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Technical Note

Women in Agriculture: Changing Roles and Current Outreach Techniques

*Technical Report
Release 3.2 (August 1998)*



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United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Social Sciences Institute



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Today's women in agriculture

An awareness of women's issues in agriculture in America is important for service providers at all levels of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Here are some "snap shots" from recent research:

There seems to be a **correlation between gender and attitudes toward government regulation of the environment**. Recent studies, including a 1996 Roper Starch poll commissioned by the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation, show women have a heightened interest in conservation of the environment. Twenty-three percent of the men surveyed in the Roper Starch poll believe government regulations of the environment have gone too far while only 14 percent of the women felt that way. Conversely, 51 percent of the women and 38 percent of the men said government regulation of the environment has not gone far enough (Sonner, 1996).

Women have a need for information about government programs. At a conference for Women In Agriculture, women were asked what workshops would be most beneficial to farm/ranch women; falling second only to stress management was understanding government farm programs. Women heavily attend workshops on computers, management and record keeping. (Pflueger and Lafferty, 1990).

While farms and the number of farmers are declining, **women farmers and operators are growing in numbers**. Census data shows that in a 14 year span, the proportion of women farmers rose from 5.2 percent to 7.5 percent of the total farm population. This growth would indicate a need for NRCS program information and services.

Women have and will continue to be vital in the development and maintenance of communities. Through their involvement in various community-based groups, women have developed information sources and communication networks. Market research on farm women entrepreneurs shows that **people wanting to reach women in agriculture should target women's agricultural organizations**. Women involved in agricultural organizations often have the background and education necessary to become successful entrepreneurs, to

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increase family income, and to expand and contribute to the local economy (Tanner, 1995). Because of their history of participation in community organizations, NRCS should actively recruit women into all types of “locally led conservation”.

According to a Farm Journal and Top Producer study, “13 percent of all farm households report using the Internet in 1997, (but) **women are significantly more likely to use information technology than their mates.**” Women have an interest in management and government programs and are more likely to attend seminars on these topics (Taylor, 1997).

Farm wives frequently outlive their husbands. According to the USDA Economic Research Service, forty-six percent of farmland acquired by women is inherited, versus only 19 percent for men (Rogers and Wunderlich, 1993). Without conservation education, these women may be less prepared to address environmental issues on the farm, whether they choose to operate the farm or rent out the land.

Women are more dependent on rent income from farmland. Since farm wives tend to outlive their husbands, they often inherit farmland. Many of these women choose to lease out the land for retirement income. As a percentage of the total population, women are more dependent on rent generated income. The quality and conservation of their property is important to their continued income. Women control over 40 percent of all leased farmland in the United States. Men control 31 percent and joint ownership accounts for 29 percent of leased farmland, according to the USDA Economic Research Service (Rogers and Vandeman, 1993). This statistic reinforces the need for NRCS to work with women in the management of their resources.

The percentage of women farmland owners varies by region. **The areas with the highest percentage of land owned by women are in the Midwest and Plains States.** In contrast, the lowest percentage of land owned by women is in New England. In the Southwest Central region of the United States, women lease out almost twice as many acres as compared to men (Rogers and Vandeman, 1993). A higher percentage of women landowners reside in off-farm urban areas, which indicates the need for local field offices to maintain a list of women absentee landowners.



The number of women in agricultural schools and agribusiness is expanding as new generations of farm daughters seek off-farm agricultural jobs. The share of women in agriculture at land grant universities today ranges from 30-35 percent (Tevis, 1995). A recent poll shows that farm women on average earn more degrees than their husbands. Fifteen percent of farm women earn undergraduate degrees, versus 13 percent for farm men. Eight percent of farm women complete graduate degrees, while seven percent of farm men complete graduate study (Taylor, 1997). This historic tendency may result in an increase of women in the agriculture job market.

“Women’s on-farm work is becoming less clerical and more managerial” says Rockwood Research President, Robert Hill. Rockwood surveyed approximately 1,000 women from a random sample of the Farm Journal Publishing database in February 1997. About one out of every four of these women viewed themselves as managers in the family business, actively partnering on their own or with their husbands in the farm operation (Taylor, 1997). Top Producer magazine’s April/May 1997 issue stated, “The New Face of America’s Farm Wife: She pays the mortgage, commands computers and sways \$10,000+ deals.” Thus, NRCS should actively seek farm women to make farm management decisions.

Farms operated by blacks and by women are generally smaller than the national average and their sales of farm products are less than the national average. Black, Asian and women farmers tend to be older than the average U.S. farm operator. American Indian operators, on average, are slightly younger. The number of black operated farms is declining at a faster rate than U.S. farms in general (Effland, 1998).

