Case Study Vignettes

Lessons Learned for Virtual Engagement with Farmers and Ranchers
About American Farmland Trust

American Farmland Trust (AFT) is the only national organization that takes a holistic approach to agriculture, focusing on the land itself, the agricultural practices used on that land, and the farmers and ranchers who do the work. AFT launched the conservation agriculture movement and continues to raise public awareness through our No Farms, No Food® message.

Since our founding in 1980, AFT has helped to permanently protect over 6.5 million acres of agricultural lands, advanced environmentally sound farming practices on a half-million additional acres and supported thousands of farm families.

Case Study Overview

This overview is part of a larger effort to guide virtual engagement with women farmers and farmland owners. In addition to these case studies, we also created a virtual guide, Reaching Women in Agriculture: A Guide for Virtual Engagement.

As part of our work to explore how organizations, primarily those serving women farmers, ranchers, and other natural resource managers, we sought input on lessons learned. We asked for input from a large group of partners and received input from seven of them.

Respondents included (in order of response received): Elizabeth Lillard, from Women in Conservation Leadership, National Wildlife Federation; Maggie Norton with Practical Farmers of Iowa; Caitlin Joseph and Ashley Brucker (also authors for this guide) from the Women for the Land Initiative at American Farmland Trust; Cayla Bendel and Kim Cole from Pheasants Forever; Jean Eells from E Resources Group, LLC, Lisa Kivirist formerly with In Her Boots, a program of the Midwest Organic Sustainable Education Service, and Wren Almitra from WFAN Women Caring for the Land and Women, Land & Legacy.

Contents

1 Women in Conservation Leadership, National Wildlife Federation, Elizabeth Lillard
3 Practical Farmers of Iowa, Maggie Norton
6 Women for the Land Initiative, American Farmland Trust, Caitlin Joseph and Ashley Brucker
10 Pheasants Forever, Cayla Bendel and Kim Cole
14 E Resources Group, LLC, Jean Eells
15 MOSES, (Formerly with) In HER BOOTS, Lisa Kivirist
18 WFAN Women Caring for the Land and Women, Land & Legacy, Wren Almitra
CASE STUDY VIGNETTES

Women in Conservation Leadership, National Wildlife Federation, Elizabeth Lillard

Contact: Elizabeth Lillard, LillardE@nwf.org, (734) 887-7134

Vinette Overview

1. How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

The Women in Conservation Leadership Program centers on a large biannual conference that was scheduled for March 2020. After the conference, the plan for the year was to develop and expand year long programming opportunities and events. Ten days before the 2020 Summit we had to postpone due to escalating concerns about COVID-19. We postponed the Summit to mid-October, thinking that would be enough time for the pandemic to resolve. Pushing the conference back about six months has forced us to also delay our expanded programming development. Our team's capacity for strategic planning and outreach is limited by ensuring the fall conference proceeds without any issues. We have recently decided to shift the conference to a virtual platform, as COVID-19 continues to be a serious issue.

2. What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

We are still in the process of shifting and I'll be able to share more once the conference is over. Some of the benefits I have noticed so far:

- It is much easier to get speakers/panelists to join because no travel or travel time is involved. Folks can have 2 speaking engagements in the same day, where normally being in person would really limit their schedule.
- A virtual meeting is more accessible to a lot of folks because it only requires the registration fee (no travel, lodging or extra days out of the office required).
- The virtual format makes it much easier to handle transition times, and get folks where they need to go. This is a big issue when dealing with a conference with 500+ attendees.
- I'm most concerned about how to ensure the networking piece is not lost. That is one of the biggest downsides to the virtual platform.
3. What lessons have you taken away that will inform future virtual, as well as in-person, events in the future?

Communication and easily accessible information are key to a successful event. It doesn’t matter if you have the most amazing speakers or sessions, if people can’t figure out when they are or how to access them it will be a wasted effort. This is especially true for a virtual conference.

Another part of this is making sure your speakers have all the tools they need to be successful. This includes sharing best practices, technology run throughs, well prepared moderators etc.

4. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with utilizing virtual engagement tools while serving your particular audience/constituency?

