



## THE OVERLOOKED LANDOWNER

A REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON  
WOMEN FARMLAND OWNERS IN THE U.S.

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This white paper describes and reports findings of a WFAN research project designed to determine the extent to which women landowners, who are the rightful decision makers for their land, are represented across the United States. This search examined both statistical data-gathering efforts and outreach programs meant for women landowners. We conclude with a brief discussion of our findings and their implications.

## Background

The future of agriculture, environmental conditions, and the health and vibrancy of rural people and communities depends heavily on the health of the land. Landowners – who may or may not farm, hunt or fish, or even necessarily live on the land (i.e., non-operators) – manage their capital assets, and can determine our collective future as eaters and residents of rural areas by their care and use of the land.

Some landowners can find trustworthy advisors capable of helping them meet the dual goals of profitability and ecological health. However, Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) has worked for more than a decade with women non-operator farmland owners who often are so lacking in confidence and knowledge that they let others make decisions against their best interests and that of their land (Wells & Eells, 2011).

Many women indicate a strong conservation ethic in meetings and surveys, but are unsure of how to translate those values into action. Often they don't know where to go for information, and if they do visit the local USDA office, they report feeling intimidated or ignored. They feel uneducated about management practices and programs (Lezberg & Newhouse, 2010). These feelings are perpetuated because few existing outreach materials feature photos of women or use language directed to non-operator landowners of either gender.

To help address this difficult social challenge, WFAN developed the Women Caring for the Land<sup>SM</sup> program. WFAN staff began meeting with women farmland owners in Cass County, IA, in 2002 (Wells, 2004). From the beginning, women told us that the majority of agricultural business advice was not aligned with the goals they had for their land. Women talked about their desire to improve the health of their farm's soil and water, and to pass the farm they loved to a new generation of young farmers who would care for it as they did. But business advisors, family members, neighbors and tenants frequently ignored or opposed these values.

Although many challenges face non-operator male landowners as well – all people can be made to feel vulnerable by illness and aging, loss of a spouse or trusted partner, or other threats – the historic and current landscape of agricultural discourse impedes the



rights and influence of landowners, and in particular, women landowners (Carolan, 2005; Eells, 2008; Wells & Eells, 2011).

While women have owned about half of Midwestern farmland for decades in partnership with their spouses, the percentage of women who own land alone is rising, as they inherit from husbands or fathers. In 2007, women over the age of 65 owned more than 25% of Iowa's farmland. The typical Midwestern female sole farmland owner is 65 or older, has not participated in management decisions about the farm in the past, and is renting her land to a tenant (Duffy, Smith, Reutzell, & Johnson, 2008).

At meetings, widows told stories of being pressured to make hasty decisions "before the body was cold," and expressed fear of losing their tenants who may have been underpaying on rent but "move snow and check on me each week," enabling the women to stay on their land alone. Even women with husbands and farming partners were sometimes relieved to hear from each other that they were not alone in wanting more conservation, fewer chemicals used, less erosion, corners left for habitat, and alternatives to what they saw as an unhealthy trajectory for farming (Breggendahl, Smith, Meyer-Diderickson, Grabau, Flora, 2007).

These women, who clearly felt discouraged and isolated prior to attending a Women Caring for the Land<sup>SM</sup> meeting, learned that they weren't alone in their feelings and care for the land. These responses raised a critical question: Why do many women landowners feel so disenfranchised when it comes to caring for their land in ways they feel are healthy, right, and holistic? WFAN's response is the Women Caring for the Land<sup>SM</sup> program, a decade-long journey to simultaneously address the most obvious discrepancies in providing information and encouragement to these women, and to conduct research into innovative ways of delivering and illustrating basic conservation and legacy concepts.



We acknowledge that women landowners are not a homogenous audience and that some women are meeting their needs for information about farm management in general. However, at the same time we find that conversations about agricultural conservation for and with women are sorely lacking. In a growing number of conferences and workshops developed for women, speakers address estate planning, grain marketing, and farm finances, but rarely is conservation – either identifying problems and effective treatments or benefits, or highlighting examples of women making conservation decisions – included as a primary topic.

## Context for the Study

WFAN conducted research in the fall of 2012 on the topics of women landowners and conservation programs and education targeted to them, to develop a better understanding of who women landowners are in order to more effectively inform and empower them as decision-makers about their farmland.

WFAN has gathered a great deal of qualitative data in our Women Caring for the Land<sup>SM</sup> learning circles and during our years of work with women in agriculture, which can paint a picture of the women who own land in the Midwest and their circumstances.