The next power group in the futures market could be farm wives, according to a recent article in The Wall Street Journal. Women, who have traditionally handled bookkeeping tasks on the farm, are taking over responsibility for selling family crops. They are utilizing their computer skills to access market information. Women are organizing commodity clubs to develop their strategies on future exchanges. As a result, many grain handlers and insurance companies are targeting the farm wife to pitch their management and marketing services. This trend reflects changes in the 1996 Farm Bill which phases out crop subsidies



and encourages growers to increase their income from their harvests. One avenue to increase profits is by using the Futures market rather than selling crops at harvest prices – which are usually the lowest (Kilman, 1998).

Is the transition to sustainable agriculture impacting the quality of life for women the same way it is for men? That was the question posed to couples participating in a study in Minnesota. Historically, farm policy debates and research have treated the family farm as a unit rather than considering the diversity of interests and roles of family members. Some organizations in the sustainable agriculture movement continue to treat the farm as a unit. In spite of the importance of women on the farm, these organizations have largely ignored their roles. As a result, men, but not women, describe quality of life with the values of the sustainable agriculture movement (Meares, 1997).



How to identify potential women landowners and farm operators

Resources and opportunities for identifying potential women customers are numerous. To help you develop a list of current and/or prospective women landowners and farm operators, consider using an Earth Team volunteer.

Women's Agricultural Organizations - See attachment A. This list of 12 women's groups or organizations should be a significant resource for you. It provides the names of national women's agricultural organizations or women's sections of national organizations. After you get to know the names of the groups, check to see if they have chapters in your watershed area, District, state, or region. Before you call the national contact person in the attachment, ask others in your area that may know a local branch of the group. Women customers, others on your watershed team, or the state office staff members who have the assignment of contacting external groups might be good resources for determining contacts. Other organizations and agencies could also be a resource.

- **Farm Service Agency (FSA)** maintains records on individuals by land ownership, land tenancy and farm operator. FSA has restrictions on the release of mailing lists of these individuals. Information can not be distributed to conservation districts, but NRCS can obtain some access to the records.
- **Plat books, office of the county clerk or city/county assessor** might provide information on land ownership. Once you've developed a list of names, the phone numbers and addresses can be researched in the telephone directory or the Internet Yellow Pages. You might have to use telephone directories from larger cities to get information on absentee landowners. You can usually access these directories at a university library or on the Internet. Also, the county clerk can give the address of the parcel owner who receives the tax bill.
- **Current customers** are also a good information source. Get references from people to whom you are currently providing services.

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- **Licensing Agencies** maintain producer/grower records and contact information. For example, dairy farms must have a license to sell grade A milk. Contact your state department of agriculture for further information.



Reaching out to women customers

We need to be where our customers are. Research shows that the agricultural sector relies heavily on personal contacts and “word of mouth”. Farmers also look to agricultural publications and trade shows for information on new technology and resources. Increasingly, farmers are using electronic services such as Email, list servers and the Internet to meet their needs. A recent study conducted by Top Producer and Farm Journal shows women are more inclined than men to use these Internet resources.

Obtaining a third party endorsement will provide additional credibility to the information that is being distributed. For example, publishing an article in the local newsletter distributed by a farm or other organization may increase the number of people you reach.

Based on the agricultural audience, the following strategies might be pursued to reach women in agriculture.

- **Offer direct assistance**
 - Hold a meeting in the office to discuss NRCS products and services.
 - Suggest a one-on-one meeting at their farm to discuss NRCS products and services.
- **Direct mailings**
 - Send a letter to women customers and potential customers. The letter should not mention that it is a direct mailing specifically targeting female customers.
 - In your letter, you may wish to provide information about:
 - locally led meetings, other meetings, workshops or seminars
 - programs and services
 - kinds of assistance available to them
 - other information (i.e. the NRCS Web site and/or your state or regional Website)
- **Meetings, workshops, and demonstrations**
 - Seminars and workshops can be done alone or in partnership with other organizations or agencies. The focus might include information on programs, services and current issues.



