

Final report for Women Caring for the Land
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The WFAN pilot project to develop “Women’s Learning Circles” in three counties in eastern Iowa morphed into a project called “Women Caring for the Land”. The original goal, to “directly improve water quality by educating and empowering women landowners to enact their own strong values for conservation on their land”, seemed a bit too optimistic to me when I began the project, but I am happy to report that there were several women who were able to make changes in their landscapes because of their participation in the project. I believe we provided a valuable service to a number of women, and learned quite a lot about what is needed, and how to do this work more efficiently in the future. I think the money was well spent and I recommend that this program be continued by WFAN.

To identify women landowners, I contacted the auditors of each of the three counties. One county provided me a paper copy listing every tract zoned for agriculture in the county; the two other counties gave me the information electronically. I targeted tracts with only women’s names on the ownership, with home addresses either within the county or very nearby, and owning at least 40 acres with all tracts added together. I didn’t select any tract where a bank or farmland management firm was involved. Identifying the women landowners this way was an incredibly time consuming job, and I know that, even being as careful as possible, I left out women who should have been invited to participate, and included tracts that weren’t really under a woman’s management. The Center for Absentee Landowners recently published instructions for getting targeted names from auditors’ lists in a paper called “Developing a Contact List from County Tax Roll Information”. I haven’t tried their procedure, but it looks much like what I used, without all the dead ends! Leigh produced a nice brochure and postcard announcing the project, and she sent invitations to 268 women in Johnson, 179 women in Jones, and 287 women in Linn counties using the lists.

Since the project was initiated in early winter, we decided to organize the women into county groups so that they wouldn’t have to drive so far in case of bad weather when a meeting was scheduled. It was a good idea, but in spite of our forethought, we had terrible week-long snow and cold in mid-January when we scheduled the initial meetings. Our first meetings in each county were eventually held in mid-February. I worked closely with the District Conservationists in each county to prepare for the meetings. We began the meetings with the participants introducing ourselves and telling about our conservation/landowning experiences, then I introduced the DC and we saw a short slide show about the programs available from the NRCS and Soil and Water Conservation Districts. I think a number of women didn’t realize that so many natural resource protection programs are available, that all the services are local and free, and that cost share is available for many practices. I showed a 45-minute slide show of conservation practices and briefly explained how they work to conserve soil and improve water quality. We wrapped up each meeting by talking with a good conservation tenant from the county. I urged the women to ask questions that they might not feel comfortable asking their own tenants. These were very productive conversations, and several concerns emerged, especially those related to leases. As we closed, I asked for suggestions about what we should target for our next meetings. Amazingly, wetlands turned out to be the first item from each

group. I used their suggestions to plan the field trip and final meeting. Thirteen women attended the initial meeting in Linn County, 8 in Jones, and 14 in Johnson. At each meeting, information sheets describing the conservation practices we discussed were available, along with publications from a number of natural resource organizations. I encouraged the women to take anything of interest to them.

Even though having meetings in winter prevented us from having the four field days planned in the proposal, we had the advantage of seeing very clear examples of good and bad conservation work by taking a conservation tour / field trip around the three counties in mid-March, just after the snow melted but before field work began. Eighteen women joined the tour. We travelled about 100 miles and looked at examples of common practices like no-till, contouring, and grassed waterways (or the lack of!), but also at several restored and natural wetlands, and also visited an organic vegetable farm under woman ownership and management. I planned the tour by contacting farmers and natural resource people I know in each of the three counties and asking for advice in finding certain kinds of practices. I drove the route to take notes and to be sure that everything would be visible from the road. I wrote an itinerary that explained the stops and sites so that the tour could be self-guided if necessary. The tour lasted from 9:30 until 2:30, with lunch at Gwen's restaurant midday. There was lots of visiting and getting to know one another throughout the day. Several women mentioned to me how they appreciated meeting other women with similar concerns. One suggestion for next time would be to take a step stool for those who need help getting in and out of the van. The tour was long and tiring, but very enjoyable. The women were happy to see so many different practices, and appreciated the commentary explaining what they were seeing and the opportunity to ask questions.