Practice and over explain. As the event organizer you have more information and context than anyone else you work with. In a virtual setting this is especially true, because people can’t just ask you a question discreetly behind the registration table.
How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

PFI’s bread-and-butter are the annual conference and our field day season. These two event types allow members and non-members to learn from one another but also act as networking and social opportunities. The combination of knowledge exchange and socializing help build the PFI community. This spring, we had to make dramatic changes to our field day season in order to keep event attendees safe during the ongoing pandemic. The only path forward was to shift to a completely virtual format. Since we have nearly ten years of experience hosting an online winter farminar series, we decided to build from that foundation. For the past couple years, we have been using Zoom to facilitate that series so we decided to continue using Zoom for the virtual field days. Then depending on the type on interaction the staff and speakers wanted with the audience (as well as reach), they decided whether the virtual field day would be contained and broadcast within Zoom only or streamed to Facebook. The initial thought was that we could facilitate more dialog within Zoom since conversation with a Facebook audience is limited to text in the comments section. Besides the virtual fields days we've also converted other events like the Next Generation Summit to a virtual format (Zoom meetings) and started new series like the Strategies for Strange Times weekly calls during the early months of the pandemic (ran for 12 consecutive weeks, Zoom meetings).

Outreach during this time has also included virtual field day trainings, trouble shooting and providing event assistance with other organizations, partners and members. I've given six different trainings to a total of 220 participants and shared the training resources with numerous other organizations and individuals. It's been a really rewarding experience as a new employee and allowed me to build my network along the way.
2. What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

Get specific as to whether it was a workshop, field tour or demonstration

Equipment matters. Literally gearing up for the virtual field day season, we purchased a handful of “equipment kits” to send to farmers to prerecord video and/or stream live. Providing a good bluetooth earpiece made a ‘world of a difference in audio quality for listeners at home. The technology is so easy to use too that there was hardly a learning curve for anyone that wasn’t already familiar with it. Another piece of equipment we sent out - even lower tech - were two tripods. One with flexible legs that allow the user to attach their camera onto equipment or other structures and a second tripod that would position the camera several feet off the ground. They didn’t use the tripods! Some did, but so many others opted to have a camera person that just held the camera the entire time. Guess what, you aren’t as stable as you think! Haha with connections as poor as they are in rural areas, every movement is a frame adjustment and that results in a constantly blurred video for many viewers. Moving forward with our virtual events, we’re going to continue fine-tuning the equipment kits, instructions, and setting clearer expectations.

What worked well?

Overall, all of it! Under the circumstances I think we nailed it! I mean, there are always technical difficulties on screen and behind-the-scenes, but that’s no biggie in the grand scheme of things. Everyone understands we’ve all been trying to do the best we can over the past several months. Everyone on staff and all our farmer speakers have stepped up and adapted and we were able to provide flexibility within our formats to accommodate staff and speaker visions. There is a core team of about seven people that contribute to various dimensions of the inner-workings of our virtual field day season. We’ve become a well oiled machine and when something changes requiring action from the team, it’s fun to see everyone’s names pop-up in comments responding to their specific niche. I think I find that aspect of teamwork even more energizing now that we are working apart from one another. Knowing that my co-workers are simultaneously working on the same thing is nice - we’re together in a sense.

What didn’t work so well?

I’m disappointed in the Zoom events a bit. I think the webinar events are too restrictive and the meeting formats can be messy if you’re not careful. I was hoping the Zoom webinars would encourage more dialog and engagement between speakers and the audience but I think there were a lot of mic-shy attendees out there. It would have been nice for attendees to see one another’s names and direct chat with other participants which is another limitation of the webinar format. Zoom meetings are more dynamic but then you can’t query a good attendee report which is important on the back end for us. There are a lot of trade-offs to consider when selecting the right format. I wish we had more time at the beginning of our virtual field day season to weigh out some other options.

What surprised you?

Honestly, I’m not sure! This was all totally uncharted territory for me so what do I use for a baseline? I kind of surprised myself, I guess. Never would I have guessed a year ago, that I would know the ins and outs of creating live videos on Facebook and linking multiple platforms together to stream content. It was an exciting puzzle to work out but this is not a skill set I ever intended on having.
3. What lessons have you taken away that will inform future virtual, as well as in-person, events in the future?

