

Women Landowners Network and Learn About Conservation Stewardship

By: Kim Woodwell and Jim Baird, American Farmland Trust

While women have always been a critical part of farming and land stewardship, with our aging rural population, they are now becoming landowners in unprecedented numbers. As new operators, widows, or inheritors of land, women are taking on roles as owners and decision-makers. This trend is expected to continue over the next two decades, with approximately 240 million acres of land predicted to change hands, and much of it transferred to women.

*“Women do talk differently than men. We speak different languages. We may say the same sentences but it can have a different meaning,”
comment from a previous Women and Land participant.*

Despite increasing in number, women remain underserved by programs that provide landowners with the resources to be successful stewards of the land. According to a USDA report, *Farmland Ownership, Tenure, and Transfer* (2016), women, particularly non-operating landowners, tend to interact less frequently with conservation resource agencies and often lack confidence in their knowledge and ability to make decisions about production and management.

As women become significant decision-makers nationwide their actions will exert a major impact on the health of our natural resources and economy. While data on women landowners is generally scarce, recent data collected by American Farmland Trust, the USDA, and others indicate that women landowners can be strong conservation partners. They tend to take a long-term view of



their land and see it as a valuable community asset that should be protected. They have a strong stewardship ethic and a desire to transition their land to the next generation. These attributes make women ideal partners in conservation and land protection, and highlight the need for gender-specific support, education, and tools to help this growing and powerful new constituency succeed.

American Farmland Trust (AFT) has recognized this as a unique opportunity and since 2011 has been working to develop a national program that includes research, training, evaluation data and outreach approaches to expand the effort to engage and empower women landowners.

Participants in the Dinwiddie Conservation Learning Circle share thoughts about management issues. Photo by: Kim Woodwell, AFT.

The “Woman and Land Workshop” held on Friday, May 6, 2016, was part of AFT’s outreach effort. In partnership with the Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) in Dinwiddie County, a one-day workshop was organized for women landowners. A key theme at the workshop was exploring how emotional attachment to the land can be both a value and a barrier when making land management decisions. Speakers described strategies that landowners can use to increase their confidence to set and achieve conservation goals. Additional discussion topics ranged from taxes to wildlife management. Female conservation professionals from the Virginia DOF, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Farm Service Agency, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) answered questions and shared information about financial and technical resources.

Katie Martin, District Wildlife Biologist with the Virginia DGIF, said it was exciting to be a part of a workshop designed to empower women to play a leading role in decision-making on their land. “This [Women and Land] is exactly the type of meeting we need to show these landowners that their voice is important in conservation and that they should take pride in their ideas and be a leader in their land conservation goals.”

The Virginia DOF communications team set up a video booth at the workshop to provide landowners with the opportunity to share their stories about the land. Participants also toured a property owned and operated by Linda Ragsdale and her husband to view conservation practices on the ground.

The May workshop capped off a three-day training program called the Women and Land Conservation Learning Circle, sponsored by AFT from June to November 2015 in Dinwiddie. This program builds off a home-grown Virginia DOF effort that held regional conservation workshops for agricultural and forest landowners from 2008-2012. Heather Dowling, Dinwiddie County’s Area Forester, started the original women-centric effort to address a need she saw for more information and fellowship among women in her county who were facing big decisions with little support.



Heather Dowling, Virginia DOF, discusses forest management at the Woman and Land workshop. Photo by: Lisa Deaton, VDOF.

These Conservation Learning Circles, developed by the Women and Food Agricultural Network (www.wfan.org), consist of groups of 15-20 local women who come together for facilitated discussions with female conservation professionals. The conversations inspire participants to build partnerships with resource management agencies, land trusts, and others to protect their land and water resources. The peer-to-peer discussion atmosphere provides women with a unique opportunity to learn from each other as well as become more knowledgeable and confident about conservation issues, practices, and programs. The participants' questions and interests drive the conversation as the technical staff educate about best practices and available resources in soil and water conservation. Discussions also cover land leasing and passing land on to the next generation.

According to the Iowa-based Women, Food and Agriculture Network, more than 50 percent of the women who attend the sessions take a conservation action within six months of completing the Learning Circle.

“The circle gave me empowerment to do things on the farm. I now feel like it’s my farm.” A Learning Circle participant who later placed a conservation easement on 530 acres of her land.

AFT is keenly interested in this work nationally and is sponsoring Learning Circles in several states. Upcoming Circles in Virginia are planned to start in February in Augusta County and in March in Rockingham County. AFT believes that rethinking traditional approaches to conservation and refocusing outreach policies and programs specifically targeted for women landowners are essential to keeping working lands in production.

Additional information about “Women and Land” and upcoming events can be found at www.farmland.org. Additional support for the Women and Land program comes from the Prince Charitable Trust, Virginia Environmental Endowment, the Virginia Department of Forestry, the USDA Forest Stewardship Program, and the Estate of Wendy Joan Shadwell.

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