iowa State University  
107 Curtiss Hall  
Ames, IA 50011-1050  
(515) 294-8321, (515) 294-3180 fax  
<http://www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu>



This material is based upon work supported by annual base funding through the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The NCRCRD and USDA prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs). To report discrimination, contact the Director, NCRCRD, Iowa State University, 107 Curtiss Hall, Ames, Iowa 50011-1050; (515) 294-8321, or USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Ave. S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (202) 720-5964 (voice or TDD).