Virtual events will continue to be a well used tool. Even when we get back to a point where we can hold in-person events, I think we will incorporate lives streaming (strategically) so that attendees further away can participate. I also believe we will continue to flex these new found mucsles- we won't necessarily constrain ourselves to Zoom and Facebook. There are lots of platforms out there why not dabble to see what really works best? We'll also become increasingly creative with how we share our content virtually. We have lots of out-of-the-box thinkers at PFI and they have come up with a storm of clever ideas that I hope to see deployed in the future!

4. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with utilizing virtual engagement tools while serving your particular audience/constituency?

Prepare and practice. And practice some more. This isn't as intimidating as it seems but you need to get your ducks in a row ahead of time so you can relax and have fun during your event. Determine what kind of experience you want to have with your audience, select a platform that facilitates that, build and agenda and practice. And remember, it's totally fair to lean on organizational partners or friends and family to make the event work. We're all looking for "wins" right now and it feels even better if you help facilitate one!
Vingette Overview

1. How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

COVID-19 and huge implications for our national WFL team. In 2020, we set a project in motion to nearly double the geographic reach of our programming, while expanding the topics and audiences we’ve previously engaged with our Learning Circles. This would have been ambitious enough without having to also reinvent the way we conduct the Learning Circles themselves. At first, our team planned to still host in-person events, while building our skillset for a back-up online version. But as May 2020 approached, it became clear that we would definitely need to shift to hosting events online. We found that Zoom was the platform most conducive to setting up the non-hierarchical, relationship-based gatherings we needed to cultivate. Drawing on examples our NRCS and Dairy Council partners shared with us, as well as examples from YouTube, we explored options for producing virtual farm tours and live or pre-recorded demonstrations to replace the hands-on components of our in-person learning circles.

For our California planning team, COVID-19 primarily impacted the timeline for implementing our Learning Circles, as well as forced us to move it to an online platform. We used a local stakeholder-driven process, it took our team a lot of needs-assessment and relationship-building to get to a place where our partners felt committed to diving into implementation. This delayed our implementation by three months, during which time (cont’d on next page)
we conducted one on one phone calls with potential participants to identify their needs, and build partnerships that could help us reach audiences able to engage online. We also had to learn the ins and outs of the Zoom platform, ensure security via registration, build curriculum appropriate to the online setting, and test out how to play videos within Zoom meetings to replace the hands-on components of in-person events.

From our Midwest team: In every single way imaginable. One moment I was planning months of learning circles covering all areas of 3 states, finding partners, advising them on locations, catering and farm visits. I distinctly remember the first circle to cancel completely. It took us two weeks to decide the April 3rd learning circle on Cover Crops would be cancelled. It has never been rescheduled. None of the in person learning circles have been rescheduled. Formerly I would recruit people to participate by direct one on one outreach, phone calls, emails. They would tag along with a neighbor or family member sometimes for the lunch and dessert more than anything. Now I’m using email lists and social media campaigns, there is no dessert, and most participants aren’t even in the same time zone as me.

2. What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

Virtual events are A LOT of work and constantly changing. I put in more time arranging a 2 hour virtual learning circle than I do a full day in person. There is very little room for “winging it”. Everything must be planned, prepped and practiced to have any semblance of organization. I am continuously adjusting my agendas and content according to how well something worked or didn’t.

Co-facilitators and discussion leaders are also more important than they have ever been. Support in monitoring the group, chat features, Q&A’s are very helpful. Also, giving yourself and your participants a break from listening to one speaker/facilitator helps keep the discussion active and inclusive.

What worked well?

There is clearly a lot of demand for this type of programming in California. We had over 50 people try to register for our first event, which was targeting a 3-county cluster in the Central Coast region of California. 34 of those were people actually associated with ag in those counties and 18 of those ended up joining the online Learning Circle. We got local resource providers in each of the three counties to join the event to share about the services they provide, and leverage support of a USDA Climate Hubs researcher to facilitate a discussion on the climate-related stressors women are experiencing on their land and what they can do about it. We also shared information about where women can get involved in advocacy and leadership. Women reported gaining confidence in their knowledge of climate-change stressors affecting ag in their area, as well as increased knowledge about who to turn to for support. Many reported their motivation to utilize USDA and RCD programs and technical assistance for support. Participants were able to share some of their struggles including family dynamics, the challenges associated with gaining respect and credibility in a male-dominated field, and the need for more support for aspiring farmers and farmers of color. Having promoted the circle as being open to anyone who identifies as a woman and stewards agricultural land, and utilizing the support of local partners for outreach, we were able to host a wide diversity of women, including women of many racial and ethnic backgrounds, production systems, and land tenure circumstances.