- Conduct seminars and workshops at nearby cities where absentee landowners/landlords often reside.
 - Give a speech at a meeting or convention.
 - Facilitate educational programs or seminars.
 - Host or co-host demonstrations that feature women landowners. Target women landowners in your pre-demonstration outreach initiatives.
- **Partner with USDA**
- Provide USDA personnel with information on programs, events and services. They are a natural information source for communities.
 - Information on our programs and resources could be submitted to local/state USDA publications.
 - Joint projects could provide the opportunity to do some direct marketing through Extension's and other USDA agencies' distribution channels.
- **News and video releases and articles**
- Initiate a public information campaign. Work with your Public Affairs Specialist to generate ideas, venues and resources.
 - Submit news releases and other communications to:
 - agricultural publications including publications of women's agricultural organizations.
 - other agencies or organizations such as Farm Service Agency; Cooperative Extension; Rural Development; Fisheries and Wildlife; Environmental Protection Agency; lake associations; watershed organizations; river groups; associations of Realtors; Chambers of Commerce; environmental and conservation groups; senior citizens groups and other important constituency groups in your area.
 - key leaders including, but not limited to those in government, community services, education, business and religion.
 - publications produced by local/area chapters or branches of agriculture and natural resources interest groups, community service groups, professional associations, religious groups and others.
 - radio, television, and cable television. Be sure the audiences of these mediums target your audience.
- **Exhibits at trade shows**
- These trade shows may be for general agricultural audiences as well as audiences associated with women's agricultural organizations.



- Include information on programs, services and current issues. Determine the theme of the conference or trade show and the primary interest areas of the people attending. Try to match audience and agency needs and interests.
- **Internet**
 - Provide Web site location information on communications.
 - Create a list server which women customers and women in agriculture can subscribe to for up-to-date information on programs and resources.
- **Estate Planning**
 - Enhance your awareness of such estate planning issues as liquidity needs, distribution of assets, taxes and land valuations. These issues impact both men and women in agriculture and conservation decisions. Laws vary. Be aware of probate-related laws in your state.
 - Contact financial planners, probate attorneys and accountants. Let them know your willingness to co-sponsor an estate-planning seminar to help women pass their land to future generations. NRCS staff could provide information on natural resource issues.



Appendix A. Women's Agricultural Organizations and Resources

The following resources are primarily national organizations with sections for women or women's agricultural organizations. If you aren't familiar with the local affiliate, call these organizations to request direct contact with women interested in farming and agriculture. This contact information is current as of March 1998. Information is subject to change, due to the nature of volunteer leadership in some organizations. Unless an affiliated group is mentioned, the headquarters of the organization travels with the volunteer president.

Agricultural Women's Leadership Network

Alice Baesler, President
450 Cane Brake Rd.
Lexington, KY 40509

Tel: 202-690-2869
Tel: 502-564-6676 Ext. 236
Fax: 502-564-2133

American Agri-Women

Carol Ann Gregg
147 Old Mill Road
Grove City, PA 16127

Tel: 724-458-6108

American Farm Bureau

Linda Reinhardt, Chairperson
Women's Committee
225 Touhy Ave.
Park Ridge, IL 60068
Contact your local or state Farm Bureau

Tel: 847-685-8762
Fax: 847-685-8896

American National Cattlewomen, Inc.

Mary Henzel, President
P.O. Box
Holdenville, OK 74848
A member organization of the
National Cattleman's Association

Tel: 405-379-6768

Cooperative Extension

Contact your local Cooperative
Extension Office or visit them on the Web

<http://www.esusda.gov>

Council for Burley Tobacco

Alice Baesler, Appointed Delegate
450 Cane Brake Rd.
Lexington, KY 40509

Tel: 502-564-6676 Ext. 236
Fax: 502-564-2133

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National Association of Conservation Districts Tel: 202-547-6223
Auxiliary

Sally Sawyer, President Tel: 405-654-1836
Route 2, Box 86
Carnegie, OK 73015
National Association of Conservation Districts

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Federal Women's Program (FWP) Tel: 202-690-0697
Sheila W. Greene, National Federal
Women's Program Manager
USDA-NRCS
P.O. Box 2890
Washington, D.C. 20013
Or, contact your state FWP manager

Older Women's League

Mary Lynn George
Web site address: <http://html.tamu.edu:8000/~mlg0372/>
Email: mlgeorge@tamu.edu

Women Involved in Farm Economics (WIFE)

Jenifer Felzien, President Tel: 970-522-1429
Route 1, Road 53 Fax: 970-522-1429
Sterling, CO 80751

Young Farmers and Ranchers American

Farm Bureau Federation Tel: 847-685-8762
Teresa Fehrenbacher, Director
Will Putnam, Chairman
225 Toughy Ave
Park Ridge, IL 60068



Appendix B. Web sites/Internet Resources

Chat with other women in ag:

<http://www.brigadoon.com/~blyle/>

Farm Journal Today Web site:

<http://www.farmjournal.com>

Field Office Computing System:

<http://www.ftc.nrcs.usda.gov/fchd/focs/>

Older Women's League:

<http://html.tamu.edu:8000/~mlg0372/>

Successful Farming/Women in Ag:

<http://www.agriculture.come/contents/sf/women/>

Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food:

<http://www.gov.sk.ca/agfood/newsletters/>

Voices of Women:

<http://www.voiceofwomen.com/>



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