



## Informing Outreach Strategies to Better Serve Iowa's Agricultural Women

Women farmland owners have the potential to transform Iowa's landscape and farm communities in significant and positive ways, given that women own or co-own nearly half of Iowa's farmland and own or co-own more than half of Iowa's leased agricultural land.<sup>1</sup> This, coupled with research results from the Women, Land, and Legacy (WLL)<sup>sm</sup> listening sessions that show women are deeply committed to healthy farmland, farm families, and farm communities, have great implications for the state of Iowa. Farm service providers in both the public and private sector have a tremendous opportunity to use these results to incorporate women's unique perspectives into farm management programs and services and thus more effectively serve the needs and enhance the strengths of women landowners.



Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

By providing background information and summarizing the voices of more than 800 women participating in the WLL<sup>sm</sup> listening sessions from 2004-2006, this publication seeks to share their perspectives on what is important as they make decisions about their land, why service providers should address their concerns, and most effective strategies for offering technical assistance to women. With help from farm service providers and the hard work of WLL<sup>sm</sup> partners and promoters, we have a chance to make a difference in the quality of information, training, and technical assistance women receive to elicit the greatest impact on women farmland owners, their families, their farms, and communities.

### The Genesis and Development of Women, Land, and Legacy<sup>sm</sup>

Although much is known about farmland *operators* in the U.S. largely due to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service's Census of Agriculture conducted every five years, very little is known about actual farmland *owners*. To address this information gap, Mike Duffy and Darnell Smith conducted a study of farmland ownership and tenure in Iowa in 2002, the results of which

<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>.



Photo by Tanya Meyer-Dideriksen

power to impact the land and surrounding communities by deciding who will farm their land, and how it will be farmed.

By 2002, others were spearheading specific efforts to learn more about women farmland owners. The Women, Food, and Agriculture Network (WFAN), in collaboration with Iowa State University, and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conducted a survey of women farmland owners in Cass County, Iowa. The goal of the survey was to gather information to strengthen farm outreach programs directed towards women. The survey was mailed to 675 Cass County women farmland owners and co-owners with 276 surveys returned for a response rate of 40 percent. Findings from the survey showed that the majority of women farmland owners (59%) co-own their land—usually with other family members. Results also showed that women overwhelmingly have a desire to keep their land in the family and in farming, yet many cited barriers such as unfavorable external economic conditions that might impede that goal.<sup>2</sup> Noteworthy, however, was women's concerns for the environment which ranked slightly higher than the need for income as it relates to the needs and values that influence their decision-making. The study concluded with recommendations for creating neutral and comfortable spaces where women farmland owners can voice their concerns, share ideas, and obtain relevant information about farm programs.

Meanwhile, the Iowa USDA State Outreach Council (SOC) was exploring options to better serve women farmland owners.<sup>3</sup> The SOC authorized a committee to address this issue. Because of

are detailed in a 2004 report titled *Farmland Ownership and Tenure in Iowa 1982-2002: A Twenty Year Perspective*.

Based on a random sample that included all parcels of agricultural land owned in Iowa, they found that 47 percent of land in Iowa was owned or co-owned by women in 2002, and women owned or co-owned 54 percent of leased farmland. 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 management company.

With such a significant share of farmland ownership controlled (or co-controlled) by women, many wondered what the implications were *or could be* for Iowa's farmland. 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

<sup>2</sup> Wells, Betty, Diane Phillips, and Emily Neuman. 2004. "Cass County Women Farmland Owners: Survey Report."

<sup>3</sup> The SOC in Iowa is comprised of USDA agency directors and outreach personnel as well as other state, local, and nonprofit organizations interested in rural issues.

the diverse membership of the SOC, organizations such as WFAN, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC), and Ecumenical Ministries of Iowa (EMI) became involved in this issue, along with several USDA agencies. The committee developed the project, called Women, Land and Legacy<sup>sm</sup>, and secured funding for WLL<sup>sm</sup> activities in 2005 from USDA Risk Management Agency's Risk Management Education and in 2006 from NRCS.

By 2006, organizational changes and circumstances changed the composition of the WLL<sup>sm</sup> State Team, which currently consists of the NRCS, the Farm Service Agency (FSA), the NCRLC and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (NCRCRD).

### **Women, Land, and Legacy<sup>sm</sup> at a Glance**

The purpose of Women, Land, and Legacy<sup>sm</sup> is to provide Iowa's farm women with a risk management tool that brings them together at the local level to empower them to act on their landscapes and within their communities. There are two important steps in the WLL<sup>sm</sup> process: the first is to listen and learn from existing and aspiring women farmland owners about their vision and goals for the land via facilitated listening sessions. The second step is to use information gathered in the listening sessions to offer local workshops that a) are in accordance with women's values, b) address topics local women identify as important, and c) discuss topics in ways that improve women's abilities to make decisions about their land.