Soil health demonstrations worked better than I could have ever imagined. Many participants stayed on the call beyond the allotted time to see the additional demos we had prepared.
What didn’t work so well?

The diversity of the group and the large turnout was certainly an asset, but it was also a challenge and meant some trade-offs in terms of the depth we could reach in our discussion about on-farm practices that women could implement. With so many different production systems and land tenure situations among the participants, we had to curate breakout groups according to those to allow them time to discuss with their closest peers. This “affinity group” model did work well once we set it up, but it was a challenge because we didn’t ask about what production system people had in the registration questions so this had to be drawn out during the meeting or via individual emails to participants. Lots of work for the facilitator! But ultimately it allowed for some new relationships to be sparked and for the resource professionals to really get some “face-time” with smaller groups of women in their area.

Powerpoints. Anything more than 5 slides and you’ve lost the group.

What surprised you?

I was surprised by how hard it is to hold peoples’ attention anytime screen sharing is happening by a presenter. We really tried to minimize the use of powerpoint but even with just 3-5 slides being presented by one person, participants clammed up a bit and it was difficult to revive discussion.

Also, the networking and conversations amongst participants and resource providers has been even more open than in person. We have had smaller groups and they are from all areas of the country so perhaps that extra bit of anonymity is encouraging. I have always heard that it doesn’t matter how many people you have at an event as long as you have the right people. The women who have participated have definitely been the right women. They come from every type or background, farm owners, operators, absentee, organic, conventional, beginning. Everything. However, they still wanted to help each other, encourage each other, and listened to each other. In 4 years of learning circles the virtual sessions have been the most rewarding.

3. What lessons have you taken away that will inform future virtual, as well as in-person, events in the future?

In the future, I think it will be key for us to work closely with partners and speakers to emphasize that the online meeting itself should be focused on generating discussion, asking questions, listening to participants’ needs, and building relationships across women. Conveying information should be done via creative means such as pre-recorded video presentations, farm tours, or demonstrations that participants can view on their own time and then discuss during the full group gathering. This is something we plan to try out in our upcoming circles.

We also learned some lessons the hard way regarding the amount of work it takes to coordinate Zoom meetings with registration. In order to keep each individual’s unique Zoom link safe (to prevent “Zoom bombing”) and support our audiences (who are not all very tech-savvy), we had to send out individual emails to each registrants with their join link and the participant agenda so they knew what to expect. I think many people sign up for online events thinking that they are going to be webinars-style engagements that they can passively listen to while multitasking on other things. But our Learning Circles are meant to bring women into presence with one another and to really listen to each others’ stories as the basis for learning critical skills and information that’s typically not easily accessible for them.
Lastly, both virtual and in-person have their place in outreach and education. The women who were very involved while the learning circles were in-person are not interested in virtual learning circles. The women involved in the virtual weren't interested in in person should we offer those again.

4. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with utilizing virtual engagement tools while serving your particular audience/constituency?

There are many places in California that farmers and ranchers can go for information and support. But we know from data and from speaking with agricultural resource providers that it remains rare for women, gender non-binary, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color farmers to be utilizing these services to their full potential. Resource providers working to address these disparities find that conducting outreach with under-represented farmers is challenging. There is a lot of trust that needs to be built, and in many cases there are structural challenges and painful histories to contend with, particularly for women of color in agriculture. And yet, we know there are many resilient, passionate women and farmers of color forging a path in agriculture nonetheless. We will need all hands-on deck to realize a resilient, food secure future, especially in California. To amplify what one of our participants, Helen McGrath said in her introductory questions – “California agriculture is going to experience severe transitions in the coming years and decades and we will need unprecedented collaboration, innovation and equity throughout the ag system to survive.” Though not a perfect replacement for in-person learning, these virtual gatherings are providing a lifeline for many women who are feeling a bit isolated right now. We’ve started to see that these gatherings can be an antidote to that isolation, a salve for the open wounds between struggling farmers and the agencies meant to support them, and a necessary infusion of interdisciplinary learning to drive the resilience our farmers will need. I welcome everyone reading this to think about how we can collectively improve our efforts towards this intention through the Women for the Land initiative and across our collaborative efforts.
How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