However, in order to really understand and convey the necessity of working with women landowners, we also need to know how many women landowners there are nationwide. How many women own land, and what percentage of agricultural lands do women own? Numbers and percentages to answer these questions would help us comprehend and communicate the scope of the work that needs to be done across the U.S. It could also help agencies and organizations that conduct conservation programming better understand their constituency, and increase the awareness of funders regarding the importance of supporting programs that reach out effectively to women landowners.

In the past, the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) of the USDA has gathered demographic data about landowners in the Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey (AELOS), conducted approximately every 10 years. However, the most recent AELOS was published in 1999; currently this data is not being gathered by NASS nor any other federal agency.

Michael Duffy and his colleagues at Iowa State University conduct periodic research on farmland ownership and tenure in Iowa to illustrate trends and changes over time, as mandated by the Iowa Legislature. Their most recent survey (2007) found that 47% of the land in the state is owned or co-owned by women.

**Because it does not appear that information about women landowners is being gathered at the national level, we wanted to determine whether other states or regions were doing research similar to that conducted by Duffy et al. (2008).**

## Methods

To locate data on women's land ownership for the nation as a whole or for specific states or regions, we conducted a thorough internet search of national organizations and agencies, and at the state level for some states where agriculture represents an important part of the economy. A total of 51 websites of agencies, organizations, and resources were studied. A complete list of these entities appears in the Appendix (page 7).

We looked for reports or publications created by these entities and publications they recommended, and we also searched within the websites for information about women landowners or land ownership demographics more broadly. We also contacted Cynthia Nickerson of the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) via email to determine whether ERS planned to conduct an Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey (AELOS) or gather demographic data about landowners through any other means in the near future.

## Findings

None of the organizations provided land ownership demographics on their websites. We were unable to locate any information on the websites that answered our questions about the number of women landowners in the nation, region, or state, or the percentage of land that is owned by women outside of Iowa.

We also searched through a number of articles and reports recommended or included in the websites of these organizations. In the majority of these studies, the researchers did not inquire about the gender of the landowner. While some studies included information about the gender of the operator (not the landowner), many omitted the topic altogether.

In some cases, gender of the respondent was assumed, and/or it was extrapolated that the person answering the survey was the owner of the land. We found one report that included demographic information about women landowners. Butler's (2008) article reported on the U.S. Forest Service's National Woodland Owner Survey, which included a question about the gender of the primary decision-maker. This study of private forestland owners reported that 92% of the landowners, owning 87% of the land, acted as the primary decision-maker for use of the land. When considering the numbers of primary decision makers, 16% are female and 10.5% are joint decision makers, indicating decisions made by "at least one male and one female." In terms of the amount of land owned, the primary decision maker for 13.4% of the forestland is female and for 7.7% of the land is "joint." Because of the high percentage of landowners who serve as primary decision-makers, these percentages can serve to approximate the gender of the landowner.

According to personal communication with representatives from USDA ERS, the most recent survey that asked about land ownership was conducted in 1999. The questions included in the USDA's Census of Agriculture, conducted every five years, gather demographic information on **operators and owner/operators only**. Nickerson<sup>1</sup> from the USDA ERS explained that although efforts had been made to conduct another AELOS as a follow-up to the 2012 census, this will not possible this year, nor likely in 2013, be-

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<sup>1</sup> Email correspondence, August 31, 2012

cause of budgetary constraints. Nickerson expressed hope that they will be able to conduct a survey of this type in 2014.

This research reinforces the idea that women landowners are largely an invisible group, and that information regarding ownership of land by gender represents a major research gap.

## Implications

Conservation practices must be enacted on agricultural lands across the United States to protect water quality and soil health and productivity for future generations. Agencies tasked with making improvements and doing more with less are hampered when they lack current, basic information about their audiences – something no business would leave to chance or to decades-old data. When women are left out by the presumption that their views of agriculture and their goals are the same as those of the men who are the primary focus and recipients of agricultural conservation information, they are severely hampered from taking action – either through influencing or ordering tenants to act – to protect their land. The social constraints for women’s agency in matters of farm management are significant, but women can be strong conservation partners when they are effectively informed and supported. Evaluations of Women Caring for the Land<sup>SM</sup> meetings (responses to a survey circulated a year after attendance at a meeting) consistently show that 50–66% of respondents have taken action to improve conservation on their land.

The environmental and social costs of omitting women – by the inappropriate design of survey instruments to measure and document their rightful place as decision-makers and the ineffective outreach that further alienates them – are visible on the land and waters. In Iowa, at least, we know that half of the rightful decision-makers have the potential to influence half of the land and



could take steps to enact conservation improvements if we invite them to participate. It is time to fully engage these willing partners, not only in Iowa but across the nation, in agricultural conservation by properly documenting their demographics, conducting targeted meetings, and developing outreach publications that communicate to women as they have to men for decades.