By the end of 2006, almost a quarter of Iowa's counties had held listening session events. In total, more than 800 women attended these events. More than half of those counties have held "second-step" learning sessions. And more are signing on. By 2008, we estimate that at least half of Iowa's 99 counties will have held WLL<sup>sm</sup> events.

### **Results from the Listening Sessions**

In order to make outreach efforts more successful, we must first explore ways in which Iowa's women landowners frame agriculture and their place within it as articulated by women participating in the WLL<sup>sm</sup> "first-step" listening sessions. The results of these sessions in 22 counties enrich our understanding of women's relationship to the land and how these women navigate the social landscape to manage their land in ways true to their values.

Data from women participating in the WLL<sup>sm</sup> 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



Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS



Photo by Tanya Meyer -Dideriksen

attitudes) not with individualism but with *independent communities*. Many therefore reject industrialized agriculture as an appropriate agricultural model, instead articulating strong support for family-owned farming systems that can make greater contributions to the kinds of communities women value.

Women also see themselves as the locus of connections linking family, community, and nature and see themselves as central connectors of the past, present, and future. It is therefore not surprising that many women in the listening sessions think in terms of long-term promises 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 program change.

With these lessons in mind, it is important for farm service providers and practitioners to understand the values and goals of women landowners as they evaluate the effectiveness of current farm programs 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 healthier farming communities.

## Helpful Decision-Making Resources for Women

According to results of the listening sessions, Iowa's agricultural women rely on a variety of resources to help them make decisions about their land and farming practices. When asked, "When you have had decisions to make or dreams that you would like to see happen for your land or agriculture, what has been the most helpful to you?" they cited a variety of resources. Figure 1 shows the most helpful resources broken down by six different categories: 1) Farm service providers and agricultural professionals; 2) women themselves; 3) family and friends; 4) the media; 5) faith, religion, and spirituality; and 6) an "other" category encompassing unspecified networks and financial incentives.

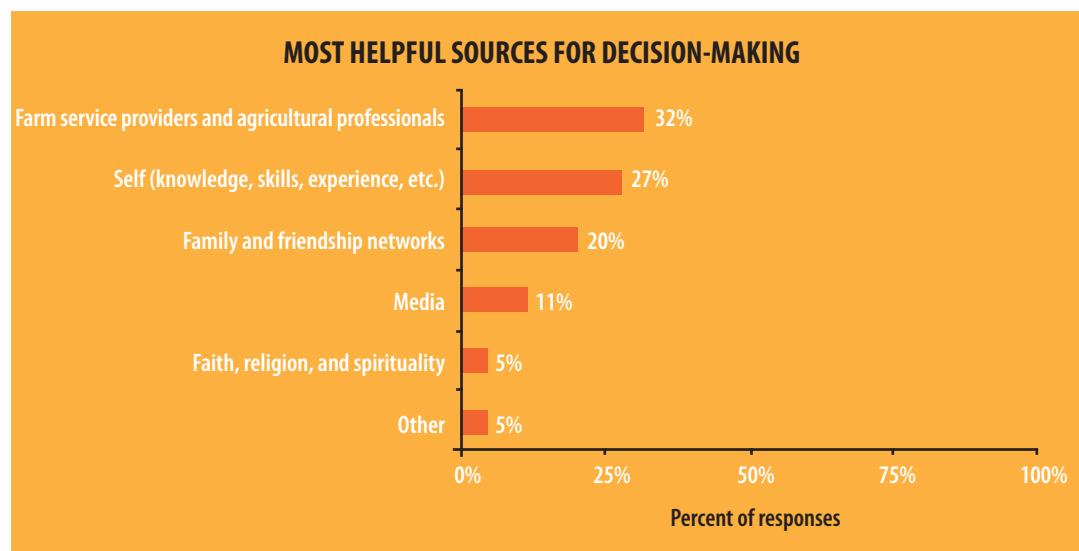


Figure 1. Most helpful sources for making decisions about the land or agriculture