While more field trips and hands-on experiences in the field could be done during warmer times of the year, I think one trip was adequate for this group at this level of engagement. Perhaps with learning circles that could continue throughout an entire growing season, more in-depth agronomy and natural resource concepts could be examined. Shorter field trips to only one or two farms would be good when the weather is more agreeable. A one-hour farm visit I attended in the Clear Creek watershed on a very nice day in late May was quite successful for a small group of older women, even though it required a lengthy walk through rough fields.

Another consideration with scheduling is finding times during daylight hours when women who work full-time can attend. A number of younger women contacted me to ask to be kept on our mailing list, even though they couldn't attend any of the daytime events we held for this project. By the end of the project, I had a mailing list that included 19 Linn County women, 28 from Jones County, and 21 from Johnson County.

The final meeting was held in the evening on April 15, again at Gwen's restaurant. As had been requested, I gave a short presentation on conservation plans, using the conservation plan for my farm as a model. Our primary speaker was Margaret Smith, a friend of mine since college. She and her husband own and operate a farm in central Iowa where they raise crops and livestock, and both own and rent land using both crop share and cash leases. She led "A Conversation about Farm Leasing" which was more a discussion about the importance of leases and the security they provide for tenants and landlords, rather than a description of specific legal details. She provided a number of useful handouts and Web resources. Her talk was very well received

and generated considerable conversation and questions. Again, all of the resources I had accumulated during the course of the project were available for the women to take whatever they needed.

Even though I have been a Linn Soil and Water Conservation District commissioner for nearly 20 years, I have to admit that I had no idea of the abysmal communication between many women landowners and their tenants, or of the women's lack of information and confidence in making decisions about their own land that emerged from these meetings. The comments and questions I heard clearly indicated that much more conservation education is needed, both for women landowners and their tenants if we hope to change Iowa's landscape and improve our water quality.

After the official end to the project, I was asked to give the slide show and to talk to the Century Club (Federated Women) of Martelle, in Jones County. Thirteen women, almost all owners of farmland, attended that program. I also presented my slides to 11 women who attended a landowner's meeting in the Clear Creek watershed in Johnson County. I also have been asked to give a seminar on the topic of women landowners and natural resource conservation to students and faculty at the University of Iowa next fall. I enjoy giving these talks, meeting the women participants, and providing information that helps them claim some of the power they have as owners of the resources.

The original proposal for this project promised that we would collaborate with a long list of agriculture, university, and governmental groups. While I did work closely with NRCS staff and the three conservation districts, I was unable to involve many of the other groups in this work. Leigh kept them informed of what we were doing, but this was very much a local project that took advantage of local resources rather than those of statewide groups. Because this group of landowners doesn't generally belong to traditional farm groups, we thought the most efficient way to reach them was with direct mail.

I know that at least 3 women who participated in the project made significant changes in the way their land is farmed. I believe there are many who now have more useful information and feel more able to describe what they want to family members and/or tenants. Several women made appointments with their District Conservationists to go over their conservation plans or to have farm visits, sometimes with their tenants also included. Several women talked with their women friends and relatives about what they learned. Two of the participating women were featured in an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* that generated considerable interest and comments from readers. Because of that nationwide coverage, I had calls and emails from women outside this part of Iowa, some quite desperate for information and advice. One RC&D in Iowa has asked that we provide the program for their clients.

This project was possible because of the good work of Denise O'Brien, who realized a long time ago the need for a mechanism to empower women to manage their own land. The data and conclusions generated by the Cass County project and Women, Land, and Legacy provided the rationale and direction for the project. Jean Eells gave me lots of good ideas about how to present information and facilitate something like a learning circle. The District Conservationists in each county were incredibly helpful, especially my DC in Linn County, John Bruene. Our

District secretary, Mary Hepker, helped me round up all the materials and handouts. The DNR, IOWATER, the Iowa Learning Farm, and the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation also provided helpful materials. The Farm Bureau *Spokesman* and Cindy Hadish at the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* helped with promotion locally. Margaret Smith drove halfway across Iowa and gave us a whole day preparing and presenting the program on leases. Jim Serbosek, Dale Manternach, and Tom Wall were the farmers who gave their time to answer questions from a tenant's point of view. Leigh and I never could have made this project happen without considerable support from all these people and others.

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