## Links to Studies

- 1999 Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey Data: Tables illustrating a variety of data from the most recent national survey conducted by NASS of agricultural landowners, available at:  
[http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/1997/Agricultural\\_Economics\\_and\\_Land\\_Ownership/](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/1997/Agricultural_Economics_and_Land_Ownership/)
- “Trends in U.S. Farmland Values and Ownership” (February 2012) – Nickerson et al.: Report by the USDA-ERS showing the latest in national trends in farmland values as well as trends in ownership of that farmland, available at:  
<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib-economic-information-bulletin/eib92.aspx>
- “Farmland Ownership and Tenure in Iowa 2007” (2008) – Duffy et al.: Report discussing a survey of Iowa landowners and the results regarding a number of facets of land ownership. This report states that at the time of the survey, 47% of land in Iowa was owned by women and is available at: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1983.pdf>
- “Family Forest Owners of the United States, 2006” (2008) – Butler: Reports the results of the U.S. Forest Service’s National Woodland Owner Survey of family forest owners. This report states that 92% of family forest owners, who own 87% of the land, make management decisions about their own land. 16% of the primary decision makers for the land are female, while 10.5% are “joint decision makers, at least one male and one female.” In terms of the amount of land owned, the primary decision maker for 13.4% of the forestland is female and for 7.7% of the land is “joint.” This report is available at:  
[http://nrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/gtr/gtr\\_nrs27.pdf](http://nrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/gtr/gtr_nrs27.pdf)

## References

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- Eells, J. C. 2008. “The land, it’s everything: Women farmland owners and the institution of agricultural conservation in the U.S. Midwest.” (doctoral dissertation). Iowa State University, Ames, IA

- Lezberg, S. and Newhouse, A. 2010. "Effective Outreach for a New Wisconsin Agriculture." Research Brief. Environmental Resources Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Nickerson, C., Morehart, M. Kuethe, T., Beckman, J., Ifft, J., and Williams, R. 2012. "Trends in U.S. Farmland Values and Ownership." *EIB 92*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. February 2012.
- Wells, B. 2004. "Cass County Women Farmland Owners Survey Report." Iowa State University, Ames, IA
- Wells, B. and Eells, J. 2011. "One size does not fit all: Customizing conservation to a changing demographic." *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* 66(5):136A-139A .

## Appendix: Agencies, Organizations and Resources Researched

- American Farm Bureau Federation
- American Farmland Trust
- Center for Rural Affairs
- MOSES Rural Women's Project
- National Association of Conservation Districts
- National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC & D)
- National Farmers Union
- Rural Women's Network
- US Women in Agriculture (USDA)
- United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA ERS)
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service
- Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project
- Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture
- Arizona Land Resource Information System
- California Women for Agriculture
- Connecticut Women's Ag Network
- Women, Land and Legacy (Iowa State Outreach Council)
- Maine Women's Ag Network
- Women's Agricultural Community (Michigan State University)
- Nebraska Association of Resource Districts
- Nebraska Department of Agriculture
- Nebraska Department of Natural Resources

- Nebraska Environmental Trust
- Nebraska Field Office – National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)
- Nebraska Forest Service
- Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
- Nebraska Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
- Nebraska State RC & D Association
- University of Nebraska Extension
- North Carolina Agricultural Development & Farmland Preservation Trust Fund
- North Carolina Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services
- North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, including *One North Carolina Naturally* program
- North Carolina Digital Collections
- North Carolina Forest Service
- North Carolina Land Title Association
- North Carolina Secretary of State
- North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension, including *Forestry and Environmental Outreach Program*
- North Carolina Women of the Land Agricultural Network
- Pennsylvania Women’s Ag Network
- Texas A&M Institute of Renewable Resources
- Texas AgriLife Extension Service
- Texas Department of Agriculture
- Texas General Land Office
- Texas Land Trends
- Texas Tech University
- Vermont Women’s Ag Network
- Association of Women in Agriculture (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

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For more information about Women, Food and Agriculture Network, visit [www.wfan.org](http://www.wfan.org).

For information on soil and water conservation and other tools for women farmland owners, visit WFAN’s Women Caring for the Land<sup>SM</sup> website: [www.womencaringfortheland.org](http://www.womencaringfortheland.org).

*Cover photo: Martha Skillman and Charlotte Shivers, Knoxville, IA. Ed Cox photo, 2011.*