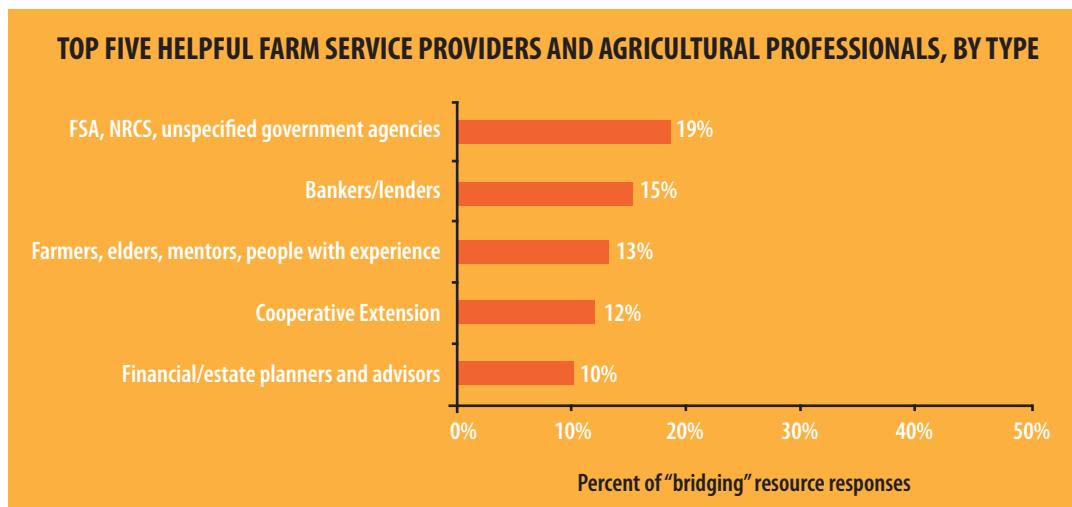


Figure 2: The top five helpful “bridging” resources, by type

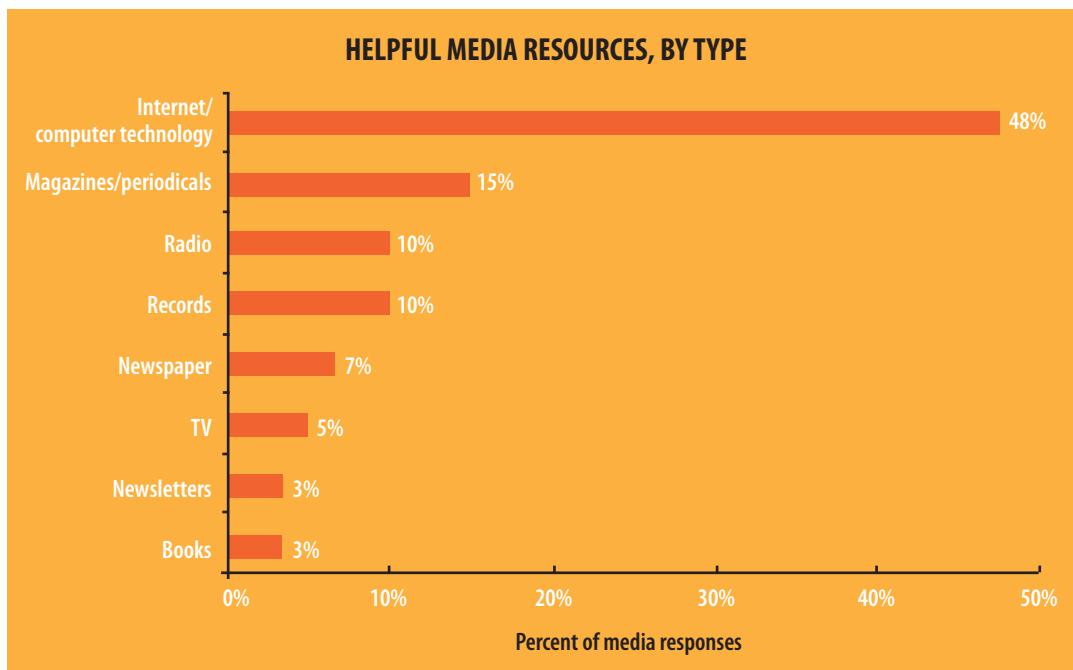
The most useful source women cite for helping them make decisions are farm service providers and agricultural professionals, constituting 32% of women’s open-ended responses. Notably, the top three categories all relate to human resources (farm service providers and agricultural professionals, women themselves, and family and friends), totaling 79% of responses. More than half (52%) of helpful resources are based on relationships women have with others (farm service providers, agricultural professionals, family, and friends).

The prominence of farm service providers and agricultural professionals at the top of this list is not surprising; however, it is noteworthy that this category of resources helps women “bridge” what they already know through self-study or interaction with family and friends. Bridging relationships provide women access to people, organizations, agencies, and institutions beyond the scope of kinship and friendship ties. Human resources in bridging relationships represent experts and professionals who are consulted because of the specialized knowledge they provide rather than emotional support.

Figure 2 shows the top five bridging resources for women in WLL<sup>sm</sup>. These include the FSA, NRCS, lenders, experienced farmers, Iowa State University Cooperative Extension, and financial and estate advisors. Other farm service providers and agricultural professionals not among the top five categories include lawyers, accountants, seed dealers, agricultural advisors, landlords, tenants, mentors, sales representatives, co-ops, Farm Bureau, local community colleges, agronomists, nutritionists, and veterinarians.

