

Profile from the Field

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Non-Profit Brings Conservation Strategies to Women Landowners

Project Title: Women Caring for the Land:
Improving Conservation Outreach to Non-operator
Female Farmland Owners

Coordinator: Bridget Holcomb

Location: Ames, IA

SARE Grant: \$61,054

Duration: 2013-2015

To read the full project report, go to
<http://mysare.sare.org> and search for
project number ENC13-137.



With support from SARE, the Women, Food & Agriculture Network (WFAN) is expanding conservation practices to women landowners (above and below). Photo by Bridget Holcomb.

The percentage of women who are sole landowners is rising as women inherit land from husbands and fathers. The 2012 Census of Agriculture revealed that women farmers now control seven percent of U.S. farmland and account for three percent of sales. Bridget Holcomb, Executive Director of the Women, Food & Agriculture Network (WFAN) has been particularly concerned with women landowners, whose numbers are rising, particularly in Iowa where women now own or co-own nearly half the farmland

in Iowa (Duffy and Smith, 2008).

WFAN's mission is to engage women in building an ecological and just food and agricultural system through individual and community power. Among their activities, WFAN works with women landowners to provide education and resources about conservation methods. In 2010, Holcomb and WFAN received a \$81,766 NCR-SARE Research and Education grant to develop their Women Caring for the Land program, which works to inform and support women landowners in working with their tenants to improve soil and water conservation.

"Women own or co-own about half of agricultural land in the US, and yet this group has been omitted from most conservation outreach," said Holcomb. "Yet each time we hold a learning circle for women farmland owners they are eager to learn about conservation and immediately start thinking about how to incorporate what they learned into their farm management and share what they learned with their tenants. Adding women in the room—it takes rethinking our outreach and offering specialized events. But it is worth it: women farmland owners represent the biggest opportunity to expand conservation practices across our farms, and it is a ball to work with them!"

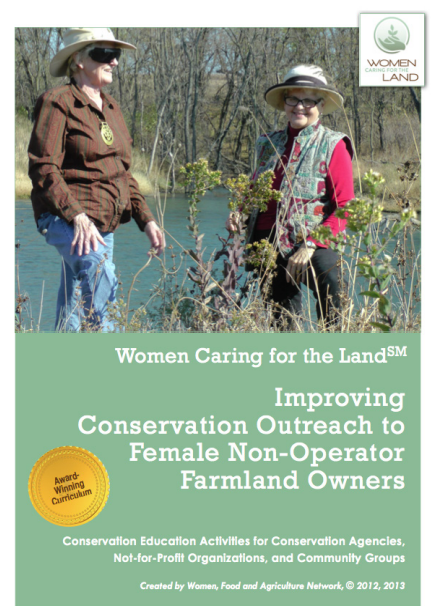
By 2013, WFAN and Holcomb were ready to share WFAN's *Women Caring for the Land* curriculum with other agriculture educators, so they applied for and received a \$61,054 NCR-SARE Professional Development Program grant to provide conservation agency and non-profit staffers with a professional

development training on the Women Caring for the Land rationale and methodology. With the PDP grant, WFAN staffers worked with the state partners to identify locations for the trainings that best met their needs. Throughout the grant project, WFAN provided professional development training to 64 conservation professionals on how to provide outreach to women farmland owners. They also reached 216 women farmland owners, and Holcomb reported that six months after attending a learning circle more than half of these women had taken a conservation step.

“Women Caring for the Land meetings are designed to attract women who own land that is farmed in ways that may or may not fit the definition of sustainable agriculture, and the fact that we reach beyond traditional sustainable agriculture audiences is one of the benefits of these meetings,” explained Holcomb. “The soil health message has been valuable for bridging the conversation about sustainable agricultural practices and their increased use and utility in dominant agriculture systems.”

Holcomb believes that if Midwestern conservation partners can more effectively serve this segment of landowners before the land transitions again over the next decade, the positive impact on our land, water, and air will be tremendous. To that end, WFAN’s *Women Caring for the Land* manual for improving outreach to women landowners is available online for free. The manual includes rationale, methodology, how-to, and 12 demonstration activities developed by conservation professionals.

“We are always impressed that women farmland owners, once they have a baseline of conservation knowledge, keep going,” said Holcomb. “Our participants raid our information tables and follow-up with their local USDA offices and other conservation professionals. Our biggest hope is that we have shown conservation professionals that to reach women we need to rethink our outreach. If we are successful in reaching women we will have unleashed the biggest conservation force in agriculture.”



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