I would say the primary effect COVID had on my outreach events is a delay in planning efforts. In addition to that, there were inconsistent beliefs and opinions on how to navigate the situation and of course some reduced attendance at in-person events due to safety concerns. At the initial outbreak it was difficult to make decisions about scheduled events, pursue new landowner hosts, and figure out how to continue to accomplish mission in such uncertain times. Many possible hosts and partners were unable or unwilling to commit to working together this year. Furthermore, I worked with landowners who were persistent about in-person events and likewise those who felt more comfortable with a virtual event. Social distancing and additional sanitation measures (hand sanitizer, OPTIONAL masks, COVID signage, food serving and packaging adjustments, portable restroom rental, etc.), were all implemented at in-person events creating additional costs.

The biggest impact of COVID-19 was simply having to cancel events. We had plans for several Women Caring for the Land Learning Circles but had to cancel, postpone, or switch to a virtual format.

For our virtual event (which was our first Learning Circle and first virtual event), we hosted couple of events. One was a Soil Health Workshops using Zoom and hosted another session on Wildlife & Pollinator Habitat using Microsoft Teams. Participants all introduced themselves, including technical resource specialists who presented on habitat basics, conservation-focused management practices, and cost-share programs available to landowners. We also provided a virtual field tour with live stops on the hosts’ farm. We opted to offer fewer spots for this virtual event than we would for an in-person event, simply to maintain a level of comfort for those new to webinars and video conferencing, and to help with our level of comfort as we conducted our first virtual event. As we work to plan in-person events and reschedule postponed workshops, we are following (cont’d on next page)
local/state/ federal guidelines closely to ensure we are in compliance and we are taking additional precautionary measures (instructors wearing masks; encouraging participants to wear them and providing disposable masks to those who need one; having hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes on hand; limiting the number of instructors and participants to maintain safe social distancing; spacing tables and chairs a minimum of 6 feet apart but further if space allows; etc.) to provide a safe and comfortable learning environment for our participants.

Our promotional efforts changed as well as our event practices. We made sure to note on event flyers and other promotions that social distancing guidelines will be adhered to during in-person events. For our virtual events, we had to increase our promotional efforts and make a point to follow up with interested participants and registrants to ensure we had good attendance.

Our promotional efforts changed as well as our event practices. We made sure to note on event flyers and other promotions that social distancing guidelines will be adhered to during in-person events. For our virtual events, we had to increase our promotional efforts and make a point to follow up with interested participants and registrants to ensure we had good attendance.

2. What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

After attending the AFT virtual training sessions I felt much more comfortable hosting my first virtual Women Caring for the Land event. I utilized Zoom and learned from the AFT training the importance of going over Zoom features in the beginning, changing display names to first name in Zoom, doing introductions in alphabetical order to simulate the predictability of order in a learning circle, and then had the landowner host present a live tour from her farm. I would say beyond those excellent tips, one KEY thing learned (the hard way) in an unrelated virtual event earlier this year, and emphasized in training is to PRACTICE. I held a virtual site visit with the landowner host prior to the event and she did a phenomenal job talking about her place and practices so I was confident going into the event. I was also able to time how long each stop would be as well as how long it took her to move locations so that I could inform participants of when to come back after a brief break. I also spent time getting to know Zoom since PF utilizes a different platform for most meetings. Based on AFT’s suggestion and my personal experience in virtual meetings and events one limiting factor is definitely time. Squeezing content into less than 2 hours is difficult but anything longer and I just don’t think people stay attentive or engaged. Attendance was actually about the same as my in-person events but I did have women from different states attend which is obviously unlikely for an in-person event. Particularly one absentee landowner who owned land near the host, but lives out-of-state – could be a worthy way to better reach absentee landowners which is very common in North Dakota. We even had one woman join from the grain cart during harvest ha! I am also nervous about participation in the post-survey because at in-person events I make them fill it out before leaving whereas with this event I put the link in the chat box at the end and sent via email but I have less control over their completion. Finally, with the virtual events it will be useful to have and share and learn from the recording.