Bonding relationships are those we foster with people who are like-minded. Referring once again to Figure 1, we learn that 20 percent of the time women consider bonding resources to be helpful for decision-making. Although not shown, among helpful bonding resources, women rely largely on family members (68 percent of “bonding” responses) for help in decision-making, compared to neighbors (19 percent) and friends (13 percent).

Women also rely on records and media for gathering information (11 percent of responses). Figure 3 (next page) shows that among informative media resources available, women rely most on the Internet and computer technology to help them make decisions about land and farming.



**Figure 3. Helpful media resources, by type**

These combined results show that a variety of farm service providers, agricultural professionals, bankers, farm businesses, farmers, family, and friends play a key role in helping women decide how to manage their land. Government agencies such as FSA and NRCS, in particular, are favorably poised to serve women landowners given that women cite them as a resource more than any other group of farm service providers and agricultural professionals. Such recognition means these agencies should not only consider ways of incorporating women's goals and values into their own programming efforts, but should also actively involve other farm service providers in both the public and private sector in those efforts, including entities such as lenders, other farmers, Cooperative Extension, financial and estate planners, etc. This strategy would enable not only NRCS and FSA to better serve women, but would facilitate better coordination among these agencies and other farm service providers, with greater expected impacts on Iowa's agricultural women.

## Ways in Which Women Want Information

Results from the listening sessions indicate women prefer to receive information they seek in the following ways:

- *Regular, single, special topic meetings.* Women express a desire to hold frequent meetings where they can get together face-to-face to focus on relevant single topics rather than covering several topics at once.
- *Small groups.* Women prefer settings in which tables can be arranged to foster discussion among small groups of 6-8 people.
- *Women attendees.* Many of the women want to learn in the company of other women. They feel that limiting participation to women will create the supportive atmosphere they seek.

- *Women presenters.* Women want to hear from other women about their expertise, knowledge, and experiences. They want to hear from women farmers, farm wives, managers, marketers, conservationists, bookkeepers, community college teachers, etc. However, they also want to hear from people who have something to contribute based on their experience with lending, government farm programs, Cooperative Extension, and so forth, regardless of gender.
- *Active, informal learning.* Women prefer to be interactive at meetings, not wooden “recipients” of information. They want to take an active role in discussions and conversations where there are no “experts.” As evidence of this, women also want to visit successful farms, yet another indication of their desire to engage in active, rather than passive learning activities.
- *Emphasis on storytelling.* Women want to exchange stories with their peers to create stronger social bonds and encourage learning. Women feel more comfortable in social environments where everyone has something to learn from each other and there are no designated experts.
- *Meeting in peaceful and neutral spaces.* Women want to hold meetings in places where they feel at peace and comfortable. Women suggested holding meetings in places like nature centers, retreats, and community centers where all women are physically included (meaning places that are handicapped accessible), and where women can be a part of nature through access to windows and sunlight.
- *Child care support.* Other accommodations that make women feel included is the provision of child care support during meetings. This service will alleviate the domestic responsibilities for some women and is acknowledged as an important source of genuine support.
- *Mentoring programs.* Women want to be mentored by other women with practical experience and insights. Mentorship programs should be flexible and largely informal.
- *Respect for women's schedules.* Many women work during the day either off or on the farm and cannot attend daytime meetings. Most women wanted meetings at night after their work and domestic obligations are met, although this was mentioned as a challenge for older women who may not want to meet late. In addition, spring, summer, and early fall require women to be out in the field so meetings that are most inclusive will observe and honor the planting and harvesting seasons.
- *Face-to-face meeting alternatives and supplements.* Women support other forms of communication that may act as a substitute for women who cannot attend meetings, or that can supplement information women gather at the face-to-face meetings. Examples of meeting alternatives where women can communicate with each other include newsletters, hotlines, and creating electronic spaces such as listservs where women can communicate with each other.

**“Women, Land, and Legacy<sup>sm</sup> is a model for success ... It is empowering and confidence building!”** —Wapello County

## For More Information

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> or contact Corry Bregendahl, NCRCRD, Iowa State University, 107 Curtiss Hall, Ames, Iowa 50011; (515) 294-2853; [corry@iastate.edu](mailto:corry@iastate.edu).

To learn more about implementing the WLL<sup>sm</sup> process, please consult the *WLL<sup>sm</sup> Development Guide*. This step-by-step guide outlines the process through which WLL<sup>sm</sup> takes place at the local level. For more information about the *Guide*, contact Tanya Meyer-Dideriksen, USDA-NRCS, 210 Walnut St., 693 Federal Building, Des Moines, Iowa 50309; (515) 284-6655; [tanya.meyer@ia.usda.gov](mailto:tanya.meyer@ia.usda.gov).

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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.

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