

Women and the Land



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CASS COUNTY WOMEN FARMLAND OWNERS: OVERVIEW OF SURVEY RESULTS

This survey is part of a pilot project initiated by the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) and Iowa State University (ISU). The purpose has been to better understand women farmland owners in order to strengthen programs of outreach to them.

A local stakeholder partnership worked over many months constructing the survey questionnaire. This partnership consisted of an Advisory Committee of Cass County women farmland owners and WFAN; USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; USDA Farm Service Agency; Iowa Department of Natural Resources; and ISU.

We took a participatory research (PR) approach. In PR, the people being studied—the intended beneficiaries of the research—have substantial control over and participation in the research. PR creates a productive dynamic among the various stakeholders by linking research and outreach.

The survey was mailed in fall 2002 to 675 women farmland owners in Cass County as identified in Farm Service Agency (FSA) lists. Advisory Committee members signed cover letters assuring respondents of the confidentiality of their responses. The return rate was 40%. The report is based upon 276 completed surveys.

ABOUT THE LANDOWNERS

Respondents own from 5 to 2,000 acres. The average number of acres owned is 256. The mode (the most common size of land holding) is 160 acres. Purchase and inheri-

tance are the primary means of land acquisition, mentioned by 62% and 44% respectively, followed by marriage (12%).

Most women (59%) own their land with others, in 71% of the cases with one other person. Nearly all co-owners are family, most often a spouse, siblings, or children.

Eighty percent of the women grew up on a farm; 86% either live on or have lived on a farm. Few are currently actively engaged in farming, although most have been engaged in farming in the past. Sixty percent indicated that they either now or in the past have considered themselves a farmer, yet when asked in an open-ended question to identify their occupation, none indicated “farming.”

Most of the women surveyed are either retired or employed outside their home; nearly half of those employed outside their home or farm are in professional occupations.

In terms of proximity, 41% live on their land now; 71% either live on it now or have at some time in the past. One-third visit their land rarely or never. Two-thirds visit their land daily or frequently.

The farmland owners range in age from 25-96, with an average age of 64. One quarter are over 74 years of age.

The average age of women who lease land nationally, according to the most recent Agricultural Economics Land Ownership Survey (1999) is 70 years for female sole owners and 65 years for female joint owners. Sole owners who lease land in Cass County also average

Local Stakeholder Partnership:**Women Farmland Owners Advisory Committee:**

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70 years of age; joint owners in Cass County average 64 years of age. The women land-owners in Cass County who do not rent any of their land are younger, 64 years in the case of nine sole owners and 49 years of age in the case of joint owners.

PLANS FOR FARMLAND

The advanced age of many of these women raises questions about what is to happen to their land in coming years. The respondents by a large majority plan to transfer their land to family, in most cases by will, but also by selling, giving, or putting it into a trust for a family member. Ten percent plan to transfer the land to someone other than a family member, most by selling, and 23% do not know how they are going to transfer their land.

What would they like to see happen if they could do whatever they wanted with their land in the future? The women overwhelmingly indicate their desire to keep their land in their family and in farming, yet some, despite our prompting to be imaginative, some respondents noted circumstances that may circumvent their wishes. For example, *"I would like to see a family member live on the land and farm it. However, economic conditions are not favorable for beginning (or older) farmers at this time."*

MANAGING FARMLAND

Few of the respondents act as the primary manager of their land. Tenants, who may also be kin, carry the most influence in key production decisions. Other owners (a category that includes family members and neighbors) play a secondary role. The respondent herself ranks third as a decision making partner.

Over 70% of those not acting as primary manager indicate that they would be able to manage the land if they suddenly had to due to a crisis situation such as divorce, illness, injury, or death in the family (23% citing their current role in management or their farming background as the reason).

Women's definitions of "managing their farmland" differ. To some, it means making technical decisions about land management—chemical use, crop choices, etc.—while others answered in terms of managing the property as an investment—which may involve selecting the appropriate decision making partner, whether family member, tenant, or farm manager.

One-to-one consultation is the primary process by which these farmland owners make decisions about their land. Most describe talking with family members, visiting government agriculture offices, and listening to their tenants. Many draw upon multiple sources, but in general rely very little on written material in the decisions. Some women do not participate at all in decision-making about their land, relying instead on family members, most often husbands, to make decisions.

Only one-third of the respondents are constrained from participating in decisions as much as they would like. They rate the following constraints, in order of importance: knowledge, complexity, and time. Several women "wrote-in" the additional constraints of distance, age, and health.

INFORMATION SOURCES AND DELIVERY

Respondents ranked 20 information sources according to importance and level of trust.