Practice, practice, practice! As we switched gears to virtual our instructors had a few practice sessions before the event to make sure we were comfortable with the software, knew how to use the functions like screen share, made sure microphones and cameras worked, etc. This was extremely helpful as we prepared for our event.

- REDUCE THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN VIRTUAL EVENTS (SEE EXPLANATION ABOVE).
- GO OVER “HOUSEKEEPING” REMINDERS AT THE BEGINNING (AND DURING IF NEED BE): MUTE UNLESS YOU ARE SPEAKING, TYPE QUESTIONS INTO THE CHAT OR Q&A BOXES, WE WILL TAKE QUESTIONS AT THE END (OR THROUGHOUT IF YOU DESIRE), ETC.
What worked well?

We were pleased with the events we hosted with Zoom and with Microsoft Teams. Once we figured out how to make the audio work (we did this in our practice session!), including videos as a virtual tour of sorts was a great addition. Utilizing the chat feature is great for sharing links or other comments/reminders during the virtual event. During the Learning Circle, we had all participants introduce themselves. If you need to do the same in your event, the easiest way we have found so far is to go down the participant list and call on people to speak. That eliminates people talking over each other if more than one speaks up at a time.

What didn’t work so well?

So far so good…aside from minor microphone issues of the participants, we have had smooth sailing!

What surprised you?

The success of having participants introduce themselves as they would during an in-person learning circle. I was worried that participants may not be as comfortable speaking during a video conference as they would be in-person, but I was surprised at everyone’s participation! Our participants also participated in discussions throughout the event, so overall we felt that the ladies were able to connect with everyone and leave with great contacts.

3. What lessons have you taken away that will inform future virtual, as well as in-person, events in the future?

I think mostly just being open to the idea of a virtual meeting when it is more fitting or strategic for the audience (e.g. absentee landowners), it is less intimidating now that I have hosted one. I would also like to experiment with going live on Facebook with an event – that was what had failed in my earlier unrelated virtual event. And I think in this “new normal” virtual options or online live components will become useful and maybe even necessary at in-person events too.

Safety first! Always! These are new waters that we are all treading together, and with these circumstances safety needs to be paramount with any events we plan. If you can't hold an event within the current safety guidelines for COVID-19, then you probably should not have the event in-person and consider your virtual options. If you can host in-person events, then take all necessary precautions to ensure a safe environment that complies with current regulations (see examples above).

Both styles of event have their value and their cost. We found virtual events easier in that we don't have to travel, don't have venue/food/supplies expenses, it takes less time, we can host virtual events more frequently, reach more people, and so on. But you lose that really valuable in-person interaction and the hands-on experience you get at a traditional workshop. You can still succeed in having your participants interact when using a virtual platform, you just have to get creative!
4. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with utilizing virtual engagement tools while serving your particular audience/constituency?

The learning circle and energy it creates is very difficult to replicate virtually, BUT in this Women Caring for the Land event and in one of our virtual Women, Wine, & Wild Game events I was still able to feel some neat connections happening.

I found it very helpful to watch other virtual events (webinars, meetings, etc.) and participate in those to get even more experience with the various virtual meeting platforms. I gleaned a ton of great tips just by listening in and seeing how others conducted their events.

Work with partners! We’ve had great experiences working with our partners who are hosting virtual events, which allows us to bring other professionals into our workshops and to contribute to virtual events they are having as well.

For a few of our virtual events, we have set-up our organization’s banners behind the speakers to help give a more aesthetically pleasing background when presenting in meeting rooms or office spaces. We use these at our in-person workshops and other events to promote our organization and how we work with landowners, so we figured why not set them up for virtual events as well!
E Resources Group, LLC, Jean Eells
Contact: Jean Eells, jeanceells@gmail.com, (515) 297-0701

Vignette Overview

1. How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

All in-person professional development training for women's conservation outreach was canceled for the year and is not expected to resume. All training has been converted to virtual format.

