



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Testing the Women Landowner Conservation Learning Circle Model

Results from Illinois and Indiana

Background

American Farmland Trust (AFT) began working with Women Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) and USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Illinois and Indiana in 2012 to hold conservation learning circles for women agricultural landowners.

The goal of the learning circles is to engage women in conversations about conservation on their land, connecting them with each other and with local resource professionals who can help them manage their land productively and to benefit the environment. We knew from the experience of WFAN in Iowa that these learning circles work. Early survey results indicate that 50 to 70 percent of women who attend "take a conservation action" within six to 12 months of attending just one circle.

Research indicates that women are deeply committed to healthy farmland, farm families, and farm communities. Some research also indicates that women face more gendered barriers than men do in managing their land for long-term sustainability.

AFT believes that we must engage women agricultural landowners as a critical component of meeting water quality and soil health goals on agricultural land. NRCS is a natural partner in this work, as they have an outreach mandate to ensure all potential participants are aware of their programs and services. A targeted goal of the agency is to reach women who own or operate agricultural land.

AFT's goal for conducting this research was to dig deeper into the effectiveness of conservation learning circles. What kinds of conservation actions result from women attending the circles? More specifically, are the circles resulting in positive change on the land? What kinds of barriers are women facing and does this outreach method help overcome them?

In 2018, we partnered with Utah State University (USU) to help us answer these questions. Between 2014 and 2017, AFT, WFAN and NRCS conducted 43 learning circles in Illinois (13 circles) and Indiana (31 circles) in partnership with local conservation agencies. In 2018, USU attempted to interview by phone all the women who attended these learning circles. They conducted in-depth, semi-structured





interviews with 130 attendees. All were involved in agriculture in some way, most often as landowners and/or as farmers.

Results: Demographics

Most of the women we interviewed had attended just one learning circle, but 18 percent attended more than one. Their average age was 62 and most lived on their farmland (70 percent). The women who lived off the land were located 46 miles away (on average), but a few of the women lived as far as 400 miles from their land. Fifty-five percent were co-owners of their land, and 36 percent were sole owners. Most of the land owned by the women was in corn and soybean production, which is the dominant agricultural land use in both states.

Not all women who attended the learning circles were non-operating owners—31 percent of interviewees were farming the land themselves, and 59 percent were renting their farmland to a local farmer. Of those women who rent out their land, just over half were using a cash rent lease arrangement and 32 percent used crop sharing. Most leases are renewed annually and nearly half are verbal agreements.

Results: Conservation Action

Most importantly, we learned that learning circles are resulting in conservation on the ground. Out of the women interviewed, 72 percent stated they took some sort of conservation action. Of those women:

- Nearly half talked to a family member regarding conservation or what was learned at the meeting
- 32 percent of the women who took an action **implemented conservation practices on the land**
- Nearly a quarter spoke with their renter specifically about conservation
- 20 percent reached out to staff or an organization that was at the learning circle
- 13 percent spoke with their renter about the meeting (but not specifically about conservation)

Conservation practices that were implemented varied. In many cases, they involved changes in soil management, including the use of cover crops and reduced tillage. It is also important to note that even though 28 percent of the women indicated they have not made any changes, some

One woman (age 58) explained how conversations with her renter led to implementation of cover crops: **“The new tenant was pretty much on board to that type of thinking about conservation farming...so it was easy to work with him to start implementing some of these ideas, and he has been very open about different types of cover crops to put on during the winter time.”**

The use of other conservation practices was also identified, including one 58-year-old woman who stated, **“We had some problems with erosion, and we’ve got it somewhat under control, and we’re trying to make sure the [renter] doesn’t plow it, or plow in a way that [allows it to go] back into erosion again.”**

One 58-year-old woman who owns the land with her father stated, **“I would say that talking [with my farmer] about the cover crop took a while, but I do think it was inspired by that meeting. [The meeting] really helped me feel more confident about talking to him.”**

Another 65-year-old woman who is the sole owner of her land said, **“I absolutely had conversations with the farmer. We have several goals. One would be rotational grazing, and the purpose of that is to have a more natural fertilizer on the land.”**



advisors. Other women discussed the difficulty in finding information about farming, as they had not had the same training in farming that their brothers had growing up.

One woman (age 65) stated, **“It’s a very antiquated attitude... it’s just a perception that [agriculture] is made up of a lot of little boys, and it’s really tough to penetrate that sometimes. You know, I have a job where I work with predominately male board members. And I’m kind of used to that type of conversation. And I think that’s helped me in some respects. But I think maybe that could be a workshop at some point, how to diffuse the old-fashioned attitudes.”**

One 62-year-old woman discussed her own experience: **“I think that to have all of the information and tools in your toolbox, it’s better, and you know it’s going to help women. Typically, it’s always been guys that have done the farming, but not always, and then if you didn’t have someone to help you learn it...I feel like I know a lot about the farm, and then my dad dies and then I [realized] I don’t know all of the stuff I don’t know.”**

indicated this was due to their selling of the land or not enough time, and 24 out of the 36 women stated it was because they are currently content with their farming operations.

Results: Barriers to Success

The most commonly identified barriers the women experienced were various gender barriers, closely followed by a lack of knowledge about farming practices. Women cited the difficulty of working in an “old boys club” atmosphere and struggling to be taken seriously by their



Conclusion and Recommendations

The interview data provides both an in-depth evaluation of the learning circle meetings and an increased understanding of the needs of women attendees. Of the 130 women interviewed, 72 percent took some form of action, either through communicating what they learned to a family member or their renter; through the actual implementation of a new conservation practice; or by reaching out to natural resource agency staff or organizations. It is critical to note this is action taken after one meeting—illustrating the power behind the learning circle approach.

The study shows the learning circle meetings are making a difference for women in agriculture. To improve their experiences and increase knowledge, the women had a few suggestions. Many women brought up the desire for more discussions related to financial or technical assistance. Additionally, even though most women were content with the existing structure (especially the field days), many expressed hope for more follow up after meetings. This could be through less formal meetings with local women or through additional follow up from staff. This suggests that many women are hungry for connections and knowledge that can be gained from these meetings. The data here shows women are still experiencing barriers to their role in agriculture that stem from gender and a lack of knowledge. Women's conservation learning circles are providing women with essential tools to help combat the barriers they experience. Taking these recommendations for improvement and learning from the experiences of these women can better enable educators to address these needs.



To learn more about our Women for the Land National Initiative, visit www.farmland.org/intiativesw/womenfortheland or contact Jennifer Filipiak, AFT's Midwest Director, at jfilipiak@farmland.org or (515) 868-1331.