One-half of the sources are individuals in a personal or contractual relationship with the landowner, such as family, neighbor, tenant, or lawyer. Five are institutional information providers such as natural resource agencies and universities, and five are farm organizations.

Spouse, tenant, and FSA are the three most important sources. Spouse, children, tenant, farm manger, and several agencies/institutions, such as ISU, NRCS, FSA, and IDALS, are the most trusted sources.

The farm organizations are, in general, less important sources of information than individual sources or agencies/institutions.

Respondents prefer receiving information from direct mailings and one-to-one consultations; newspaper and magazine articles are favored to a lesser degree. Only those with convenient Internet access and who are "very comfortable" using computers prefer the Internet. In general, women with Internet access have no strong preference for or against using it to receive information, but women without convenient Internet access and/or comfort in using computers indicate a very low preference for the Internet.



Stakeholder Partners (Marjorie Sothman, Kristen Garrett, Delma Harris, Jackie Pelzer, Karen Cable Sudmann, and Diane Phillips) working at a meeting in Atlantic, Iowa.

Large public meetings, which government agencies and institutions frequently employ, are women's least preferred means of information delivery. Small neighborhood meetings are also out of favor, though to a lesser degree. In any case, neither meetings nor local radio programs are viable options for women living a considerable distance from Cass County.

Over one-half (58%) of the respondents have convenient access to a computer, and 57% have convenient access to the Internet. Over one-third (36%) are not comfortable using a computer. Comfort is related to access and age of the woman landowner.

LEASING AND INCOME

Most respondents lease or rent land to others: 61% lease or rent out all of their land and 17% lease or rent out some of their land. Fifty six percent use a written agreement; 44% use a verbal agreement. Most landowners (89%) are comfortable or very comfortable with their arrangement. Their land is farmed most often by a local farmer or neighbor or by a family member. Seven percent use a farm manager.

Nineteen percent of the women landowners rent land from others, in addition to the land they own. Most of the women are currently engaged in farming.

Land is important as a source of income for all but 12% of the respondents to this survey—a finding consistent with other data sources about women who lease farmland. However, values such as conservation and environment are also important. In fact, on a question about needs and values that influence their decision-making, conservation/concern for the environment is ranked slightly higher than need for income.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

The land's meaning is tied to home and family. When asked what their farmland means to them, 55% answered that it is, or has been, their home and provides them with a connection to their family. Their property holds meaning as a source of income, employment, or financial security for one-third of the respondents. Almost 8% noted both the home/family and monetary significance of their land.

Among women owning multiple tracts (53% of all surveyed), one tract was often distinguished from others based on family connection, or a home site.

"When my aunt wanted to sell her half, my brother and I bought it. My dad had already passed his half on to us. He has a great emotional attachment to that land and it would have been devastating to have it sold. Initially, I wasn't too enthused about buying her share, but now I'm very glad we did. It feels good."

"It is somewhat difficult to share ownership with siblings. Many decisions are a compromise to maintain peace and to allow the family member who does the farming to make the major calls."

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*Building Communities one
 Relationship at a Time*

INFORMATION NEEDS

We asked, "With respect to your land, what topics do you wish you knew more about?" Almost one-half of the women responding would like to know more about economic issues related to their farmland. They indicated interest in federal farm programs (20%), land rental pricing and estate planning (23%), and marketing (7%). They want to know more about environmental topics such as soil conservation, how to farm without chemicals, alternative crops, wind-breaks, wildlife, farm pond maintenance, and growing native grasses. About 7% want to know more about technical issues in production.

SPECIAL CHALLENGES

How do we reach the 19% of landowners who live a considerable distance from their land, the 29% who have never lived on their land, the 14% who have never lived on a farm, the 40% who have never considered themselves farmers, the 33% who rarely or never visit their land, and the 30% who indicate they would not be able to manage their land if they suddenly had to? These landowners are "different" not only by being women, but in many cases also by not being local. Being out of sight may mean they are often also out of mind and not reached through conventional outreach methods.

We have learned, for example, that women who have never lived on their land are

much more likely to face decision-making constraints, especially constraints of knowledge and complexity. We have also learned that women who have never lived on the land are somewhat less influenced by the need for income from their land.

A subsequent report will detail how these landowners differ from the majority in terms of preferences for information delivery.

NEXT STEPS

The value of this project lies not only in the data collected but also in the process used to gather the data. Through this research, space has been created in which women farmland owners can voice concerns, whether about gender discrimination, family crisis, or farm programs. Through this research women have also shared ideas and been moved to action.

We hope that the project will serve as a model for other counties or regions, creating a growing body of knowledge and strengthened programs of outreach to all women farmland owners. We have created a revised survey questionnaire based on what we have learned in Cass County.

For those interested in pursuing similar research, please contact Betty Wells (contact information at left).

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