2. What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

In a 90-minute session, use of small group breakouts is beneficial and may be essential to allow people to interact with the information and remain engaged with the experience. Having a small number of participants is helpful to allow for active engagement with each other and with me as facilitator/instructor, however it may be possible in the future to manage a larger group. I felt somewhat forced to use slides to convey information in the virtual format – something I have chosen not to do during the in-person professional development training. I prefer to have participants experience how different the environment is where women can thrive as learners, where dialog is favored over lecture. I'm not yet convinced that virtual platforms necessarily emphasize the difference for the trainees, time will tell. For me, the loss of evaluation data discerned by watching the participants during the day is very problematic in understanding how effective the training is. Relying only on an on-line survey means an additional loss of data if participants don't reply.

3. What lessons have you taken away that will inform future virtual, as well as in-person, events in the future?

If the audience of women landowners who are older are not likely to return to in-person meetings for a long time to come, there may be no point to training people how to host effective face-to-face meetings for women. However, the concepts of engaging women's values and passions for stewardship are essential for professionals to understand and if virtual events continue to be viable training venues then I will add more options to the E Resources Group, LLC portfolio. I will also be adding opportunities for women landowners to engage directly with me and other experts through services I will develop.
MOSES, (Formerly with) In Her Boots, Lisa Kivirist
Contact: Lisa Kivirist, lisakivirist@gmail.com

Vignette Overview

1. How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

We adapted our three in-person events (Women Caring for the Land events and In Her Boots on-farm workshops) into three virtual events/webinars:

6/18/20: Resources for Cultivating Conservation (Panel)
7/28/20: How to Set Priorities & Manage Time with Charlotte Smith, 3 Cow Marketing
8/18/20: She’s Got Your Back: Tap into a Support Network with Denise O’Brien Rolling Acres

What worked well?

The Chat function worked much better to engage and have interaction amongst attendees versus live discussion/Q&A. We encouraged women to introduce themselves and their farm in the beginning of the session. We learned the chat takes time to “warm up” (nobody wants to be the first). We experimented for a later session and asked some women farmers we knew who had registered for the event to jump in and get the chat going quickly in the beginning. They were happy to do that and it made a huge difference in interactions. We did hear from women very appreciative of the virtual format as they are not able to attend in-person events due to most often farm commitments and family responsibilities. We “saw” several moms with babies on their laps (on mute!) who could readily attend something like this.

What didn’t work so well?

We learned it is difficult (and frankly unnecessary) to try to be “everything” in a virtual event. That was a frustrating realization as we can and historically have covered so much ground at in-person field days, including definitely prioritizing and foster networking and social connections. While the chat function was helpful, it also by default caused two “dual” things going on: Someone presenting and discussions going on in the chat (which might be on a totally different topic). We learned it’s important to have the speaker focus strictly on the information and not get distracted by the chat. Having one officially “host” and keep an eye on the chat and having another team member be the tech support (with ample bandwidth) worked much better. Remember attendees register to hear the advertised speaker and topic, therefore keep your introduction and other information short (we learned this via survey feedback).
What surprised you?

By going virtual with a free event, we by default immediately cast the attendee net much wider, both geographically and background. While inherently it’s great to have wider outreach, this could be a challenge moving forward with specific grant and program deliverable goals that need to address a specific audience. For example, we are the “Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service.” Does it support our mission if we had attendees from New Zealand (which we did)?

These will be increasingly important questions to address in the future related to virtual event outcomes. We had higher educator/agency women then typically at our events. Additionally, we did have a handful of male attendees (that would not have been typical of our in-person events).

3. What lessons have you taken away that will inform future virtual, as well as in-person, events in the future?

Not surprisingly, attendees register last minute for these events. We had about a third of attendees register the two days prior. Having the ability to view the webinar online after one’s own timeline understandably expands outreach. We found virtual events/webinars are an easier fit when it comes to pure informational exchange, i.e., speakers presenting information. It is a challenge to create more “intimate, safe space” virtually for women to really ask more personal questions and directly engage.

Even though there is definite excitement and urgency around hosting a virtual event live, we’re realizing it’s important to see these as lasting, “evergreen” resources online. About 1/3 of registered attendees did not attend live but watched later.

We hosted all three of these events at 1 pm CST, both wanting consistency in timing for them all and thinking the early afternoon/after lunch might be a conducive time slot. Would love more insight comparing with other timing situations if there might be better options (although evening events would be a challenge for agency and other organizational speakers and support).

Hosting these in the winter/early spring may encourage better attendance. We had the most attendees at our June event and our lowest at the last event in August. This may also have to do with “Zoom fatigue” and the fact that such resources were “new & shiny” earlier in the season and then became more commonplace.

Presenting virtually is a skill set and it isn’t necessarily something that is immediately transferrable from other settings – i.e., someone who may do fine presenting in a large room via a PowerPoint on a screen can’t just take that same format and run with it online necessarily. PowerPoint slides should be much simpler/less content as attendees are viewing on their computer or even on phones.

4. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with utilizing virtual engagement tools while serving your particular audience/constituency?

We offered these sessions all free of charge, as just about all online farming resources to date have been. While this definitely opens up attendance enthusiasm, am concerned on how “paying” for virtual events will be perceived in the future, especially events like conferences going on-line as there is now an established expectation that virtual events are free. Typically, we charged $25-$50 for our all-day, on-farm In Her Boots (cont’d on next page).
workshops (including lunch) which attendees paid and felt was a solid value. Having a “tech rehearsal” a few days/weeks prior to the actual event was key for all parties involved. Presenters with varying levels of internet bandwidth need to check to make sure all is working well. We sometimes found that running a presenter’s audio through their phone was much better quality than their computer microphone (but this required testing/practicing ahead of time as most folks were not familiar with this).

Don’t look at webinars in isolation but integrate with other programming and resources. With our Resilience Boot Camp, we also had podcasts and a weekly ENews that we could draw and direct folks too.
WFAN Women Caring for the Land and Women, Land & Legacy, Wren Almitra

Contact: Wren Almitra, wren@wfan.org or info@wfan.org

Vinette Overview

1. How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

All of our in-person Women Caring for the Land Learning Circles were canceled and converted to on-line events. Considering we’ve been holding face to face Learning Circles since 2008 this forced a significant shift in both our planning and promotion processes, as well as how we think about ways to connect on a personal level and share needed information with our target audiences. Our Women, Land & Legacy program, which operates through local chapters throughout Iowa, saw all programming cancelled. For the first time in that program’s 16 year history we coordinated state-wide educational and networking meetings, which were held virtually—again, a first for this program.

2. What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

For Women Caring for the Land, we started completely from scratch because none of our in-person events used a digital lecture format or PowerPoint slides to disseminate information. We learned how to handle the logistics for Zoom meetings for large and small groups and break-out rooms; we learned, and are still learning, the best time duration of an on-line meeting; we learned how to handle the key soil health demonstrations via video; and we adapted for on-line polling/surveys for evaluation data. For one series of meetings our meeting participation size was intentionally limited to mimic our in-person meetings. For another pair of meetings, we advertised to a nationwide audience. We saw different benefits to both formats.

We were relieved that for the most part the facilitation seemed to transfer fairly well in creating a conversational atmosphere where questions could be asked more or less in real time in the Zoom chat function, by unmuting themselves or raising hands, and in small break out rooms. For the series of meetings with limited participants, the magic of a small number of women getting to know each other by introductions worked reasonably well also, more so if they were willing to turn on their cameras and be seen. If they didn’t engage right at the beginning by having their cameras turned on we didn’t get as much interaction and had a little bit of attrition for reasons we are uncertain of. We were surprised at their interest in continuing to talk with us and each other as long as a half hour after an event was over.
For the meeting attracting a nationwide audience, there were these benefits:

- Break-out rooms were appreciated and an effective modeling of in-person meetings in regards to networking and sharing resources (though these still did not meet the quality of in-person networking).
- We are seeing higher increases in pre-registrations overall with a 50% or so corresponding drop-off in actual attendees. We are still pleased with the turn-out.
- We are seeing an increased national reach, which is effective in connecting with more women and showcasing our innovative programming that focuses on education, empowerment and networking, now across states.
- Surveys so far have been positive, we seem to be continuing effectively in sharing information (with post-event actions taken yet to be determined).

3. What lessons have you taken away that will inform future virtual, as well as in-person, events in the future?

We will try future virtual events without limitations of group size or geographic area, and will try to limit the amount of content to maintain the opportunities to ask experts questions and have a more leisurely interaction. We may also continue fostering small group models of virtual connection.